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The Theology of Richard Kearney

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Abstract:
Richard Kearney's religious philosophy is deeply informed by the Christian theological tradition, which he engages with both imaginatively and innovatively. As such, it invites theological scrutiny and reflection on the consistency and clarity of its usage. This article first examines Kearney's notion of the "possible God," which interprets God as a possibility rather than an actuality. It then moves to his anthropology, exploring his dialectic of person and *persona* and the process of transfiguration, in which one recognizes *persona* – a God-given quality – in others while simultaneously discovering it within oneself. Finally, it analyzes his Christology, which merges with anthropology, as the notions of *messiah* and *persona* are used almost interchangeably. Across all three areas, the article raises the question of priority: the priority of the possible over the actual, the oneself over the other, and particular salvific events over epiphanic ones.

Keywords: Richard Kearney; God; possibility; transfiguration; Christology

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Introduction

Richard Kearney's religious philosophy frequently draws from biblical narratives and employs Christian theological concepts and terms, such as *kenosis*, *perichoresis*, *persona*, and *transfiguration*. This usage invites theological reflection and an analysis of its consistency and clarity, which is the goal of this article. Kearney's notions are specifically Trinitarian, and thus, the analysis is conducted from the same perspective. The aim is not to force Kearney's imaginative and poetic engagement with Christian faith and doctrine into a rigid theological framework to demonstrate its incompatibility. Rather, the objective is to assess its coherence within Kearney's own work, while also considering classical and contemporary theological reflections. Due to the focus of this study, the article is titled "The Theology of Richard Kearney", although Kearney would not consider himself a theologian.

For this reason, the article also does not aim provide an exhaustive summary of Kearney's oeuvre, but concentrates on three key areas: his *concept of God*, *anthropology*, and *Christology*. Kearney does not dedicate a specific treatise to any of these theological locis; rather, his conceptions must be

extracted from various parts of his work. Among these, two major volumes – *The God Who May Be* and *Anatheism* – stand out, as they engage most directly with the topic of religion.

Kearney's concept of God

Kearney develops his doctrine of God in *The God Who May Be*, a title that also serves as the thesis of the book, slightly elaborated in its opening sentence: "God neither is nor is not but may be."[1] Behind these verbs – *is* and *is not* – lie what Kearney identifies as two rival ways of interpreting the divine: "eschatological" and "onto-theological." While Kearney endorses the eschatological perspective, he further develops it into what he calls "onto-eschatology," which should be a third way between the two extremes.[2] In this name the preference for ontology and eschatology over theology, which slips out of the perspective, is evident.

Nevertheless, what are these two rival and one sided ways? Kearney aims to interpret God as a possibility-to-be rather "than as either pure being in the manner of onto-theology, or as pure non-being in the manner of negative theology."[3] As such it is from the outset not clear what stands over against the onto-theology, whether it is eschatology or negative theology, leaving aside whether negative theology thinks God as non being, or rather emphasizes what God is not.[4]

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1 Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: a Hermeneutics of Religion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, 1.

2 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 8. Similarly in *Anatheism*: "I propose the possibility of a third way beyond the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism: those polar opposites of certainty that have maimed so many minds and souls in our history. This third option, this wager of faith beyond faith, I call anatheism. Ana-theos, God after God." Here he develops the metaphor of the way further and presents the anatheism not only as a third way or middle term, but as a way forward through going back, that is kind of a creative repetition leading to another level. In Richard Kearney, *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 3.

3 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 4.

4 Ingolf U. Dalferth, following Kierkegaard, also aims to understand God in terms of possibility, but emphases different polarities – classical metaphysics of being and neoclassical process metaphysics of becoming. Dalferth is critical to these traditions, but although he aims to pay attention to the priority of the possible, he asserts that: "To understand God, we must go beyond the alternative of being and becoming, actuality and possibility to that without which no such alternative would be possible," he writes in the preface and continues: "Every actuality is replaced by another actuality in the course of time.

In this middle way Kearney proposes he conceives of God not primarily in terms of being or non-being but in terms of potency or possibility. In what he identifies as the classical metaphysical tendency – or, the onto-theology, potentiality was always subordinated to actuality, with the potential viewed as insufficient compared to the actual. This tendency portrayed the divine as fulfilled, complete, and perfect. For Kearney, this view represents the idea of a stable monolith – possessing omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience – but devoid of life and incapable of reaching out to creation.[5]

Throughout history, there have been thinkers who criticized this conception and shifted from the talk of what God is to the talk of God is not. However, in making this necessary and important correction, Kearney argues, they often went too far. By opposing overly "positive" and foundationalist propositions, they emphasized the impossibility of saying anything meaningful about God.[6]

Both of these views depart, according to Kearney, from the notion of God as being, which he challenges, asserting instead that "it is divinity's very potentiality-to-be that is the most divine thing about it."[7] He seeks to balance the strengths of both approaches while avoiding their shortcomings and employs the strategy of *via tertia.*

However, this approach has been criticized for sometimes exaggerating the two other positions, pushing them into false contradictions – or even inventing them where they may not exist.[8] Nevertheless, Kearney's aim with

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Each constellation of possibilities and actualities ends. Possibility does not. The only actuality that never comes to an end is the actuality that grounds all possibility." In Ingolf U. Dalferth, *The Priority of the Possible: Outlines of a Contemplative Philosophy of Orientation*, Cambridge u.a.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021, xii–xiii.

5 In the so-called ontological reading of Exodus 3:14, he connects this tradition with Augustine and Aquinas, who identified God speaking from the bush with the Being of Greek metaphysics.

6 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 7–8. Kearney refers mainly to philosophers as Levinas, Marion and Derrida, for whom God is too high and utterly unnameable, and Zizek, Lyotard, Kristeva or Caputo, for whom in the lowest of depths and both of these groups share, in Kearney's view, an aversion to any mediating role of narrative imagination.

7 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2.

8 Merold Westphal points out that the metaphysical talk about God employing categories of *causa prima* or *actus purus* does not necessarily contradicts the "eschatological" talk about personal God of gift and desire, but can be useful in its proper, subordinate place. Westphal demonstrates this on such diverse thinkers as Thomas Aquinas, Anselm of Canterbury or Karl Barth. See Merold Westphal, Hermeneutics and the God of Promise,

his playful and poetic treatment of these categories is to introduce movement and dynamism into the discourse about God while giving greater significance to human actions.

To this end, Kearney introduces several interconnected categories, though often without much explanation. These include *eschaton*, *kingdom*, *persona*, *desire*, and *promise*. While the role of *persona* will be addressed in the anthropological section of this article, the meaning of these terms can be summarized as pointing to the claim of the future that qualifies the present. *Desire* and *promise* are modalities oriented toward something not yet realized, which Kearney refers to as the *eschaton* or the *kingdom*.

Desire can be characterized by a kind of lack and signifies a yearning for something not yet, or not fully, present. However, it does not indicate total absence; rather, it embodies a force that moves one in a particular direction – toward the other. At the same time, desire stands in contrast to possession: once one attains what one desires, the desire tends to vanish. Yet fulfillment rarely arrives, and when it does, it is often only fleeting. For this reason, remaining in a state of desire may be preferable, as it respects the other and paradoxically brings them closer than false possession ever could.[9]

In this way, the notion aligns well with the concept of God as possibility – portraying God not as fully present nor entirely absent ("neither is nor is not") – but as an object of desire that draws human beings into a quest for Him.

The notion of promise functions in a comparable manner. Emerging from the side of the Other, it arouses expectation or desire and inspires hope for something not yet realized. This "something," referred to as the *eschaton* or the kingdom, is likewise characterized by this kind of dialectic. These terms point to a reality not fully present, but existing in a state of potentiality, or revealed in *kairotic* moments – occasions that interrupt ordinary *chronos*

in: John Panteleimon Manoussakis (ed.), *After God. Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, 78–93, 82–85.

9 See chapter "Desiring God" in Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 53–71. Kearney starts here with an interpretation of the Song of Songs and then develops his notion of desire in the dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* and Jacques Derrida's *On the Name*. He calls the first moment of desire–yearning for the presence of something as an onto-theological way of desiring God, and the second, marked by constant suspension, as eschatological. As always, he aims to find a third way between these two.

and move desire and promise toward fulfillment. However, this fulfillment is never final, as exemplified by the concept of *persona*.[10]

Kearney emphasizes that these realities will not manifest unless we actively bring them into being, and that this process is primarily an ethical one, as the eschatological kingdom is a kingdom of love and justice, requiring ethical action on the part of humans.[11] What is both provocative and challenging in this claim is the apparent conflation of the kingdom with God. Kearney asserts that by realizing this kingdom, we turn God from possibility into actuality: "God can be God only if we enable this to happen."[12]

From the outset, it becomes problematic to discern what Kearney means by "God." While he criticizes the disembodied God of metaphysics (though it is debatable whether anyone truly believes in such a God), he advocates for a more personal God rooted in the scriptural narratives. However, he seems to diffuse this personal quality into a futuristic vision of a loving and just community.

Nevertheless, Kearney occasionally seems to step back from these radical pronouncements, particularly when discussing God's dependency and conditionality. At the beginning of the book, he writes: "God depends on us to be. Without us no Word can be made flesh."[13] However, later in the text, he poses the question: "Does all this amount to a conditional God?" And answers: "No. For if God's future being is indeed conditional on our actions in history, God's infinite love is not."[14]

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10 Another important aspect of the notion of desire and related terms is the "active/passive character of this divine eros." Referencing to Confessions, bk. 6, Kearney recalls that: "Augustine's desire of God is a fervid response to God's desire of Augustine." It might be useful to remember this primacy of God's desire on other occasions as well. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 62.

11 "This eschatological promise requires not only grace but ethical action on our part." Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 45. Or later he interprets God's name from the burning bush narrative as: "I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice." Ibid., 37–38.

12 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2. William Desmond comments critically and pointedly on this pronouncement: "Sentences like these could be parsed in such a way that we risk idolatry. We are human. God is God, and only God is God. We do not make, or enable God to be. God makes us to be. God must be to enable to be. God is not the Kingdom of God. God is God. God enables the Kingdom to be, and we may be co-operators, perhaps even creative contributors, but God is not the Kingdom of God." In William Desmond, Maybe, Maybe Not: Richard Kearney and God, in: Manoussakis, *After God*, 55–77, 74–75.

13 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 4.

14 Ibid., 37.

One can also trace a subtle development in Kearney's thought from *posse* to *possest*, a term freely borrowed from Nicholas of Cusa that combines *posse* (possibility) and *esse* (being). This concept seeks to overcome the ontological priority of actuality while still retaining some sense of actuality in the idea of God because without it, God becomes hardly thinkable.

In the epilogue of the book, Kearney writes: "For if the God of the possible is indeed *possest*, this is not a matter of opposing *posse* to *esse* in some binary division. On the contrary, the *possest* contains the possibility (though not the necessity, as Cusanus held) of *esse* within itself."[15] From this, it appears that what makes possibility possible must itself exist, and what it actualizes are new entities and new actualities.[16]

At this point, however, it seems only like a wordplay. The key difference between Kearney's view and that of Cusanus or classical metaphysics, at least as Kearney puts it, lies in Kearney's emphasis on the open-ended nature of what will come to be.

> "[…] the eschatological *possest* […] promises something radically new and adventurous. For *possest* may now be seen as advent rather than arche, as eschaton rather than principium. The realization of *possest*'s divine *esse*, if and when it occurs, if and when the kingdom comes, will no doubt be a new *esse*, refigured and transfigured in a mirror-play where it recognizes its other and not just the image of itself returning to itself."[17]

The underlying stratum of Kearney's endeavor is the question of whether change is possible in God, expressed through the dynamics of possibility and actuality. For Kearney, actuality refers to something already fully realized. When he critiques actuality, his concern is less about the actual existence of God and more about God's character.

Possibility, on the other hand, represents something in motion – or even in a state of latency before motion – that holds the potential to take many different paths. Through the concept of *posse*, Kearney introduces alterity into the idea of God, suggesting that God can be changed by what is other than Himself, through His engagement with creation.

Does the idea of God enduring change imply a weak God? Kearney occasionally exaggerates and makes statements that might imply this, but when he emphasizes the "weakness" of God, his aim is to challenge triumphalist

15 Ibid., 110.
16 Seen in this way, Kearney is more in line with Dalferth's notion of God quoted above.
17 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 110–111.

views that draw rigid conclusions about human nature and society from the notion of an unchanging, omnipotent God. Paradoxically, this emphasis seeks to reveal a stronger God than one defined as an unchangeable essence. For Kearney, God's strength lies in His ability to undergo passion, allow Himself to be changed, and emerge not diminished but enhanced by the process.

Support for this view comes, among other sources, from the concept of *perichoresis*, which describes the interplay of sameness and otherness within the Trinity. Kearney interprets *perichoresis* as this: "Meaning literally 'dance (*choros*) around (*peri*),' it referred to a circular movement where Father, Son, and Spirit gave place to each other in a gesture of reciprocal dispossession rather than fusing into a single substance."[18]

This capacity to make space for the other without losing one's own identity is presented as an essential characteristic of divinity and is extended to God's relationship with humanity. To give place to otherness, Kearney argues, is not a loss for God, nor for humans; rather, it is a gain.

Kearney employs another significant concept to support this view: *kenosis*. Derived from Phil. 2:7,[19] the term means self-emptying or letting go. While originally used to describe Christ becoming human, Kearney extends its meaning to illustrate a broader principle of God's relationship with the world.[20]

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18 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 109. In a later text, when discussing Rublev's Trinity, Kearney gives different and more accurate etymology of the term, yet still interprets it as a dance: "This dance motif is captured in the original Greek term for the Trinity, 'perichoresis,' meaning to dance around. The three persons circle around (*peri*) a receptacle (*chora*), which may be read as a bowl of hospitality, a Eucharistic chalice, or a womb of natality." Richard Kearney, God making: Theopoetics and Anatheism, in: Richard Kearney – Matthew Clement (eds.), *The Art of Anatheism*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 13. The term was used differently in Christological and trinitarian context in the tradition, see Leonard Prestige, ΠΕΡΙΧΩΡΕΩ AND ΠΕΡΙΧΩΡΗΣΙΣ IN THE FATHERS, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 29, No. 115 (April, 1928), 242–252, but the "dance interpretation" is a modern one, influenced by Kabbalistic sources, which also seem to underpin Kearney's understanding, see Kearney, God making, 5–6.

19 Phil 2:5–7: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness." NRSV.

20 He repeats this interpretation of incarnation as kenosis and asserts, that "By this I understand the self-emptying of the omnipotent God, the surpassing of metaphysical categories of divinity as First Cause or Highest Being, the realization that God is a promise, a call, a desire to love and be loved that cannot be at all unless we allow God to be God," in Kearney, *Anatheism*, 52.

According to Kearney, God chooses powerlessness to make space for the other – creation and humanity within it. This chosen powerlessness is not a sign of weakness but a deliberate act to empower the other and, in doing so, to enhance God's own greatness. God's greatness lies in His ability to make Himself powerless, not in being powerless by nature.

Nevertheless, this differentiation is absent in Kearney's account, though it may be implicitly presupposed. When he writes, "God thus empowers our human powerlessness by giving away His power, by possibilizing us and our good actions – so that we may supplement and co-accomplish creation. To be made in God's image is therefore, paradoxically, to be powerless; but with the possibility of receiving power from God to overcome our powerlessness,"[21] a crucial question arises: How can one receive power from a God who is Himself powerless?[22]

This lack of clarity leaves the relationship between God's self-emptying and humanity's empowerment somewhat unresolved. Although Kearney is not dealing with the logical puzzle, further differentiation would help elucidate whether God's powerlessness is absolute or a chosen state that allows Him to confer power. Moreover, it would be helpful to specify what is actually meant by "powerlessness." It seems that Kearney is advocating for a different kind of power than that associated with the metaphysics of presence. This interpretation is reinforced by his choice to use *dunamis* as a key term in thinking about God, since it encompasses meanings of potency and power as well as possibility. The proposed concept of God, then, is not defined by mere powerlessness, but by a different kind of power – one distinct from that associated with the powerful of this world.

If not sufficiently differentiated the idea of receiving power from powerless God is a contradiction and I suppose that this tension, similar to the earlier quote on God's conditional future being and unconditional love, arises from the conflation of God and His kingdom and perhaps a lack of the recog-

21 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 108.

22 This relation is confused also in Kearney's retelling and interpretation of various World War II testimonies, for example when writes that for Etty Hillesum, "God was a God of powerlessness who gave her the power to resist, to carry on, to dare to live in the face of death" (p. 58), and continues to assert that "God can *be* only if we let God be God" (p. 59), or that "to the weakness of the divine responds the strength of the human," and that "the death of God gives birth to the God of life" (p. 69), although it is not clear where this life originates and if in the strength of the human, it does not seem to give much hope, rather it sounds very risky. All quotes are from Kearney, *Anatheism*.

nition of God's transcendence, as well. God and the Kingdom are two distinct realities.[23] God's love is His essence and power, which can empower humans and is not dependent on them. Out of this love, which is his own self, God can make room for others by stepping back and becoming seemingly powerless.

Through this act, the world arises. However, being distinct from God, it is marked by dualities such as being and non-being, life and death, love and hatred. Therefore, it remains an open space in which the kingdom of Love must still be realized. This world represents an arena where humans can act, yet find themselves in their powerlessness and receptivity. As such, they must receive power from another source. Kearney describes this process as a transfiguration, a term that plays a crucial role in his anthropology.

Kearney's anthropology

The chapter *Toward a Phenomenology of the Persona,* first one in *The God Who May Be*, can be seen as a preparation for the more theological discussions in the rest of the book. This preparation is grounded in the recognition of the alterity of another person and its transcendence – that is, its ever-escaping quality, which cannot be fully grasped or possessed.

This step is achieved through the distinction between two levels in human beings, which Kearney refers to as *person* and *persona*. The level of *persona* represents that aspect of the human being – or rather, that quality – which cannot be objectified in terms of data or measurements, and cannot be fully grasped or known with finality. It constantly eludes consciousness and is best described through the use of imagination, particularly in the figurative language of narrative and metaphor.[24]

In other words, Kearney addresses the question of identity. Some characteristics of another person can be known and encountered with relative stability and predictability; these fall under the concept of *person*. However, there are other aspects that remain hidden, becoming known only intermittently – this is what Kearney refers to as *persona*. He draws on a biblical verse to illustrate this: "A little while and you will no longer see me; and again a little while and you will see me" (John 16:16–20). This verse emphasizes, in Kearney's interpretation, the presence and absence of this level of one's be-

23 This difference is asserted also by Desmond, see above.
24 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 8.

ing. It can be recognized in the real, bodily person who can be known and encountered – but only for a moment, after which it disappears.

The recognition of *persona* Kearney presents as a process of transfiguration, in which he stresses the primacy of the other, yet there seems to be some confusion in his propositions. In an encounter with others, one always configures them. He writes, "To accept this paradox of configuration is to allow the other to appear as his/her unique persona. To refuse this paradox, opting instead to regard someone as pure presence (thing), or pure absence (nothing), is to disfigure the other."[25] This suggests that the self has the power to allow or disallow the *persona* of others to appear – through hospitality, openness, and acceptance of this paradox.

On the other hand, Kearney later stresses that "The *persona* transfigures me before I configure it. And to the extent that I avow and accord this asymmetrical priority to the other, I am transfigured by that particular persona and empowered to transfigure in turn – that is, to figure the other in their otherness."[26] It seems, then, that what is required from the self is this allowance or hospitality, but the self is not the one who performs the transfiguration – perhaps only the disfiguration. The transfiguration is not an objective process that takes place outside the encounter, nor is it a physical change in the appearance of the other. It happens only within this mutuality and takes place first on the part of the self (although it could be discussed whether it proceeds in subsequent steps). The self is changed by the other; otherwise, he or she could not perceive the other at all. From the self, receptivity is required. The activity, it seems, lies with the other.

Receptivity, however, is seen as a capacity rather than pure passivity. This capacity, also referred to as *persona*, is located within the self.[27] Through this concept, the twofold structure of human beings – person and *persona* – is recognized within the self as well. In other words, one can be a stranger to oneself just as the others can.[28] Therefore, the term *persona* serves two

25 Ibid., 10.

26 Ibid., 16.

27 "This capacity in each of us to receive and respond to the divine invitation I call persona." Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2.

28 In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* Kearney develops this notion, although not under the name of *persona*, and explores how human beings refuse to acknowledge themselves as others but: "an integral part of us is to accept the truth that we are strangers-to-ourselves and that we need not fear such strangeness or 'act it out' by projecting such fear onto Others." Here Kearney builds on Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*.

functions: first, it refers to the capacity to respond to the call or face of the other, and second, it describes that aspect of the other which always transcends the individual person.

With this 'always more' of the *persona* – its transcendence comes the notion of infinity: "*Persona* is the in-finite other in the finite person before me."[29] This prepares the ground for a theological, yet somewhat enigmatic assertion: "Because there is no other to this infinite other, bound to but irreducible to the embodied person, we refer to this *persona* as the sign of God. Not the other person as divine, mind you – that would be idolatry – but the divine in and through that person. The divine as trace, icon, visage, passage."[30] The theological dimension of persona, which has been latently present from the beginning, comes to the forefront in the conclusion that while the excess or surplus of the other never ends, there must be God behind it – the only real transcendence. This resembles more of a natural theology argument than a scripturally informed conception of God, who comes to His creation and makes Himself known – something Kearney aims to recover in contrast to the metaphysics.[31]

With this anthropological prolegomena, Kearney moves towards the development of the notion of transcendence. One's persona, or capacity to respond, is not only receptive to other personas but also to the divine invitation. In this case, the structure remains the same, and mutuality is preserved. Kearney asserts: "Each human person carries within him/herself the capacity to be transfigured in this way and to transfigure God in turn – by making divine possibility ever more incarnate and alive."[32]

See Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters. Interpreting otherness*, London: Routledge, 2003, 8.

29 Kearney, *The God Who May Be,* 17.

30 Ibid., 18.

31 Similar, distinction of human being introduces Petr Gallus in his Christology and anthropology. Gallus differentiates with Dalferth and Jüngel vertical and horizontal dimension in human being and for the first one uses the term *person*, for the second *personality*. The main difference is that this first dimension, for which Kearney would use a term *persona,* is recognised not as a conclusion based on the transcendence of the other, but follows from the perspective of faith. See Petr Gallus, *The Perspective of Resurrection. A Trinitarian Christology*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021, 230.

32 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2.

This anthropological discussion offers yet a different interpretation of quotes like "God can be God only if we enable this to happen."[33] To "transfigure God in turn" then does not mean to change God into something He is not, but to figure Him in His otherness – in other words, to perceive Him as God. Still, it is the other, in this case God, from which the impulse originates, resonating the capacity to respond within oneself. This response primarily involves a change in perception, accompanied by the practical realization of the so-called kingdom.

Further clarification of the term transfiguration can be found in Kearney's interpretation of its paradigmatic case – the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor.

Kearney's Christology

If the dual structure of person–*persona* is applied to every human being, Jesus cannot be an exception. Indeed, Kearney interprets the transfiguration narrative in these terms: "Here the person of Jesus is metamorphosed before the eyes of his disciples into the *persona* of Christ."[34] Just as with universal transfiguration, Jesus's transfiguration was not a change into something or someone else. His person did not mutate, and his body was not negated or abandoned in a miraculous way; the disciples were still aware it was Jesus. Yet, as Kearney puts it, his divine persona was allowed to shine forth.[35] To clarify this process, Kearney quotes the *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, which explains the transfiguration as "a change not in the person itself, but in the figure in which it normally appears."[36]

For Kearney, the transfiguration signifies a change in vision. The disciples on Mount Tabor saw what they had not seen before, but what was latent within Jesus. They recognized him as Christ, the Messiah. However, the exact nature of this messianicity is somewhat unclear, and at times it seems as though not only the dialectical structure of person/*persona* is shared by Jesus

33 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2, or later: "But because God is *posse* (the possibility of being) rather than *esse* (the actuality of being as *fait accompli*), the promise remains powerless until and unless we *respond* to it. Transfiguring the possible into the actual, and thereby enabling the coming kingdom to come into being, is not just something God does for us but also something we do for God." Ibid., 4.

34 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 39.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 40.

and the rest of humanity, but also a potential to be transfigured into Christ. This is a conclusion Kearney somewhat proposes, but he also maintains the uniqueness of the particular Christ – Jesus Christ – when he says: "The infinite *persona* of Christ is not exhausted in the finite figure of Jesus of Nazareth. The Messiah is distinct, if by no means separable, from the Nazarene."[37]

This distinction and inseparability are a clear allusion to the Chalcedonian definition, which negatively defines the relation of divine and human nature in the person of Jesus Christ as: "acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably."[38] Kearney seems to appeal to this framework when differentiating between the person of Jesus and the *persona* of Christ. To further reinforce this notion, Kearney refers to the figure of the Paraclete and claims that John's Gospel "identifies the transfiguring spirit of Christ with the eschatological Paraclete of the kingdom." He continues: "Jesus the historical person must depart from this finite world so that the *persona* of the infinite Christ may return as the Paraclete who refigures all in a new heaven and a new earth (John 14:26)."[39]

In this case, Kearney seems to betray his own dictum about the indivisibility of person and *persona*, as the infinite Christ may return in different figures. What, then, remains of the historical Jesus? Or how many components does this person consist of? Is *persona* of Christ different from *persona* of Jesus, or does Jesus of Nazareth posseses no persona of his own–only that of the cosmic Christ? If so, how fully *vere homo* is he?

Kearney's Christology clearly opens the way for different messiahs in different places and times,[40] but it also disrupts the basic anthropological

37 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 42–43.

38 Translation in Herbert T. Bindley (ed.), *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, London: Methuen, 1899, 297.

39 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 43.

40 This position is affirmed in the exposition of Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) and Teilhard de Chardin's thought in an article Two Prophets of Eucharistic Hospitality. Here Kearney endorses their visions of Christ being extended beyond the person of Jesus and prolonged into the creation. See Abhishiktananda reflection: "Do I call him Christ? Yes, within one tradition, but his name is just as much Emmanuel–Parusha. Can he be Krishna? Rama? Shiva? Why not, if Shiva is in Tamilnadu the form of that archetype which seeks to become explicit at the greatest depth of the human heart?" (p. 16), or Teilhard's, who goes even further and extends the body of Christ to the whole universe: "Thus when the Phrase '*Hoc est Corpus meum*' is being pronounced, '*hoc*' means '*primario*' the bread; but '*secundario*,' in a second phase occuring in nature, the matter of sacrament is the world, through which there spreads, so as to complete itself, the superhuman presence of the universal Christ." (p. 20) This last sentence shows that in

unity of person/*persona*. By doing so, it makes the historical Jesus merely a vehicle for an ahistorical Christ-*persona*, thereby robbing him of his uniqueness (embodied *haecceitas*), which Kearney values so much in other beings.[41]

Persona as image

This error becomes less apparent when the relationship between Christ, *persona*, and other people is explored more nuancedly, particularly through

this line of argumentation, shared by Kearney, Christ is not a true man, but superhuman, not Jesus Christ, but universal Christ. The unity of person/*persona* dialectic in case of Jesus from Nazareth is then hardly held together, as this *persona* manifests itself in the whole creation. Richard, Kearney, Two Prophets of Eucharistic Hospitality, *Japan Mission Journal* (Spring, 2014), 14–25. The rationale beyond this arguing seems to be an attempt to appreciate the creation and involve it into the divinity. Similar attempts were made recently in deep incarnation thesis, proposed by Niels Henrik Gregersen. However, whether made on the basis of eucharist or incarnation, these attempts lack the differentiation of ways how God relates to His creation and can be present in it. Jürgen Moltmann therefore recalls the pneumatological presence of God in the world and asserts: "This outpouring of the divine Spirit has to be distinguished from the incarnation of God's Son. The incarnation takes place in the one – Jesus Christ – for many; the outpouring of the Spirit takes place in many so that they may be united with the one head, Christ. That comes about both in the church and in the cosmos, for the human being receives 'the breath of life' from God's Spirit (Gen. 2:7), just as do all living things and the earth itself: 'When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground' (Ps. 104:39)." Jürgen Moltmann, Is God incarnate in all that is?, in: Niels Henrik Gregersen, *Incarnation: on the Scope and Depth of Christology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, 126–127. Similarly Ingolf U. Dalferth: "God as Spirit is not enfleshed by all bodies […] he is present to them as Spirit and not embodied by them. God accommodates his activity to bodies, but this neither makes God a body nor the totality of bodies (the universe)… God does not become incarnate in the totality of human beings (but in Jesus Christ), yet he accommodates his presence and activity to the peculiarities of human existence." Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present. An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God*, Leuven: Peeters, 2006, 233. Spirit is mentioned also in the texts quoted by Kearney, who, however, does seem to reflect this difference. Abhishiktananda wrote: "the mythos of Parusha (Spirit) is wider than that of Christos; not only does it include the cosmic and metacosmic aspect of the mystery, but it is also free from the attachment to time entailed by the mythos of Christ. […] The Parusha is, is simply there, like the Atman, Sat, Brahman, once the human being awakes to himself." (p. 16) Here, however, another problematic aspect occurs with the localization of the Spirit in human being, which only needs to be awaken.

41 It becomes quite confusing because several paragraphs later Kearney recalls Tertulian's defence of the uniqueness of Christ's persona against sects of Sabellians, Patropassians and Monarchians, who reduced "the Son and the Spirit to the single monarchy of the Father;" or Basil the Great distinction between *prosopon* (face) and *prosopeion* (mask), without which Christ would easily became "little more than a mouthpiece for the Father." Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 43–44.

the metaphor of image and reflection. If the persona of oneself is the capacity to respond to the call of the other and to act on behalf of the other then the more one becomes persona, the more one resembles Christ. In this sense, Kearney writes that in the transfiguration narrative, God: "announces Christ as the possibility of all humans becoming 'sons of God' – that is, by being transfigured into their own unique *personas*."[42]

Kearney's discussion of the Pauline legacy also follows this line, emphasizing the mystical elements represented by the idea of union with Christ. The process of becoming a *persona* is described through various metaphors and images drawn from the Pauline letters, such as being transfigured in the light of Christ, being altered according to Christ's image and likeness, or giving up the "old self" to be renewed in the image of its Creator.[43] This rich metaphor serves to illustrate how a human being can remain their most unique and personal self while simultaneously becoming more and more like Christ. In other words, Kearney navigates between the poles of individuality and universality, or union with others,[44] which ultimately leads to union with Christ.[45] This final union is reserved for the eschaton, highlighting the processual and never-complete nature of becoming a *persona*.[46]

This is emphasized further by recalling a "messianic time" of persona, which suggests that being a *persona* is not something one fully accomplishes, but rather something that manifests only for a fleeting moment, much like

42 Ibid., 43.

43 Kearney refers to 1 Corinthians 15:49–58, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:10 in Kearney, *The God Who May Be,* 45.

44 "This divine *persona*, finally, safeguards what is unique in each one us – what stitches each in its mother's womb, what knows every hair of our head – while convoking us to a shared humanity." Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 45.

45 In this sense Kearney interprets Colossians 3:10: "There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything." Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 45.

46 This differentiated notion of image resembles the concept of *christification*, common in orthodox and catholic tradition, but in certain way present also in Jürgen Moltmann's conception of God's image in Creation, in which Moltmann develops an idea of God's image in three distinct ways: as original designation of human beings: *imago Dei*, as the messianic calling of human beings: *imago Christi* and as the eschatological glorification of human beings: *gloria Dei est homo*. Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation. A new theology of creation and the spirit of God. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 215. This line of reasoning prompts a question whether the boundary between the God and human is not crossed and people are not deified, which is a common soteriological model, although a problematic one. For this remark I am thankful to Petr Gallus, see Petr Gallus, *Člověk před Bohem. Teologická antropologi*e, Praha: Karolinum, 2024, 504.

in the original transfiguration narrative. Often, this moment is only recognized in retrospect. After such an event, one "turns back into the person." By highlighting this, Kearney seeks to avoid the fetishization of someone as *persona* or the pride of self, where an individual might believe they have already become like Christ.[47]

These risks arise because the process is inherently ethical. It involves both activity and receptivity; it is "something done onto us by the grace-giving persona of Christ, but it is also something we can do to others in turn."[48] Therefore, for Kearney, it is an ethical duty, and humans are not merely passive receivers in this process – they actively participate in their own transformation.[49]

The notion of persona, therefore, appears to represent a God-given quality or capacity inherent in all human beings. This capacity is realized by being responsive and attentive to the personas of others – by performing actions that help protect and nurture it. This quality was fully realized in Jesus Christ. To become like Him is to recognize this quality within oneself and others and to respond to it by living in a corresponding manner.

The function of Jesus Christ

The function of Jesus Christ, then, is not more than that of a model – the one in whose person the divine persona was so visibly manifest that He is worth following. However, there can be other messiahs, or rather, all people are called to be the chosen ones.[50] For Kearney, this works primarily in a reverse way, as he frequently recalls a verse: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40),[51] or a line from Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem: "To the Father through the features of men's faces."[52] It seems that this is much about recognizing

47 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 45–47.

48 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 44. Or later: "This eschatological promise requires not only grace but ethical action on our part." Ibid., 45.

49 In classical terms this process could be described as sanctification, which is usually differentiated from the justification. See for example Martin Luther's notion in Large Catechism: The Apostles' Creed, paragraph 53 and following.

50 "For remember, Jesus does not here declare himself the one and only Christ. […] True, the Father calls him his 'chosen one.' But does not Christ's persona do the same for each of us? Are we not all called to be chosen ones?" Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 46.

51 Ibid., 44, 46, 51.

52 Ibid., 13, 39.

Christ in others, or, in non-Christian language, recognizing their persona, and offering them a hand.[53] This act reverberates this quality in oneself and turns one, for a moment, into a persona – a messiah, or Christ. This moment is what Kearney refers to as messianic time.

When commenting on the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ, which for Kearney are further examples of the process of transfiguration, he concludes that, just as the disciples did not recognize Jesus on their way to Emmaus, because they were, as we are, so full of great expectations "… that we fail to see the divine in the simplest of beings: we overlook the persona in the person."[54]

It is significant that these stories and the transfiguration narrative share a common focus on vision, appearance, and the recognition of someone as someone.[55] Kearney, therefore, builds his hermeneutics of religion around these events of epiphanic vision. These are not merely appearances or spectacles, but events that produce real effects as they alter the cognition of the beholders – and thus, the beholders themselves. However, there are other kinds of events that produce effects in a different manner. Among these, one could place the crucifixion and resurrection, which are central to Christian theology.

The crucifixion was witnessed by many, and while it could be considered an appearance, it was more of a disfiguration than a transfiguration. The crucified one was recognized as Christ only by the Roman centurion, and the hopes for a new kingdom were shattered. Yet, the effect of this event does not lie in the appearance itself or in the recognition of the beholders. It produces its effect through the death of Jesus of Nazareth – or, for Christian believers, through the death of God. The resurrection, in contrast, was attested by no one directly. It is difficult to consider it as a vision or appearance, especially since it is not directly described in the New Testament. Yet, it still produced profound effects, among other things the post-resurrection appearances themselves.

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53 This emphasis on the other or stranger as the primary locus of an encounter with the divine is preserved also in *Anatheism*, where Kearney claims that "It is noteworthy, I think, that the stranger is often treated as the human persona of the divine. Indeed what appears as an all-too-human other, emerging out of the night to wrestle with us, is only subsequently recognized as divine." Kearney, *Anatheism*, 22.

54 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 49.

55 This focus is present also in the discussion of the burning bush encounter in the chapter I Am Who May Be, Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 20–38.

This second kind of event differs from the first not only in how it performs its effect, but also in its particularity. The crucifixion and resurrection are once-and-for-all events – Jesus of Nazareth cannot be crucified again. These events are singular and unrepeatable, marking a unique moment in history. In contrast, the appearances of Christ, such as those after the resurrection, can happen multiple times.

This seems to be the reason for their preference in Kearney's thought. They are the kind of events one can possibly attest to in his or her own ordinary life: to recognize a divine quality or spark in others and be transformed by that. Their potential universality bypasses the peculiar particularity of the cross and resurrection and the problem of its appropriation. But in the end, it is based on a kind of soteriology that does not need these second kinds of events. The persona is a quality that does not seem to evaporate, however distorted it is. Therefore, sin, if there is something like that in Kearney, can repudiate it but does not go so far as to make it impossible to restore. This restoration takes place through the other persona, a particular persona of a unique human being, which calls upon the subject, but not necessarily through the persona of Jesus Christ, nor at all through his cross and resurrection.[56]

Historical reality of these "appearance events" is not discussed, and although they are the preferred ones, they serve rather as useful stories for the interpretation of our own epiphanic experiences. As such, their historicity does not seem to be relevant, and their use is purely pastoral, as is the case with the resurrection itself, which must have preceded these events. Instead of the risen Christ, Kearney speaks about the risen message[57] or about the message of dying and rising again.[58] In this sense, the resurrection of Jesus, for Kearney, represents a resurrection into the kerygma. But what, exactly, is this kerygma about?

> "Seen thus as kerygma of Transfiguration-Passion-Resurrection, the message of Christ's paschal visitations might go something like this: If you are hungry and need

56 At this place the classic Anselm's question *Cur deus homo* comes to mind, but is left unanswered by Kearney.

57 On appearance to Mary Magdalene, Kearney writes: "Here Jesus chose to make himself visible to the most despised of beings – a fallen, scorned prostitute, then considered the lowest of the low – and to make her the premier evangelist of his risen message." Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 49.

58 Ibid., 50.

> bread and fish, ask for it and you shall have your fill. […] If you are wanting in body or mind – crippled, despised, rejected, downcast, disabled, despondent – and your nets are still empty after many tries, do not despair; someone will come and tell you where to cast your net so that you may have life and have it more abundantly."[59]

For the disciples and other followers of Jesus who witnessed these post-resurrection appearances, this might have been their kerygma, as it was embodied in the person of Jesus Christ – whom they saw die and then He appeared alive to them. Without this recognition, such a kerygma lacks foundation and risks sounding more like a lesson in positive thinking. Why shall one have his or her fill? Why shall someone come and say anything to those who are wanting in body or mind? Isn't the experience and the state of the world today attesting the opposite – people dying from hunger, suffering under the war and oppression?

Kearney's project therefore has a strong ethical concern, but is directed towards those, who are capable of action, who can be hospitable and open towards others. Those who are in need of hospitality may only hope that someone will, maybe motivated by Kearney's work, answer their call, but the reason for such a hope seems to be missing. It is perhaps, the emphasis on the urgency of need to act in this world and the avoidance of triumphalist theological tendencies, which leads Kearney to abandoning of any foundation for such a hope, which would not rest on our deeds. In the end is not Kearney proposing only a God of little things,[60] but also a little God?

Conclusion

This article discussed three particular theological topics in Richard Kearney's work and raised questions related to each. In Kearney's concept of God, the confusion between God's being and His Kingdom was identified as the core issue of the paradoxical notion of God as possibility – that is, God without being, waiting to be actualized by human beings. As Patrick Burke observes, Kearney's ontology is governed by ethics and Kearney "dances between the two,"[61] which clarifies the assertions such as, "God can be God only if we enable this to happen." This statement, then, is more of an appeal to human responsibility and engagement in the Kingdom than a claim about

59 Ibid., 51.
60 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 51.
61 Patrick Burke, Kearney's Wager, in: Manoussakis, *After God*, 94–105, 101.

God's nature. However, if one expects help from God in this task, must not ethics be anchored in ontology or theology proper?

In Kearney's anthropology, the relationship between human beings and God is more nuanced, as he emphasizes the primacy of the Other in the process called transfiguration. But does the same not hold true in theology? Does God's being – the foundation of His promises and calls – not precede any human action, however strong the mutuality between the two may be?

These questions arise also in Kearney's Christology. Must not the hope and realization of the Kingdom be grounded in actual salvific events – events that occurred independently of human desire or will and which Kearney's account seems to neglect?

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