

# The Seminar on God and the Human Future

A Report on the 2016 Spring Meeting

## Joe Bessler

The Spring meeting in Santa Rosa witnessed the God Seminar moving more surely to engage both contemporary New Testament scholarship, in the figure of Paul, and voices of postmodern theology. In several presentations by, and conversation with, Irish philosopher Richard Kearney the Seminar engaged a major voice in postmodern discussions of God. Walking us through core insights from his recent books, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, and *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, Kearney described anatheism, not as a new movement but as recognition of an old pattern, rooted in the human capacity for hospitality amidst uncertainty. Seeking to articulate what he calls, in the Introduction to *Anatheism*, “a third way between the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism: those polar opposites that have maimed so many minds and souls in our history,” Kearney uses *Ana-theos*, literally, “God after God” to name the process of “seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove” (3).

Between those extremes of certainty, Kearney privileges uncertainty as not only typical in our human experience but also as critically attested in the history of scholarship. About our human experience, he writes:

The anatheist moment is one available to anyone who experiences instants of deep disorientation, doubt, or dread, when we are no longer sure exactly who we are or where we are going. Such moments may visit us in the middle of the night, in the void of boredom or melancholy, in the pain of loss or depression. (5)

And about the anatheist moment in the history of the West, Kearney writes:

The attitude of holy insecurity ranges, in Western history, from the Socratic practice of not-knowing—as precondition of the search for truth—through such decisive inaugurations of philosophical wonderment and questioning as Augustine’s ‘Who do I seek?’ [and] Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*. (7–8)

Such moments, even dispositions, toward un-knowing and uncertainty have themselves been understood as creative processes. As Kearney summarizes: “Without disorientation no reorientation.” Thus, nurturing the capacity for uncertainty is a key aspect of anatheism’s therapeutic potential for the postmodern mind and heart. Kearney

encourages trust in that deep historic pattern of bewilderment opening up newness of life. And he locates the wager of that trust by calling attention to the risk of openness, of hospitality to the figure of the Stranger in biblical, philosophical, and literary discourse.

In the encounter with the Stranger one sees, again and again in the history of literature, the discovery or awakening to an epiphanic moment of insight and transformation. It is not the familiar, which all too often simply reasserts our certainties—political, religious, and epistemological—but the strange and the uncanny that disorient us in life-changing ways. Kearney’s doctoral professor, Paul Ricoeur, was famous for his suggestive insight that the process of *critique* not only breaks open our previous naïveté, but also enables the possibility of a “second naïveté.” For Kearney, Ricoeur’s language does not describe a one-time event but suggests a kind of organic process deeply rooted in our basic capacity for hospitality in the midst of uncertainty.

I am rehearsing these basic moves in Kearney’s model of anatheism because most of the responses and questions of that model stem from an engagement with these core formulations. Namsoon Kang (Brite Divinity School), for example, wondered about Kearney’s themes of uncertainty and hospitality.

The God of uncertainty does not itself guarantee that it would function as mobilizing faith to attend to the complex dimension of love or justice in this uneven world, where even love and justice as discourse and practice are becoming more and more cliché.

And with regard to hospitality, Kang posed the profoundly disturbing story of Lot.

Lot offers his daughter to “the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, [who] surrounded the house” (Gen 19:4), in order to offer hospitality to two male guests: “Look, I have two young daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof” (Gen 19:8). While the guests were enjoying the protection of the hospitality by the host, two voiceless women were facing the extreme hostility from their own father, who is completely disregarding the human dignity of his own daughters.

In his response, Kearney sought to clarify that the kind of emergent sacrality he sought to describe with anatheism might or might not go with the name of “God.” Kearney argued that he was not calling for an “uncertain God,” but calling attention to how our human experiences of uncertainty and doubt can be affirmed as opening up new orientations to the sacred. With respect to stories such as that found in Lot and in Kang’s other, disturbing text of Judges 19, Kearney thanked Kang for bringing up those

texts which expose the profound moral dangers of an uncritical hospitality.

Still during the first Friday session, the Seminar also responded to Sarah Morice Brubaker's (Phillips Theological Seminary) paper, "Paul, Augustine, and the Problem of Overconfidence." She wondered if Augustine's failure to treat "overconfidence," which she beautifully translated as "blowhardism," as a form of lying, might be due to a passage in 2 Corinthians 10–13, where Paul did a little false crowing of his own. While not following from Kearney's initial presentation, Morice Brubaker's paper did highlight complex questions of hermeneutics, reception, and the often surprising play of figurative language. Art Dewey, among others, suggested that in Second Corinthians Paul was not actually boasting, but cleverly depicting a boasting, foolish figure in order to mock and upbraid his audience's own behavior.

In response to Kearney's second presentation, during which time Kearney discussed his project further, Jeffrey Robbins (Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania) began by clarifying what Kearney meant when he wrote of the "death of God." By that, Robbins said, Kearney meant "the death of a *certain* God—namely, the death of the 'Alpha God of triumphal might and metaphysical certitude.'"

For Kearney, the death of this certain God is a prompt for thinking what comes *after* the death of God, which allows for an understanding and experience of the sacred in a less metaphysical way.

For Robbins this is the source of Kearney's language of hospitality and openness to what may yet come. Robbins suggests that this forward-looking move in Kearney is pivotal to his project.

For Kearney, the way to overcome ontotheology is by way of what he calls onto-eschatology. The key is that by locating itself in the temporal zone of liminality, anatheism suggests not only a different kind of being (God *after* God), but also different kinds of becoming.... [I]t is only now, by virtue of the death of (a certain) God that theology can think God anew, more creatively, more transformatively. Theology unbound.

While affirming the temporal moves involved in Kearney's onto-eschatological project, Robbins also wanted to press Kearney on what it might mean for his work to move spatially, as it were, between the inside and outside of the Western tradition.

In a second response to Kearney, Brandon Scott began by expressing appreciation for the way Kearney situ-

ated himself as a person and scholar at the beginning of *Anatheism*. Scott went on to situate himself, describing his indebtedness more to George Lakoff's work on metaphor rather than Ricoeur's. But more importantly, Scott located himself as a New Testament scholar, and it was here that he challenged Kearney's failure to attend to scripture in a scholarly way.

For example: The disciples walking down the Road to Emmaus, a story found on the gospel of Luke and surely a creation of that author, did not discover in the breaking of the bread that this stranger is their *rabboni*, which is actually the voice of Mary Magdalene, correctly noted as being in John 20:16, a story also surely a creation of the author of the Fourth Gospel. This fusing of two completely separate and different stories I find very problematic. Perhaps it is an example of second naïveté, but I'm afraid it is just plain naïve and uncritical.

He conceded:

Maybe as a New Testament scholar I am being picky in noting these, and I could elaborate many more, but they indicate to me a failure to take seriously either the Bible or biblical scholarship. Where I come from, that's a serious problem.

While Kearney appreciated the overall critique from Scott's perspective as a New Testament scholar, he objected sharply to Scott's use of term "fantasy" as a description of his effort. Part of his own project, he asserted, involved dealing not only with scripture but with the way later authors, poets, theologians, and musicians would themselves interpret and reframe those texts of scripture, often in amazing ways.

Would Scott want to insist that all works of literature and theology conform to the findings of historical-critical scholarship? No, replied Scott. But scholars, including philosophers, should pay attention to a scholarly methodology that has now become standard over the past two hundred years.

It was an arresting and illuminating exchange. The scholars wished that Kearney could have stayed over to day two of the

God Seminar, when Scott presented his paper on "The God of the Real Paul," as well as when David Galston presented his paper, "Archive Theology and the God of Paul." Galston's paper called attention to a dynamic that Michel Foucault had emphasized in his discussion of culture as an "archive," namely the way in which later texts, interpreting earlier ones (e.g., Augustine or Luther interpreting Paul), would come to be understood as more definitive in shaping the ongoing reception of the earlier work than the early

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work itself. It would have been fascinating to play out the Kearney/Scott conversation through the lens of Galston's paper.

During Saturday's session, Brandon Scott's paper, "God of the Crucified Messiah" (interpreting Paul's view of God), enabled the God Seminar to dialogue with New Testament scholarship by focusing on the political-religious and imperial dynamics shaping the contours of Paul's arguments. In his interpretation of the God of the historical Paul, Scott underscores the importance of the martyr narrative of 2 Maccabees as the basis of Paul's discussion of God's loyalty and power in the face of the humiliating execution of Jesus. Specifically, Scott shows how Paul's God language focused not on metaphysics but theodicy. Recognizing the importance of that religious/political context for Paul's letter shifts the organizing contrast in Paul's work from "Law vs Gospel" (a central theme of the Protestant Reformation) to the Gospel of Jesus vs the Gospel of Rome.

Turning to his own interpretation of Paul's "special view of God," Scott insists on the importance of recognizing that Paul was *called*, not *converted*. Paul never became a Christian. He remained a Jew. Yet, at the core of what Scott calls Paul's *apokalypsis*, or *insight*, is Paul's conviction that this gospel of Jesus was to be proclaimed to the nations, opening up the possibility of a "body of Christ" in which there is no longer "Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal 3:28).

In his response Joe Bessler (Phillips Theological Seminary) underscored the importance of Scott's political framing of Paul's work, noting that

Scott's work helps open a very fruitful dialogue between New Testament scholars and contemporary philosophers and theologians, who in line with Foucault, Derrida, and others, have successfully challenged the notions of metaphysical stability, ancient and modern, that underwrite the claims of theological dogma. The focus by these thinkers on *instability* (rather than metaphysical stability) has helped return biblical and theological discourse to a focus on the dynamics of persuasion—to an analysis of the poetics and rhetorical appeals of these texts.

While affirming the various framing moves employed by Scott, Bessler was left wondering to what end was Paul proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to the nations? How did Paul's *apokalypsis/insight* fit with Paul's apocalyptic worldview? Put another way, what did Paul really want?

In the ensuing discussion a good bit of energy focused on Paul's apocalyptic vision. John Caputo, for example, called attention to the fact that while Scott frequently cites 1 Corinthians 1 in his book, he seldom cites 1 Corinthians 2, where Paul, in Caputo's words, "takes it all back." All the emphasis on foolishness or weakness in chapter one is simply Paul's rhetoric of appearance. Chapter two asserts what only those with faith can see: that what appears fool-

ish is really the wisdom and power of God. That aspect of Paul seems driven to victory if not violence. Scott agreed but also argued that Paul never invokes the kind of violent language that one finds in the Book of Revelation.

David Galston's paper, "Archive Theology and the God of Paul," sought to link a New Testament analysis of Paul to the post-structuralist philosophy of Michel Foucault. In his paper Galston first offers a brief history of structuralist and post-structuralist analysis, along with an introduction to the basic vocabulary of Foucault's project. Foucault focused on how signs and sign systems interact to create strategic systems of rhetorical and cultural power, including the development of counter-strategies that resist the controlling and/or conventionally reigning system. Such counter-strategies often look backward within a cultural epoch in order to leverage a strategic shift in contemporary discourse. Writes Galston,

The point is that a philosopher can look back on a figure of history and see, in that figure, a theme or a trace of something different that was not in the immediate circumstances of the horizon. Despite the protests of professional historians and the all too common critique of "anachronism," a philosopher is justified to see in an historical figure a counter-horizon that the figure did not know about.

## God Seminar Spring 2016 Ballot Items

The central philosophical interest in Paul is in Paul as a power-knowledge event.

Fellows **Pink**/Associates **Red**

The Paul of the authentic letters is a figure of transgression and of an alternative horizon.

Fellows **Red**/Associates **Red**

The instability of metaphor assures religion is a perpetual problem for humankind.

Fellows **Red**/Associates **Red**

While in conversation with historical-critical work in biblical scholarship, the task of the God Seminar is informed but not confined to historical factual truths.

Fellows **Red**/Associates **Red**

Theology engages in theopoetics to creatively reimagine God after the death of the God of sovereign power.

Fellows **Red**/Associates **Red**

Paul's letters are not engaging in constructive "metaphysical" discourse, but in cultural/political theopoetics.

Fellows **Red**/Associates **Red**

It is just such a shift, argues Galston, that we see happening in the figures of Paul and Jesus—both in the way they offer a counter-horizon within their own political-religious contexts, and with respect to the way later thinkers will reconfigure their rhetoric. Deploying Foucault's terminology to analyze the work of biblical scholars Lloyd Gaston (*Paul and the Torah*, 1987) and Brandon Scott (*The Real Paul*, 2014), Galston shows how Paul's rhetoric of faithfulness becomes a counter-strategy *vis-à-vis* Rome's imperial discourse.

Archive theology, in this analysis, sees in Paul the rhetorical activity of transgression that rested on his basic vision of a transformed world order.... He enabled, perhaps inspired by Second Isaiah, a rhetorical strategy in which the defeated people could think of themselves as the very vehicle of salvation. Despised and rejected, they are, in the body of the Anointed, heirs to the promises.