

## An Interview With Richard Kearney “Facing God”

Liam Kavanagh

Journal of Philosophy and Scripture

**JPS: The very title of the conference series that has brought us together today, namely “Religion and Postmodernism,” raises the question of the possibility of a productive exchange between religious and philosophical narratives. What benefits do you think might follow for religious discourse from bringing philosophically orientated perspectives to bear on the reading of scripture? Similarly, what benefits do you think might follow for philosophy from direct exposure to and engagement with religious texts?**

**RK:** Well I think it is crucial to maintain an exchange between the two disciplines. The whole rational, conceptual, metaphysical heritage of Greek philosophy meeting with the biblical monotheisms and revelation can be extremely creative. Indeed, I think our entire Western heritage consists of an intermingling of and between these two genres of thought, the philosophical and the religious, or the philosophical and the biblical. But as you know, it is precisely the idea of a decisive *breach* between the two discourses, particularly since Kant and the Enlightenment, that has significantly determined much of the development of our philosophical tradition. In the twentieth century, this conviction was repeated in Husserl’s and Heidegger’s bracketing out of theology and revelation, as one of those presuppositions that we should suspend as we do phenomenological philosophy. So both in the Enlightenment separation of

scientific reason from faith, and Heidegger’s subsequent separation of phenomenology and theology (in his famous 1927 lecture), there is a very strong scruple in contemporary continental thought about keeping the two disciplines apart.

Of course there are those like Levinas and Ricoeur who try to blur the boundaries a little bit, though it seems to me they usually do so apologetically. Levinas, for example, will claim no longer to be engaged in phenomenology, but Talmudic studies, when he raises questions about God. But I think it is evident that Judaism deeply informs his work, especially when he speaks of eschatology or messianism or the stranger in *Totality and Infinity* and other philosophical texts. Similarly Ricoeur, in *Thinking Biblically* and other religious works, will claim to be engaged in scriptural exegesis or biblical studies, rather than philosophy *per se*. Now I tend to be a little bit less scrupulous, less worried about the blurring. So for instance in *The God Who May Be*, I don’t have a huge problem about saying, “let’s do a hermeneutics of religion.” Now it is a *hermeneutics* of religion, it is a philosophy. A philosophy that analyses—without theological pretensions or expertise—certain scriptural texts. In the case of *The God Who May Be*, these include Exodus 3:14, the transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, the Annunciation, the Song of Songs etc. I am however, leaving aside the specifically historical context of these texts—questions of the historical Jesus, whether the Shulomite women ever did exist or not, whether the Song of Songs is a Babylonian or Jewish text, whether there are Greek influences etc. These are fascinating questions, but they are not my questions. I am not an expert in the whole theological discourse about these passages, but I feel quite free to engage in a poetics and a hermeneutics of scriptural passages *as* texts, without necessarily saying that these have a privilege with regard to the revelation of truth. That question I am bracketing. So although I cannot claim theological expertise in this discourse, this tradition is nonetheless my tradition, it is my set of

narratives. It is also my faith—my heritage, and therefore I know it better than say, Hinduism or Buddhism, or other religious traditions that talk about God. So it makes eminent sense for me to take that liberty. If I had more expertise in Sanskrit or Japanese, then maybe I would feel more competent to comment on other traditions, even if they are not mine. I would certainly be open to dialoguing with them.

Therefore, it seems to me that to cut off all dialogue between philosophy and these wisdom traditions, including the biblical, is actually cutting off your nose to spite your face. I think it's lopping off too much. I can fully understand how the Enlightenment, given the invasion of philosophical discourse by church authorities during scholasticism and the medieval inquisitions (and the ensuing burnings and condemnations), would say "faith take a step back" or "theology take a back seat." So whether it is the separation of faith and reason to preserve faith, as in the case of Kant—who set the limits of reason in order to make way for faith—or whether it is to preserve reason, as in the case of the philosophical Enlightenment, I understand where that is coming from. However, I think in so called postmodern discourse, with which I have some concerns to which we can return, we have made some progress in this regard, namely, the ability to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue. I strongly advocate such interdisciplinary exchange, and not just between philosophy and religion, but also between philosophy, religion, science, literature and other disciplines. I would call it a "creative confusion" to borrow from Edward Said. A creative confusion of disciplines, while also respecting the genre limits of each one. So it's a delicate balance.

**JPS: In a provocative reading of Exodus 3.14 from *The God Who May Be*, you identify a "seismic shift" occurring at the "chiasmus where 'ehyeh meets einai." <sup>1</sup> What constitutive roles do you think these formative readings have played in the**

**philosophical and theological traditions of the West? And Secondly, what significant similarities and differences do you think distinguish your position from that of Jacques Derrida's appeal to "Jewgreek is greekjew," in 'Violence and Metaphysics?'**

**RK:** The standard translation of the Exodus 3.14 passage "'ehyeh, 'asher 'ehyeh" is "I am who am," in latin "*Ego sum qui sum,*" and there is a long history of interpretation of this text from Philo to Augustine to Aquinas and the Scholastics and so on. The most commonly agreed reading is that it is an ontological self-definition of God: I am who am. Now as a tautological pun that is interesting. It could be a way of saying, "I'm *not* telling you who I am. I am who am." So the repetition could be seen as a rhetorical deflection of the answer, of any easy answer. "You are not going to get hold of me!" Well if that is true, then it is even more fitting that we translate the phrase as Martin Buber and Rashi, the medieval Jewish commentator, and others have done, as "I am who shall be," or "I am who will be," or "I am who may be." In doing so, one restores the element of promissory note, and also the conditional nature of God's manifestation in the world. "I am who may be, i.e. I am unconditionally the promise of the kingdom, I am unconditionally love, the call, invitation, and solicitation, but I can only be God, God in the flesh, God in history, God in matter, if you are my witnesses," to quote Isaiah.

Furthermore, Hebrew scholars like Buber, Rosenzweig and Rashi, point out that in the Hebrew, the verb "'ehyeh 'asher" actually has a conditional, subjunctive, futural mode. In German it is translated as "*werden.*" So, on this reading, God says: "I am who becomes. I am who will be, may be, shall be. If you listen to what I am saying, you will go back and liberate your people, and you will lead them into a new relationship with Egypt and the Word. But if you don't do that, and you think that you possess Me, then you've only got an ontological formula of Me as totality, self-sameness, self-love,

self causing cause, self loving love, self thinking thought. You attach all that Greek metaphysical stuff to Me. That's being unfair to Me, and unfair to Aristotle, because Aristotle wasn't talking about Me. He was talking about a certain notion of form and causality which to his mind was divine. But he is coming from a different tradition, a different way of thinking, a metaphysical way, and I respect that. But I, Yahweh, am giving you a different message. Maybe I can enter into dialogue with Aristotle's God and the God of the philosophers, but don't think you can easily collapse the two, one into the other." So by not going with the standard orthodox translation of "I am who am," which can lead to the notion of a God of totality, and instead choosing the hermeneutic wager that "I am who may be," we open up that space for a different inflection in the biblical notion of deity.

With regard to the second part of your question, I don't see any great difference between myself and Derrida with regard to the Greek-Jew formula. The phrase originally comes from Molly's soliloquy in Joyce's *Ulysses* of course: "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet. Woman's reason." So for Derrida and deconstruction, this exemplifies the movement beyond binary opposites to the necessary and mutual contamination of Jew with Greek, Greek with Jew. I am in agreement with Derrida on this point, though I perhaps would use the term "creative confusion" rather than "contamination," (but I know what Derrida means). Where I would differ from Derrida is that I think for him the "Jew" side of the equation does not necessarily entail a faith component. In other words, for Derrida the messianic structure of existence does not necessarily need to be fleshed out in terms of a "messianism," be it Christianity, Judaism or Islam. And there I would be of the view that we need to give the Jew some flesh back. It is not just a transcendent, unnameable, ineffable, unthinkable, unlocatable Other with a big "O." It is also the little people in the world who need cups of cold water and give cups of cold water. It

is Isaiah and Joseph and Jesus, and it is that whole world of embodiment and enfleshment, which I think is sometimes lacking in Derrida's notion of the Messianic, which for me is too formal, too quasi-transcendental, too abstract—although I have huge respect for what he is doing. So I would try to give the "Jew" back more body than Derrida perhaps, who "rightly passes for an atheist". Though he does call himself the "last of the Jews" (*le dernier Jude*) in *Circumfession...*

**JPS: Could you say you rightly pass for an atheist?**

**RK:** ... No. I would say the opposite—that I rightly pass for a theist! Derrida admits in the phrase a certain ambiguity about "rightly passing for..." He seems to be saying, "that's how people understand me and I understand that they understand me like that because my work suggests as much." But he doesn't say, as Jack Caputo keeps coming back to, "I *am* an atheist," only "I rightly *pass* for an atheist." So likewise, I would tend to say that I rightly pass for a theist. I don't really have a problem saying I am a theist, but in the way that I try to define or decline that in the introduction to *The God Who May Be*, namely, I am a theist in the sense of an eschatological God of the possible. The way I see God might be defined by many theists as atheistic. For many, what I am doing in *The God Who May Be* could be a form of atheism or agnosticism. It's not that for me, but people were burnt for less in the middle ages!

**JPS: In light of your exploration of the theme of transfiguration in terms of *persona/prosopon*, would you "subscribe to this infinitely ambiguous sentence from the *Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabes: 'All faces are His; this is why HE has no face'?"<sup>2</sup>**

**RK:** I would say He has no *one* face. In other words, God is not reducible to one person, or to the unique. Now when the one becomes the unique, and therefore the

exclusive reserve of one person or church, then we're in trouble. This is one of the dangers of monotheism, and arguably, principally of Christian and Islamic monotheism, both of which appeal to one special face, Jesus and Mohommad. It is particularly an issue for Christianity. Yahweh has no face, but all faces are Yahweh's face.

What I would try to do as a Christian is to reread the uniqueness of Christ in another way. I would argue that Kierkegaard is right. There was only one God-man, who embodied a unique, singular, special coming together of the divine and the human. Furthermore, by reinvoking that whole prophetic biblical image, and re-identifying with so much of the Jewish narratives, particularly Isaiah, Jesus is actually saying "before Abraham was, I am." I was there *before* Abraham, and also *with* Abraham. I was there when the three angels visited Abraham. That was Me! I was there every time someone asked for a cup of cold water; and I will be there in the future every time somebody asks for, and gives one, even if they don't realize it's Me. Now as I understand it, this refusal by Jesus as *prosopon*, to be reduced to a singular face/person, is the refusal of possession. It is the refusal to be made into an idol or property of any particular church. This refusal by Jesus proclaims that, as much as we may try, we cannot latch on to him as the unique *Noli me tangere*. He must go, so that the spirit may come. Now what is the spirit? Well the spirit for me is other faces. As in that beautiful line by G.M. Hopkins, "to the Father, through the features of men's faces," it is the possibility of lots of other faces, including every face that asks for a cup of cold water and receives it. So in a kind of *second* kenotic act, Jesus says "Yes, I am called to be the unique one, and I assume that act here and now," and then goes through the drama of the resurrection, in order that everybody else can be called to that too. We have been called since the beginning of time—before Abraham was—and will continue to be called in the future.

So the second coming is not just a coming of the end of time, although it is that too. It is also coming in every single moment of time. That is why I like to quote Walter Benjamin when he says that the future is made up of moments which are portals through which the Messiah may enter, at any moment. Then the face of Jesus becomes—potentially at least—every face. That is very different from saying there is only one Jesus. Such Christian exclusivism is something I'm trying to go beyond and open up. And I would want to go further and extend the Jewish-Christian dialogue to include inter-faith dialogue with Buddhists and Hindus and so on, because the more I read of the Upanishads, or the Bhagavad-Gita, or the writings of Buddhist sages, the more I realize that the Word is there too. There are faces there too, though I think sometimes we in the West can get locked into the "greekjew is jewgreek" equation. But just as the Jew is *prosopon*, so is the Greek in terms of other traditions. And sometimes, deconstruction has not been sufficiently open to this. I think Derrida himself would be, but I'm not sure Levinas was. In fact, I think Levinas believed that the infinite face was the exclusive preserve of monotheism, and there is textual evidence to suggest that. I'm being a bit hard on Levinas perhaps. Christian exclusivism can be even more brutal than anything you'd find in his work. But once I asked him, at the Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium in Normandy, "What do you think of when you think of the face?" (because Levinas never really describes the face). And he said "I think of Christ." I found that very interesting. So following a certain Levinas, the Jewish face is open to the Christian face, and I would like to think that the Christian face is open to non-Christian faces.

**JPS: In *The God Who May Be*, you stress the co-dependent relationship obtaining between God and Humanity. You argue that we should read the formula "'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh," in terms of "relation rather than abstraction. God's 'I shall be' appears to need Moses' response 'Here I**

**am' in order to enter history and blaze the path toward the kingdom." (GWMB, p.26, my italic) What distinctions and comparisons do you see between your position and Gianni Vattimo's claim that the narratives of Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion inaugurate a covenant or alliance between God and Humanity, a covenant which serves to weaken hierarchical structures?**

**RK:** Well I think in both cases there is a definite opening of the religious to the moral and the political. Both of us in our different ways have been involved, him more centrally than I of course, in politics. Myself mainly in Ireland and Britain, and him in Italy, and we have both been described, rightly or wrongly, as politically engaged intellectuals. So yes, I think that these issues of how you translate the word of God have big implications for ethical and political practice. God needs us to be enfleshed in the world. God as unconditional love, justice, invitation, call, solicitation, promise. But if we don't have ears to hear and eyes to see, if we don't respond to the call, as Mary and Isaiah might have chosen not to do, then God would not have been present in Mary or in Isaiah, and we would not have had the incarnation or the Book of Isaiah, and the whole prophetic tradition. So I want to keep open the fact—over and against the metaphysics of omnipotence that it is possible that God might *not* have been incarnated as Jesus, or rendered prophetically audible, visible, communicable and transmissible as Isaiah, just to take those examples, and there are others.

So God needs us. Yes. God needed Moses to hear "I am, who am" and then to go off and implement that missionary statement of liberation, which he did. Not that it didn't get all mixed up and confused further down the line, but Moses did listen and hear. So yes, there is a need in God, a desire in God for us, to be made more and more fully incarnate in every moment. I think I share that with Vattimo. I'm not sure that he believes in a transcendent God,

whereas I do. I'm not sure that he doesn't take Christianity as a story of nihilistic kenosis, implying that the covenant of self-abasement and friendship is good for us, because it makes us good people. This might serve for Vattimo like a pragmatic Humean fiction - let's stick with it, because if we don't, we're going to have a chaotic selfish society. It is as if for Vattimo we need this narrative illusion, this story. It is not, of course, like the meta-narratives of the past, which claim to be objective, and are therefore powerful, militaristic, imperial, coercive and repressive. For Vattimo it is purely subjective. So it is nihilistic in that it is nothing. Now, I don't personally ascribe to such a view. Not that I wouldn't find common cause with him; perhaps if we really got into what "nothing" means, the meaning of *nihil* and the God-beyond-being and all that. But I'm not sure he wants to go down the route of Meister Eckhardt and the mystics, as outlined by Stanislas Breton, for example, in *The Word and the Cross*. I don't think Vattimo really embraces the mystical *via negativa*. I suspect his position is closer to a moral and political pragmatism, hence his invocation of Habermas and Rorty. He seems to be saying, "Look, this is a good story, and it is a story about charity and compassion and self-abnegation. It is subjective, and it serves to get rid of questions like 'is it true?' 'Is there a *God out there*?'” These are all metaphysical questions for Vattimo, and I think he believes we should jettison them along with the question of transcendence.

So there is a kind of radical immanence of subjectivity in Vattimo that says, well, if the Christian story can make people behave with compassion and charity, then it works, and following pragmatism, if it works then it is "true." Truth is what works for the good. So although I run parallel to him on many of the issues—promoting the kenotic God of compassion and charity, etc.—against the God of omnipotence. I think I would hold out for a transcendent God. My notion of a hermeneutic narrative would have a reference *outside* of itself. It points towards something other, bigger than us, and I don't

think Vattimo wants to go there. What we both share in common, however, is our notion of the Christian God as committed to love and justice. On the issue of whether eschatologically, the God of *posse/possest* exists unconditionally as call and promise, and as transcendent - that is an area where I think we may disagree.

**JPS: Would religious narratives play a more central role in your work than philosophical or literary narratives for example?**

**RK:** Well I think there is a difference, from the point of view of ethics. Now I've no doubt that all kinds of literary books have made people do good things, and the same goes for certain philosophies. Some people read Levinas, Kant, or Tolstoy and then go out and become good people because of that. But there is a "truth claim" in religious discourse which is different from the literary and philosophical. Now I'm not saying it is necessarily more powerful, but it is different. It claims that this narrative has a reference outside of itself. Literary narratives do not claim to be referring to anything outside of themselves. And philosophical discourse tends to 'bracket' the truth claims of faith and Revelation. At least since Kant and Husserl.

**JPS: Could this be the case for all non-religious narratives?**

**RK:** No, historical narratives also claim to refer to things outside of themselves, i.e., "the way it actually happened," even though we can never get back to it and tell it objectively or adequately. Here there is a claim to be saying something beyond the narrative, something *about* reality. There is the crucial question of reference. Something *did* happen, Auschwitz *did* happen, for example. Now revisionists would say, no, that's just a story, and I have a counter story, and whoever wins will decide whether Auschwitz existed or not. But I hold that historical narratives, as opposed to literary ones, do refer to something outside of

themselves, and religious narratives, I would hope, also refer to something outside of themselves (i.e. God, however you define God, whether as *posse*, promise, or love, etc.). That is a central debate in the philosophy of religion, in the hermeneutics of religion, in theology. Religious narratives are not in that sense the same as literary discourse. Again, I differ from Derrida here in that I don't think he wants to entertain the truth-claims about whether messianic expectation is referring to an Other that does exist. I don't think he wants to get into that, and that's why he "rightly passes for an atheist". And I think Rorty and Vattimo take a similar line. I totally respect that. But I think a hermeneutics of religion can also take a theistic turn. It is a *wager*, of course, but one I would take with Ricoeur and Jaspers, and Marcel and Tracy. It may be right and it may be wrong, but let's entertain the possibility, let's bet on the possibility that the *posse* does exist, and is more than a figment of our imagination, or a good story in itself. I think it *is* a good story; but I think it is also more than that. It refers to Good News that goes beyond even our most ingenious supreme fictions. It claims to speak of something other than us, greater than us, and indeed transcendent of us.

**JPS: Richard Rorty has recently accused certain postmodernist thinkers of engaging in a "rationalization of hopelessness" and a "gothisizing" tendency to cast allegedly ubiquitous and irreducible structures, in terms of the inescapability of original sin.<sup>3</sup> Given that in your recent work you have also charged certain postmodernists of engaging in a "cult of apocalyptic traumatism," do you agree with Rorty's assessment?**

**RK:** You know I would, almost! I think he is onto something quite important. I think there is a cult of traumatism in a lot of postmodernism. Even the Impossible can be pushed too far. Now if you were to reinterpret it as a possibility beyond the impossible then that's fine, and I think Jack

Caputo is very open to that, even though he starts with and stays with the Impossible for 99% of the time. But I don't think he is closed to the possibility of a possibilizing God beyond the impossible. I think Marion is potentially open to it, particularly in his 'God: The Impossible' paper, though prior to this I don't think he would have been. Derrida, I'm not so sure. There are passages in 'As If It Were Possible,' where he picks up some of my arguments from the *Poetics of the Possible*, so it's an on going dialogue. But I still find in Derrida, and he is by no means the main culprit here, that there is an emphasis on the impossible over the possible, there is an over-emphasis which can lead to a certain sense of disorientation and dismay. There is the Other out there, there is Justice out there, there is Pardon out there, there is the Gift out there, but they are all impossible. Now I know he doesn't mean that they never happen, but even by using the word "impossible," even if it is hyperbole or pedagogical rhetoric, there is a certain tone and style of thinking imparted. It is not an accident to talk of the God of *Impossibility* or the God of *Possibility*. Each has a certain inflection, and one, it seems to me, invites more hope than the other.

I think that there is also a certain movement in deconstruction and in postmodernism generally that finds "hope" and "memory" almost dirty words. Why? Probably because they seem to suggest narrative and continuity, reconciliation and recapitulation. All of which are considered non-kosher because they appear to imply meta-narratives and the retrieval of totality etc. But I would define these terms differently. To be fair, I think there are definite grounds for hope, indeed a messianic hope in Derrida. All I would say is that I wish he would be more emphatic and more audible in giving voice to that strain in his thought; because the one that has been heard more often, rightly or wrongly, is the one that has not been the clarion call to social action and political transformation, but rather, the one that goes into very minute qualifications and disqualifications about the possible meanings of gift, justice, forgiveness, and so

on. I do not want to fault Derrida here, because I do believe, particularly in his recent work, that there is a real movement towards ethical hope and political commitment. I remember very well, for example, how he replied to Mark Taylor here at Villanova at the first Religion and Postmodernism conference. He said, "You cannot just say that everything is a text, and America is a casino, and prison is a casino etc. Not fifty miles from here there is a prisoner, Mummia Abu Jamal on death row, and that is not a metaphorical or a textual prison, it is a *real* prison. There is a real person there, and he will really die if we do not do something about it." So Derrida certainly has this sense of moral and political urgency. It's just that sometimes his texts are so decontextualized, so formal, so quasi-transcendental, and so verbal, that one can get lost in labyrinths of deferred meanings and slippery signifiers and not get to the point. I remember Ricoeur once saying that the thing about Derrida (whom he greatly respects) is that he is always beginning but he never begins. It's all about how to begin, it is all preamble. I think there is a certain truth in that, though it would be a little unfair to dwell on it. There are other postmodernists in whom the sense of hope seems to be lacking altogether—Baudrillard and Zizek for example...

**JPS: In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, you mention Zizek in particular.**

**RK:** I find Zizek is full of iconoclastic, rhetorical, self-undermining positions. There is dialectical dexterity, irony, and humor on every page. I find all that hilarious. I think he is so entertaining, and his combination of Marxism and Lacanianism is brilliant. And such political incorrectness! It's a riot, he's a real entertainer. But I do find that when you put down his book you say, "Well what the heck, nothing means anything, let's have a good laugh and get drunk in the bar rather than join the revolution" to juggle with Sartre's conclusion to *Being and Nothingness*! It becomes verbal game playing and intellectual confidence trickery

after a while. Not that every philosopher has to be joining the barricades and sending us out to action. But I am committed to the hermeneutic formula—“from action to text to action”—and I think the return of the text to action is very important. I don’t think either Baudrillard or Žižek leave us many paths to travel back from text to action. I think Derrida is certainly trying, and without a doubt Caputo is swinging out all kinds of little bridges here there and everywhere to cross over the abyss, but it’s almost in spite of the language of his deconstructive position. Jack Caputo, like Jacques Derrida, wants justice. They want God, certainly Jack Caputo does, and I think Derrida does too. They desire these things. Derrida says that God is the name of the “desire beyond desire,” and they want “hospitality” and “pardon” and all these things. But the difficulty is how do you get there? They want to get there, they desire it, and that is the messianic expectation. But what I don’t see in their work, particularly in Derrida’s, are the hermeneutic paths and narratives and examples that get us there.

If somebody says to me what does *posse* mean, we can do some hermeneutic work by looking at various texts and traditions—scriptural, philosophical, literary, etc. We can go back and say “this is what the Greeks say about *dunamis*, and this is what Aquinas says and this is what Leibniz says, and this is what Heidegger says.” That gets us somewhere. But where it really comes to life in philosophy, it seems to me, is where those intra-philosophical references go on to also invoke testimonial examples, which you then can analyze philosophically. If you leave out flesh and blood people, or even literary examples of flesh and blood, then you’ve got something desolate. It’s too desert-like. That is a problem for me with deconstruction. I admire the feat, but I don’t know how anyone can live in deconstruction. It is an-khorite, as Jack Caputo says. There is nothing in Derrida’s text to prevent commitment, but there is nothing in his texts, I find, that helps you get there, either. It seems all we have to do is close our textual shop and go into action, but

the inter-action between the two is not clear to me. So it is the step out of philosophical deconstruction and into action that I find problematic. That said, as a detour, I think deconstruction is more or less indispensable for all disciplines. We should all have our day in the desert, our retreat in the deconstructive klinger. But I think that once we have fasted for forty days without food, water, or shelter, there is somewhere else to go afterwards. That’s important. You have got to come down from the mountain and in from the desert. We may have to go back there again, but for me it is a detour rather than an end in itself.

**JPS: Throughout your work, you have advocated the role of narrative in facilitating the possibility of mutual translation and understanding between diverse cultures and communities. Do you think that scriptural narratives also have the potential to foster and enhance understanding of this kind, or might they serve only to reinforce alienation and division?**

**RK:** Well there is no doubt about it that, for centuries, millenia in fact, religious narratives have been abused by those in power who declare themselves to be on the side of the good, and others to be on the side of evil. There is nothing new about that. I suppose that what is astonishing is that so many people continue to believe it. What I would offer as a defense of religious language against its abuses by certain people in power, are the counter examples of the powerless who evoke religious language, not to divide the world into good and evil and to engage in apocalyptic scenarios of Armageddon, but to actually struggle for love and justice. There are all kinds of examples of this, maybe numerically far more examples than the former. But even if there were not, it would still be valid. Even if there was only one person, Ettie Hillison, or Bishop Romero in El Salvador, or Maximillian Colbe or St Francis, or whoever. Take the example of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Millions were inspired



by them, and aspired to be like them. They resisted power structures of repression and coercion and injustice in the name of the God of liberation, in the name of the God of *posse*, the promise of the kingdom of justice. So I think we have got to measure up the abuses and good uses of our invocations of the Gospel message when we come to citing history as abusing and not abusing. Now where that becomes a bit problematic, is in a place like France where politicians would never use the name God. It would be unthinkable to invoke “God on our side” and so on, as American Presidents have done. This has something to do with secular republics, and the memory of religious wars that devastated Europe throughout the centuries, and the Enlightenment of course. But when you consider that over 90% of Americans believe in immortality and personal salvation; that they will meet their friends and loved ones when they go there etc., that’s a hugely believing population—and therefore religious discourse requires more of a hermeneutics of suspicion in America than it does say in Europe, and certain other parts of the world, because in America, it is still a majority discourse, the majority way of thinking. Given the fact almost everyone in the most powerful country in the world is a believer, and that their President invokes God—a certain omnipotent God—as being on their side - that is where we have to be critical perhaps. I think scriptural narratives can play a negative role in hegemonic discourses, but in counter-hegemonic discourses, it can have very important revolutionary and subversive potential. Isaiah and the Gospels are still, when invoked by the right people in the right context, incredibly emancipatory for millions of people throughout the world. You only have to look at the Philippines, Latin America, and Africa, to see how this is so. The Gospel can be used by people for good or evil. I have heard people invoke “peace with a sword,” to justify Vietnam or Iraq. The just war arguments are very delicate ones, very problematic. Personally, I’m for non-violence, *Satyagraha*, Gandhi’s principle of non-violence, non-violent

resistance. But resistance doesn’t mean doing nothing. If a psychotic or a Nazi intends to enter my home and shoot my children or cut them into little bits, I’m going to stop him if I can. I’ll try non-violently; but if that doesn’t work, if persuasion doesn’t work, if argumentative communicative action as Habermas would say, is just not doing the trick, then I’m going to stop him by physical force—and if that means wounding him in the knees I will try and do that, and if it means shooting him in the head eventually, I will do that. Now I won’t deny that that is an unjust thing to do to a living being; but it would be more unjust not to do anything, and to allow innocent children to be slaughtered. So we try in such instances to do the least unjust thing possible.

These are delicate matters. What I am saying is that basically the Gospel can be invoked for evil or for good, and it is a constant drama. From this point of view, hermeneutics plays a central role in discerning in each situation whether this is a loving and just thing to do, or whether it’s not a just thing to do. I say that acknowledging that I have little doubt that when Blair and Bush went into Iraq they probably thought they were doing the just thing and that it was a just war. I don’t agree with them, but there are grounds for hermeneutic debate. And in such an instance you cannot leave religion out of the realm of philosophical discourse, because it is one of the most mobilizing discourses still operative in the world. It’s all very well to say, “Well after the Enlightenment we live in a post-Christian, post-religious age.” We don’t actually. Probably the vast majority of the world are believers in one kind of deity or another, and sometimes it is the secular humanists in the universities who think that because they don’t believe in God anymore, that nobody else does; when in fact, about 90% of the world does. At best, a post-religious age means that we don’t take it for granted, that it’s not the hegemonic discourse it used to be. Happily. But I don’t think religion has gone away, and I don’t think it should.

**JPS: So how does one deal with the abuses?**

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 38.

**RK:** The abuses are terribly hurtful for any believer who thinks there is something liberating in Isaiah or the Gospels. It's hurtful because there is a sense of betrayal, that the real message is being perverted, diverted, deflected from its original message of love and justice. But here philosophy can play a crucial role in helping to sort out some of the distinctions, to discriminate and discern and judge in a way that's very difficult to do if you only rely on the Bible or the Gospels. That is what fundamentalists do. They try not to engage in hermeneutics, because for them there is only one way of reading the Bible, and that is The Truth. That kind of literalism is disastrous. And that is why, going back to your first question, the separation of religion and philosophy is on one level ruinous, because religion needs philosophy to keep it critically investigating its own intentions, presuppositions, motivations and translations into action.

Similarly, I think philosophy needs religion because religion remains one of our most, I repeat, motivating forces, and I think it will always be, even if religion is secularized. To expel all religion from the domain of phenomenological investigations is incredibly foolish and irresponsible. It is inverted dogmatism. After all, how come we can talk about every thing in the phenomenological order of experience except religion? It just doesn't make sense. So, I say, long live the hermeneutics of religion! God too deserves to be questioned!

■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p.34. Hereafter GWMB.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 109.