

INCARNATING THE GOD WHO MAY BE:
CHRISTOLOGY AND INCARNATIONAL HUMANISM
IN BONHOEFFER AND KEARNEY

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ADVISER: RON KUIPERS
INTERNAL EXAMINER: NIK ANSELL
EXTERNAL EXAMINER: JENS ZIMMERMANN

MARK FRASER NOVAK
INSTITUTE FOR CHRISTIAN STUDIES
TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

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Abstract

This thesis examines questions of humanity and divinity that are pressing in contemporary philosophy and theology as seen in the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Richard Kearney. Both these thinkers seek to address issues around transcendence/immanence, sameness/difference, ontology/ethics, and post-metaphysical approaches to God. Chapter one explores the many convergences in their thinking with regards to these topics. Chapter two looks at the main divergence in their thinking: their respective Christologies. Chapter three, following up on the exploration of convergences and divergences in their thought, examines a possible way in which to mediate the difference in their otherwise similar patterns of thinking. The thesis aims, overall, to show that a Christologically-based incarnational humanism is a suitable and appropriate live option that is not only biblical, but also responds to issues in both contemporary philosophy and theology, providing a way to understand how the possibility of divine incarnation depends upon our ongoing human response.

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Abbreviations for Bonhoeffer's Works

I cite the volumes of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (general editors Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., Victoria Barnett, and Barbara Wojhoski. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996-2014) in English as follows:

- DBWE 1* *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens.
- DBWE 2* *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt.
- DBWE 3* *Creation and Fall*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax.
- DBWE 4* *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss.
- DBWE 6* *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott.
- DBWE 8* *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, H. Martin Rumscheidt, and Douglas W. Stott.
- DBWE 10* *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott.
- DBWE 12* *Berlin: 1932-1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott.
- DBWE 16* *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill and Douglas W. Stott.

INTRODUCTION: WHO IS JESUS CHRIST FOR US TODAY?

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? (DBWE 8:362). This is perhaps the most important and guiding question for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and it will also be one of the main questions that rests behind this thesis. What is the importance of Christology in our current context, which is alive with discussions of secularity and post-secularity, of modernity and post-modernity, of pluralism, otherness, hospitality, etc.? Does Christology help us to better answer questions of anthropology and theology, of who humans are and who God is? Can this paradoxical doctrine from a particular faith tradition be true and beneficial, or must we relegate it to a bygone time of religious naïveté, a historical relic that is out of touch with our current age? At any rate, Christians cannot avoid the question, ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’ And the answers we Christians give to this question will necessarily effect how we live our lives.

To address this main question, and its surrounding and subsequent questions, I want to focus on two thinkers—Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Richard Kearney—to see how they answer this question. It may seem strange to compare and contrast these two thinkers: the former was a German-Lutheran pastor and theologian in the early 20th Century, and the latter is an Irish-Catholic philosopher in the continental tradition (hermeneutics and phenomenology) who is still active in the early 21st Century. Further, it may seem odd to bring these two figures together on the topic of Christology. This is so mainly for one reason: Bonhoeffer is extremely explicit about his Christology, and builds his theology around it, while Kearney, on the other hand, seems to have no Christology at all. Kearney, for his part, has “no claims to theological competence, exegetical expertise, or confessional orthodoxy.”¹ Although he uses the figure and stories of Christ to exemplify his philosophical ideas, and not to formulate a Christology, because he still

¹ Richard Kearney, “Enabling God,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 41.

remains a professing Christian we can assume that a personal Christology informs his thinking. This stance is contrasted with Bonhoeffer's, whose theology would be empty without Christ. All of reality is, for Bonhoeffer, contained within the one 'Christ-reality' (*Christuswirklichkeit*, DBWE 6:58), a Christological stance that allows him to overcome numerous dualisms that plague other post-modern and post-metaphysical thinkers.² Any attempt to understand Bonhoeffer must recognize the "centrality of Christology in his thinking," and further, that the "key to Bonhoeffer's contribution to contemporary discussions of God after metaphysics is his incarnational Christology."³

Despite these differences in Bonhoeffer and Kearney's emphases on Christ, there are numerous connection points between their patterns of thinking that are both ripe for exploration and relevant to current debates in contemporary continental philosophy of religion. Some of the most pertinent to our discussion include: 1) issues around post-metaphysical understandings of God and overcoming onto-theology; 2) ethical relations with the Other that honour and attend to particularity and human suffering; 3) understanding religion in a post/secular age; and 4) a return to embodied ways of knowing and understanding. Prescient and anticipatory in much of his thinking, there has been a recent return to Bonhoeffer in light of contemporary scholarship on the aforementioned issues. My thesis hopes to join in and continue this ongoing exploration into the relevance of, and connection between, Bonhoeffer and contemporary philosophical and theological thought. I am approaching this thesis neither theologically nor philosophically, then, but rather from an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to use insights and material from both. It is my contention that, although theological and Christological discussions are specific to the

² Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy," in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Christian faith, they are also of import to general questions about human nature and reality, and so Christology can help us address questions in the traditional realm of philosophy as well.⁴

The first chapter examines the convergences in thought between Bonhoeffer and Kearney. Both authors adhere to and expound upon understandings of God that are post-metaphysical. Exploring the problematic nature of metaphysical thinking, its extra-biblical derivation, and its growing irrelevance in our age, both thinkers argue that we need to imagine God outside of metaphysics. Similarities also exist between Bonhoeffer's 'Penultimate/Ulimate' distinction-relation and Kearney's 'Onto-Eschatological' formulation. Both ideas contain the notion that possibility exceeds, but is somehow always within, actuality; the 'not yet' is in the 'now'. This chapter also explores Bonhoeffer and Kearney's convergences around ideas of 'this-worldliness', 'religionless Christianity', and incarnational living. These themes all have a point of connection: a focus on living here-and-now, in this world and in these bodies. This incarnational stance affirms the belief that the eschatological and God are known only through incarnation, through flesh, and that this is what God desires. As Bonhoeffer writes, "from now on divine being can be found nowhere else but in human form" (DBWE 6:400), and that this is "the glorification of God, who honors himself by being in human form" (DBWE 12:355).

Moving on from the convergences, the second chapter examines where Bonhoeffer and Kearney's thought part ways, focussing especially on the area of Christology. Perhaps the most obvious reason for the differences between these thinkers' is that one is a pastor and theologian, and the other is a philosopher. Although they are both Christians, and are both responding to similar problems, their discourses are different because of their academic and cultural milieus: Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian whose main focus was ecclesial; he also experienced

⁴ Henriksen provides a similar rationale for his analysis of Christology and postmodern philosophy. See Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Desire, Gift, and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 11.

first-hand the horrors of World War II. Kearney on the other hand is a philosopher and primarily an academic; born after World War II, his work responds to 70 years of post-war critique and thought. Not surprisingly, then, Bonhoeffer is more at home talking explicitly about Christology than is Kearney. These differences become important for how they relate to their similarities.

In particular, I explore Bonhoeffer's *Christuswirklichkeit* ('Christ-reality'), his focus on the 'who' and not 'how' of Christ, and his connection of Christ with the Church. These aspects of Christ are all central for understanding Bonhoeffer's 'high' Christology. I then examine Kearney's work to see what implicit Christology can be extracted from his thought. The lack of a cruciform and Christological underpinning to Kearney's project is aptly pointed out by Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann: although Kearney's work, unlike that of many others working currently in the continental tradition, is attentive to themes of "particularity, embodiment, and the incarnational," they argue that "from Bonhoeffer's perspective it is insufficiently *cruciform*."⁵ It may be that Kearney's 'low' or absent Christology is due to a desire to affirm pluralism, as evidenced in *Anatheism*.⁶ However, I will aim to show that the radical inclusivity that Kearney desires can come via a strong Christology. Drawing on his use of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poems, his notion of 'epiphanies of the everyday', as well as his phenomenological and Levinasian musings on 'the face', I aim to show that, while I too remain critical of Kearney on Christology, his apparently 'low' or non-existent 'Christology' may in fact be seen as tuned into something central to Christ's person.

⁵ Gregor and Zimmermann, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy," 12. Italics in original. Cf. Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 236: "[T]he orthodox Christian idea of Christ's incarnate and cosmic presence is largely absent from Kearney's construal of the Christian faith." Jeffrey Bloechl also points out that Kearney's "Christology" focuses on the transfiguration and downplays "the transubstantiation, the passion, the crucifixion, [and] the resurrection." Jeffrey Bloechl, "Christianity and Possibility," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 135.

⁶ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

The third chapter, picking up on the discussions of the first two chapters, attempts to mediate the divergences in Bonhoeffer and Kearney's thought via the convergences. I show that, though there are differences in their thinking, there may not be a chasm between them, but only a brook that needs some bridges. In many ways, the focus of their work seems to be aimed in a similar, if not the same, direction, and I think that inhabiting the space between them can produce interesting results. Carrying on from the similarities that exist between their views of post-metaphysical understandings of God, Onto-Eschatology, and the Penultimate/Ultimate distinction-relation, I aim to show that certain other dissimilarities may in fact be more alike than they appear. However, the thoughts of these two figures are not completely collapsible into a perfect synthesis; notable differences remain that must be allowed to persist.

One of these bridgeable dissimilarities is the connection point and overlap between Bonhoeffer's famous line '*etsi deus non daretur*' ('as if God did not exist') and Kearney's 'the God who may be'. I show that Bonhoeffer's use of '*etsi deus non daretur*' can also be interpreted to refer to God as 'not being (a) given,' and so to a God that 'may be'. This translation lines up with Bonhoeffer's discussion in *Act and Being* that "the being of God is no 'there is'" (DBWE 2:122), but that "Christian revelation must occur in the present precisely because it is, in the qualified once-and-for-all occurrence of the cross and resurrection of Christ, always something 'of the future'" (DBWE 2:111). If this interpretation stands up, then the parallels between Bonhoeffer's theology and Kearney's work in *The God Who May Be*,⁷—which portrays an Onto-Eschatological God who depends on human responses in order to become actualized—are not only possible, but promising.

⁷ Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

The concluding section of this thesis will re-examine the previous sections with an ear to the questions: Where do we go from here? How does this help us move forward in theology, philosophy, anthropology, and ethics? Does Christological and incarnational thinking help in these areas by overcoming some of their inherent problems? Without aiming to provide the final answer on the question of whether either Bonhoeffer or Kearney ‘got it right’, I will conclude by showing that a loose synthesis of their thought opens us up to new and healthy ways of living life; that instead of closing down how God can be known in the world, their work opens us up to the ways in which God can become God, and humans can become fully human. My thesis aims to show that a Christologically-based incarnational humanism is a suitable and appropriate live option that is not only biblical, but responds to issues in both contemporary philosophy and theology (e.g., transcendence/immanence, particularity/similarity, ontology/ethics) and provides a way for us to understand that the possibility of divine incarnation depends upon our human response.

To engage in the thought of these two thinkers, I must first create a context wherein their contributions will be more revelatory, and so more fruitful. As such, we will begin with a brief look through two relevant areas: historical Christological viewpoints, and the relevance of Christology in our current world. First, a very brief overview of different Christological options will be given, especially as formulated in the first five centuries after Christ. This historical background will allow us to see what the earliest Christological formulations were, including the ones that have been considered orthodox and heterodox, and why they were thus understood. Having this backdrop will allow us to be able to measure up the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kearney, i.e., in what ways they are similar and different from these ancient formulations. The second part of this introduction will examine current critiques of Christology in order to

illuminate the reasons why it is still relevant to talk about Christ today. In a world that has grown more secular, pluralistic, and allergic to the exclusivity that comes with specific religious doctrines,⁸ there are meaningful criticisms of Christology. We will assess a few of these, and see to what extent they can be reconciled in order to provide a charitable yet effective understanding of who Christ is for all humans today.⁹

0.1 | HISTORICAL CHRISTOLOGY: ORTHODOX AND HETERODOX OPTIONS

As we begin this comparative examination of the thought of Bonhoeffer and Kearney, especially as we focus on how their understanding of Christ informs the rest of their views, it behooves us to take a brief excursus into historical views on Christology. As this historical element is not the main focus for this thesis, the overview will be concise, providing enough information so as to offer a point of comparison for the main figures. Having this background will help us better see how the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kearney line up, and perhaps why they have chosen certain formulations over others. That formulations about Christ were important during the Patristic period is evidenced clearly in the Apostles' Creed, whose section on Jesus is the longest section, longer than the sections on the Father and the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ The length points to the importance of Christ, but also to the complexity of understanding how the Bible describes Christ. I will now provide a brief description of a few main Christologies of the Patristic period.

⁸ These should not be seen in an altogether negative fashion, as will be shown later.

⁹ It is my belief that Christ's life was, and is, universalistic in nature, and so Christological discourse should benefit non-Christians as much as it should benefit Christians.

¹⁰ Both of which have "no distinctly Christian content apart from [their] relationship to the second article." Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 163.

Ebionism: The Ebionites (Hebrew: ‘poor ones’), a predominantly Jewish sect during the first two centuries AD, believed that Jesus was just a human being.¹¹ As adherents to the monotheistic Jewish faith, they deemed it impossible for there to be another God, as this would indicate polytheism. Although they understood Jesus to be a prominent moral teacher who had surpassed the wisdom and righteousness of others, and some of them even considered him to be the Messiah, they denied that Jesus was in any way God or divine. The Patristics discarded this formulation of Christ on the grounds of its inability to understand and reconcile the salvific effects of Christ; Jesus as merely creature cannot save all of creation.

Docetism: Docetism can be seen as the polar opposite to Ebionism. It centres on the belief that Christ only *appeared* to be human. Coming from the Greek *dokeō* meaning ‘to seem’ or ‘to appear’, this Christology envisions Christ as completely divine, his humanity being only an illusion.¹² Although this formulation protects the divinity of Christ, by having Christ only ‘appear’ to suffer and die, it also misses completely any of the soteriological aspects of Christ’s suffering humanity: “If God in Christ does not enter into solidarity with the hell of our human condition, we remain without deliverance and without hope;”¹³ or, in the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, “that which he has not assumed, he has not healed.”¹⁴ Again, the Patristics considered this understanding of Christ to be insufficient and they summarily rejected it.

Arianism: According to Arius and his followers, Jesus cannot be identified with God. Although Jesus was the “unique revealer of God and our redeemer,”¹⁵ he was not truly divine because true divinity “could not be subject to any limitations and certainly not to suffering and

¹¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 45.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 175.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Epistle 101,” in *Christology of the Late Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, vol. 3, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1954), 218.

¹⁵ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 170.

death.”¹⁶ Arianism sees Jesus as the most preeminent of creatures, and the most like God that a creature could be, but in no way divine or part of the Godhead. God is absolutely unique, and God’s essence cannot be shared in any manner;¹⁷ hence, the popular saying of Arius’ that “there was when he was not.” The presumable intent of Arius—“to honour and exalt God above every creature”¹⁸—is admirable, but his delimitations on the understanding of transcendence did not allow for God to really be with us in any way. It thus represented a “triumph of Hellenistic thought over Christianity.”¹⁹ The Arian formulation of Christ came to be rejected on the fundamental basis that if Christ was not God, and was a creature, then he could not save creation; for Christ to redeem all of creation, Christ had to be more than just a creature—even the highest creature—within creation.

Nicene Creed: As a result primarily of Arianism, an ecumenical council was held in Nicea in 325 AD in order to come to some conclusive understandings of Christ.²⁰ This ‘initial milestone’ in Christology absolutely insisted that Christ was divine. Whereas Arianism attested that Jesus was created by, and therefore not consubstantial with, God, the Nicene council affirmed that Christ was uncreated and of the same substance with the Father. These beliefs can be seen clearly in the following section from the Nicene Creed²¹ on Christ: “God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father.”²²

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 51.

¹⁸ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 170.

¹⁹ William P. Loewe, “Classical Christology,” in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 54.

²⁰ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 169–70.

²¹ The Nicene Creed adopted its final form after the Constantinopolitan Council of 381 AD; it generally continues to be called the Nicene Creed, but is also referred to as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. See Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 53 n 25.

²² Although dropped in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 AD, the Nicene Creed of 325 AD included an appendix that was further aimed at Arianism: “But those who say: ‘There was a time when he was not;’ and ‘He was not before he was made;’ and ‘He was made out of nothing,’ or ‘He is of another substance’ or ‘essence,’ or ‘The Son of God is created,’ or ‘changeable,’ or ‘alterable’—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic

However, even though this formulation settled questions regarding the divine nature of Christ, it left open questions surrounding the humanity of Christ.²³ The schools of Alexandria and Antioch were the primary schools to develop subsequent Christologies to address these concerns.

Chalcedonian Formulation: As these two main schools of thought continued to develop their Christologies, the larger Christian community was concerned and enacted the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD in order to settle the Christological question. The Alexandrian school placed a higher emphasis on the divinity of Christ, without neglecting his humanity, and understood salvation in terms of deification.²⁴ Those in the Antiochian school were more concerned with emphasizing the humanity of Christ, and focussed on his life on earth. This division—‘one-nature’ versus ‘two-nature’—led to the former almost denying the humanity of Christ, and the latter almost completely separating the humanity and divinity.²⁵

While it would take us too far afield to go into all the details surrounding these two schools of thought, the Chalcedonian Council sought to bring together the best of both, and eliminate the worst. The most important part of the Christological formulation reads:

... one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*; the distinction of natures by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁶

While this formulation does not provide final answers to every question that surrounds Christology, and perhaps acknowledges that they can never be fully answered, it provides us with limits and guidelines for all future Christologies. By showing us a dividing line between

Church.” Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Sixth Edition, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1931, repr. 1983), 29.

²³ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 170.

²⁴ Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Sixth Edition, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1931, repr. 1983), 62. Italics in original.

heresy and orthodoxy, and acting as a guide to obedient Christian thought, we should use the “Chalcedonian formula as the minimum—and relative, as any human device—criterion”²⁷ for all future Christologies.²⁸ As theologians and philosophers continue to develop Christologies for contemporary times, I believe that it remains wise to adhere to these Chalcedonian guidelines, and to see them as guiding and not restricting.

Now that we have this brief Christological history, and a formulation that provides guiderails for future ones, we must address another question: Does Christology even matter anymore? Are these developments only relevant for a bygone age? We will turn now to an examination of a few contemporary critiques of Christology, and possible responses to these, in order to show that talking of Christ, both theologically and philosophically, is relevant and necessary in our contemporary world.

0.2 | IS CHRISTOLOGY VIABLE TODAY?

It has been over 70 years since Bonhoeffer posed his question of who Christ is for us today. Over the course of these decades, the world has changed dramatically. Wars have continued to plague the world, ideologies and nations have continued to rise and fall, and globalization and technology has brought the world closer together than ever before. However, Bonhoeffer’s question is still as relevant for us today as it was for him in the 1940s, although it must be understood and answered in different ways in response to the different issues and developments that have arisen over these past decades. Our guide for this section will primarily

²⁷ Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 65.

²⁸ Rutledge writes that “[t]he Chalcedonian Definition remains the measure by which we test our proposals: Jesus was *both* fully divine *and* fully human.” Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 12. Italics in original.

be Ralf K. Wüstenberg's book *Christology: How Do We Talk about Jesus Christ Today?*²⁹ Set in the context of ongoing debates about the relevance of religion and Christianity in the contemporary world, this book, authored by a Bonhoeffer scholar, reflects a broader conversation on the topic, and provides a succinct response to critiques of Christology.

In this book, Wüstenberg points out that, although there has been much that has changed since Bonhoeffer's original question in his Tegel-Berlin prison cell, his question is as much of a concern today as it was back then. Wüstenberg highlights that generally, the "Christian discussion about God does not belong in our world anymore," and is definitely less popular and accessible than the subject matter of other academic disciplines.³⁰ In this manner, we find ourselves in many ways in the same position in which Bonhoeffer found himself: in a letter dated 16 July 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote that "we have to live in the world—'etsi deus non daretur' [even if, or as if, there were no God]" (DBWE 8:478). The world of Bonhoeffer's day had largely given up on the 'religious *a priori*' (DBWE 8:362-363), and this remains largely true today.³¹ So our task is much like Bonhoeffer's: to determine how we can take this stance of '*etsi deus non daretur*' as the pretext for our theological and philosophical endeavours. To do this properly, we must respond to the current concerns, dispositions, and critiques of Christianity we find in our world.

To properly reflect on the Christological question today, Wüstenberg argues that we must "address objections from intellectual-historical, social-critical, interreligious, and other perspectives: the secularization of the attitude of life, the experience of a variety of religious

²⁹ Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *Christology: How Do We Talk about Jesus Christ Today?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ However, it cannot be overlooked that there has been a return to religion, as the notion of 'post-secularity' is gaining ground. The 'religious' or 'theological' turn in contemporary continental philosophy is also a case in point.

movements, and a completely historically defined consciousness of truth.”³² By assessing and responding to these critiques, he shows that it is still a worthwhile effort to engage the Christological question. Wüstenberg addresses five main arguments that critics make against Christology in our time, to wit: religious pluralism, faith in science, dogmatism, humanism, and feminism. We will look at each of these in turn in order to ascertain the specific nature of their respective critiques of Christology, after which we will explore ways in which a fuller understanding of Christology can help address these concerns in a productive manner.

1. Religious Pluralism

In this first area, Wüstenberg addresses concerns around religious pluralism and tolerance, and he specifically asks: “can traditional Christology, with its emphasis on a claim to exclusivity, remain in force in an age of new encounters with world religions?”³³ Jean-François Lyotard is most noted for succinctly describing postmodernity in its most reduced form: “incredulity to metanarratives.”³⁴ Lyotard—as well as figures like Levinas, Derrida, and Foucault—aptly points out that totalizing and specific claims to truth and knowledge (whether religious or otherwise) inherently lead to violence, oppression, and domination. History is a clear and credible witness to the truth of this insight. In a century marked by secularity and postmodernity (though even the meanings of these terms and periods are not stable), there has been an increase in the plurality of thought generally, and an increase in religious pluralism specifically, along with a rejection of absolutes and definite truth claims. Wüstenberg picks up on this sentiment when he writes that it “cannot to be [sic] overlooked that the present age is

³² Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

characterized by a radical pluralism that regards any categorical claim to truth as questionable.”³⁵ That the Christian faith holds to such a categorical truth claim about Jesus is a case in point, for it is Christians who place a singular emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). So, in response to these issues, how can Christianity both adhere to the universality of Christ’s claims and yet honour, and not merely relativize, the claims of other faith systems?³⁶

Before outlining his preferred position, a position that he finds does justice to this guiding question, Wüstenberg goes through three prominent positions that attempt to understand the exclusivity/plurality dialectic. These three approaches are: ‘exclusive’, ‘pluralistic-relativistic’, and ‘inclusive’. The ‘exclusive’ approach, one that is declining among contemporary theologians, sees God’s revelation as coming exclusively through the Christian faith. As such, “the Christian concept of revelation must be particularly emphasized.”³⁷ The antithesis to this position can be called ‘pluralistic-relativistic’, wherein “there can be no final revelation of the divine absolute.”³⁸ In this position, every religion, faith tradition, and spirituality has equal access to the divine, and so they “provide equally valid answers to the questions of life and death.”³⁹ The final position Wüstenberg explores is the ‘inclusive’ approach; it seeks to find a middle-ground between the other two positions examined. Although Christ may be a unique revelation of God, he is not *a priori* the only revelation of God. As such, this position holds that God addresses and works through all aspects of the world, not just those that explicitly acknowledge Christ. Karl Rahner popularized this view with his idea of ‘anonymous Christianity’.⁴⁰

Finding all of these approaches lacking, Wüstenberg discusses what he sees to be a more

³⁵ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ This phrase was first used by Rahner in a 1961 lecture in Bavaria. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, vol. 5 (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1966), 131–34.

holistic and beneficial approach to mediating the difference between absolutism and relativism, namely a ‘positional pluralism’ or ‘pluralism/tolerance from faith’. This standpoint desists from seeing Christianity itself as absolute; rather, God alone is absolute, and Christianity is chosen by God for the position of bearing the absolute, or the truest revelation of the absolute, as opposed to choosing or acceding to this position itself.⁴¹ Based on this stance, there is “no claim to absoluteness *on the part of Christianity*”; rather, roots in a faith stance that stretch out to that which is beyond “open up a genuine access to interreligious dialogue, namely in the form of tolerance that is vouched for by faith.”⁴² From this worldview, one can accept by faith the work that is being carried out by Christ throughout the world, be encouraged to seek out and recognize the signs that point to areas where Christ is already at work, and then to participate in Christ’s reconciliation.⁴³ To believe in Christ is to accept that faith is a gift, and so this faith provides the very reason why one can enter into tolerant, even celebrative, dialogue at all, and why faith cannot be imposed on others. Because Wüstenberg opines that a strong Christology actually increases one’s tolerance to others amidst religious pluralism, let us see how he will carry this forward into other areas of contemporary critique of Christology, starting with the historical-intellectual objection.

2. Faith in Science

This second critique examines the verifiability of any Christology, i.e. can the person of Christ be proven to have existed, and to still exist. If the historical reports about Jesus are primarily limited to those found in the Bible, and so his existence, not to mention his

⁴¹ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 16–17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20. Italics in original.

⁴³ However, Haight argues that “affirming that God acts in other religions independently of Jesus in no way minimizes what God has done in Christ.” Roger Haight, “Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism,” in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 100.

resurrection, is not provable according to a modernist historical-critical viewpoint, does this reduce Christianity and all Christological viewpoints to conjecture and faith (understood as blind belief)? Has modern research and historical scholarship not dissolved Christianity “into pure subjectivity”?⁴⁴ The responses to these questions impact the relevance of Christology in our current age.

Although the primary accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth come from the Bible, there are also a number of contemporaneous sources that refer to Christ and the ‘rumour’ that was spread of his resurrection. This shows that there is validity to the claims of Jesus’ existence. However, another key point to bear in mind is that the gospel writers were intentionally writing narrative and biography; the modernist notion of writing something objectively historical about the life of Jesus was totally alien to their way of thinking.⁴⁵ As these narratives and takes on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were written by different authors at different times, they present and emphasize different aspects of Jesus. There has never been one theology since the beginning, but only theologies; so too with Christology: there are Christologies, plural, offering differing views based on differing perspectives.⁴⁶

As noted above, the scientific critique of Christology comes out of a framework that creates a dualism between what is ‘true’ or ‘correct’ (or ‘objective’) on one hand, and what is ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ (and ‘subjective’) on the other hand; the former is ‘certain’ and the latter is ‘uncertain’.⁴⁷ However, this historical and modern approach to truth attempts to hide the fact that it is itself constructed, or shaped by subjective concerns; this historical and modernist approach is not absolutely and objectively true, but rather something that has also developed with

⁴⁴ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

subjective aims and interests in mind. As such, the study of history includes more than the simple retelling of an uninterpreted chain of historical events, but necessarily includes such subjective elements as interpretation, selection, and editorializing. We can see from this position that, at the very least, any Christology should not be asked to meet an epistemological standard that is impossible for any other discourse to achieve.⁴⁸ Christological discourses can remain legitimate short of demonstrating the objective, mind-independent certainty of their claims.

3. Dogmatism

This section looks at the concerns with and critiques of dogmatism: “[I]s Christology something other than a dead letter and cold belief in dogma?”⁴⁹ Knowing that Christ lived and died over two millennia ago, and that the Christian community did not achieve relatively firm and authoritative Christological understandings until the Chalcedon Council of 451 AD, we are still faced with the responsibility of forming the proper contemporary response to Christ and the doctrines and dogmas surrounding him. Is continued belief or intellectual assent to these discrete propositional items sufficient in order to count oneself as a Christian today?⁵⁰ Do these old formulations have any relevance to us today, or do they only provide us with answers to questions that we no longer ask? What pertinent questions are we, or do we need to be, asking today? As Andreas Schuele conveys, “any future Christology will have to be able to make sense of the phrase ‘Christ *for us*’ in such a way that it comprises and combines both, ‘for each of us’ and ‘for all of us’.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 40–41.

⁵¹ Andreas Schuele, “Introduction,” in *Who Is Jesus Christ For Us Today? Pathways to Contemporary Christology*, ed. Andreas Schuele and Günter Thomas (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xiii. Italics in original.

Twentieth century theology did a lot to unsettle our assumptions about Jesus and Christology—from Albert Schweitzer and others’ search for the ‘historical Jesus’,⁵² to Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing project.⁵³ But as we saw in the previous section on historical developments in Christological options, our human understanding of Christ has been unsettled from the very beginning. The early church fathers and formulators of doctrine were also perplexed by the question of who Christ was.⁵⁴ We could say that, unfortunately, this question often became more about the ‘how’ than the ‘who’—something that I will address later in a fuller discussion of Bonhoeffer’s Christology. However, there was still a sense of wonder at the divine and what this meant for them in their lives. The Chalcedonian definition of Christology does not provide a distinct and definite understanding of Christ. In its abstractness, it provides the guiderails that determine what the Christian community considers to be false theology, and what can therefore be possibly true or acceptable. Thus, we should not understand these ancient formulations as truths that we accede to in and of themselves, but rather we should see them as tools that are advantageous to us in our aim to understand who Christ is for us from generation to generation.⁵⁵ It is for this reason that doctrine should be ‘cold’: in order to allow us access and understand that which is always beyond doctrine.

⁵² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1961).

⁵³ Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁵⁴ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 50.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

4. Humanism

Although, as Jens Zimmermann argues,⁵⁶ the roots of humanism can be traced back to Christianity itself, it has grown significantly since the rise of the Enlightenment, and in our day this growth has resulted in an increased focus on human rights and ethical interactions. As humanism expanded during the Enlightenment period, so did critiques of Christology, especially around theories of atonement: Is God not cruel for allowing Christ to suffer and die in such a horrifying way to save us, and even satisfy Godself? Although the Bible affirms that in Christ God is with us (Matt. 1:23), Christianity and the Christologies that it develops must come to terms with the critiques that point out anti-humanist tendencies within Christian theology.

Any understanding of Christ must grapple with the question of how salvation and reconciliation with God can be achieved. This pattern of thought stresses that “an event occurs between God and Jesus Christ, which is then discussed under the themes of *atonement, sacrifice, and satisfaction*.”⁵⁷ Wüstenberg points out how the ‘person-Christology’ of the ancient church took on a soteriological bent in the Scholastic and Reformation period, and was thereby transformed into a ‘works-Christology’.⁵⁸ Perhaps seen more clearly in St. Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, this transformed Christology ushers in the belief that it was necessary for God to become human and to be crucified in order to atone for the sins of humankind. It was only through this incarnation and gruesome death that a right relationship between God and humans could be restored. However, others (Abelard and Calvin, e.g.) argued that the incarnation and work of Christ cannot be reduced to atonement and the removal of sins, but to an ongoing reconciliation

⁵⁶ Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 29. “So-called Enlightenment values, such as social welfare and human rights, with foundational conceptions of human dignity, freedom, agency, rationality and personhood, all go back to Christian roots.”

⁵⁷ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 66. Italics in original.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

and a new way of life. It was Luther, though, who really attempted to unite the person and works of Christ; the ‘who’ and the ‘how’. Through Christ, there was an exchange of qualities (*communicatio idiomatum*) such that God received all that was due humans, and humans received everything that is characteristic of God.⁵⁹

Bringing together the person and works of Christ allows us to see how Christ was and remains here for and with us, and how we might become active agents in the ongoing reconciliation of the world to God via suffering with the other. But to what extent does this integration of the person and work of Christ address the critiques that problematize the violence of the sacrifice of Christ? Few would deny that Christ’s life ended gruesomely; however, one can also argue that through God’s incarnation in Christ, the whole sacrificial system—so prominent in contemporaneous religions—was turned on its head. It was God who voluntarily incarnated and lived up to and through the sacrifice, who overcame death and the necessity of the sacrificial system.⁶⁰ In no way did God let an innocent human being suffer in this macabre act, contra the humanist critique, but rather God suffered this way for us. The act of God on the cross is not a mere covering-over of sin, but a deep overcoming and elimination; God endures the pain and suffering (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). Christology thus remains important today because it reveals not an angry punishing God, but a God who suffers for and with humanity, and who calls us to suffer with God.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80–81. Bonhoeffer describes this conjunction of qualities in Christ his ‘pro-me’ structure; I will elaborate upon this in section 2.1.1, where I discuss Bonhoeffer’s Christology.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁶¹ René Girard’s work on scapegoating is relevant here too. He shows that the Bible is unlike other sacrificial myths, in that it insists that the scapegoat is innocent, and that violence perpetuated against scapegoats will always remain cyclical. He explicates these thoughts well in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987]). Although Girard believes that the God described in the Old Testament is never “entirely foreign to violence” (157), he believes that the God described in the New Testament is fully uncontaminated by violence. As Christ is completely innocent, he is incomprehensible to the system of violence and causes it to fall into its own trap (209), thereby showing the folly of the sacrificial system and that Jesus’ desire is to end it (210). For a book looking at Girard’s work in relation to postmodern Christology,

5. Feminism & Liberation

This final critique of Christology deals with the concerns of feminism and liberation theologies. One of the main concerns these critics raise involves the ramifications of Jesus being male, and referring to God as his father. It is hard not to see how these masculine images are easily connected to patriarchal relationships, which have tended to minimize and downright degrade women and others in socially marginalized positions. As Rosemary Ruether points out, if the Catholic church says that a woman cannot image and represent Christ, then how can Christ represent women?⁶² The critique, then, is that no liberation can come, especially for women, by or through a male, and therefore all people need to be liberated from patriarchy as such.⁶³ Further issues arise for feminists out of Christian claims to the unity of human and divine in a *male*, as well as the images of a *wrathful Father-God* satisfied only by the death of his son.⁶⁴ With the presence of these male images, and knowing that the majority of Christian theological development has been made by males, how can contemporary Christologies respond to these critiques in a way that does not downgrade the biblical narrative as a narrative that points to the soteriological efficacy of Christ?

While it is sure that there is no one feminism or feminist theology in the singular, there are numerous constructive positions put forward by many women theologians (e.g., Ruether, Schüssler Fiorenza, Sölle). These thinkers suggest positions that seek to honor the ethical orientation of Christ, the co-working of humans in the redemptive process, and the immanence of God.⁶⁵ For example, Ruether writes that “Christians must affirm the particularity of Jesus, not

see Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (London, England: T&T Clark, 2008).

⁶² Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Christology and Patriarchy,” in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 122.

⁶³ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 88.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

only in gender but also in ethnicity and culture, and the limitations of any single individual to be universally paradigmatic.”⁶⁶ What does a Christology look like that honours feminist concerns, and that also calls for liberation from other forms of oppression? How can an understanding of Jesus be carried forward into social and political realms in a redemptive manner?

In response to these concerns, Wüstenberg opines that the “Christian religion must not be moralized (by fading out soteriology), the Christian doctrine of God should not be abandoned as such (by an embrace of mythical-gnostic trends), nor must one be ‘fixated’ on a soteriological doctrine of reconciliation (by fading out the social-ethical dimension of the Christian idea of reconciliation).”⁶⁷ That Jesus was male cannot be denied, and Christ’s being female would not eradicate problems of universality; Christianity’s task is to “see that what is paradigmatic about Jesus is not his biological ontology but rather his person as lived message and practice.”⁶⁸ Moving forward, contemporary Christian formulations of Christology should continue to look to the orthodox formulations of the past; it seems that by engaging with, rather than rejecting these resources, we will find that we have the necessary tools to address these problems, such as: 1) an understanding of God’s joining in our suffering; 2) God’s embodiment in sinful human flesh, which values life “in an unprecedented way”⁶⁹; and 3) the fact that Christology is the basis for anthropology. In this vein, Wüstenberg looks to the theology of Bonhoeffer, where he finds a robust Christology that is ‘this-worldly’ and life-affirming in every way, including suffering with all those who suffer, and which is motivated to create redemptive change in both political and social realms. From this stance, one that acknowledges that Christ has redeemed the whole world into himself (2 Cor. 5:19) and overcome Death (1 Cor. 15:55), “ethics ‘flows’ from ...

⁶⁶ Ruether, “Christology and Patriarchy,” 132.

⁶⁷ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 101.

⁶⁸ Ruether, “Christology and Patriarchy,” 132.

⁶⁹ Wüstenberg, *Christology*, 102.

Christology: ... Christ is not only present ‘next to’ the Christian, but ‘lays claim on’ the ‘whole’ Christian in the midst of his/her life.”⁷⁰

In a liberation Christology that follows Bonhoeffer’s lead, Christ as God suffers for us (exclusive) and also takes us into suffering with others (conclusive).⁷¹ Liberation must be hoped for, but it is ever and always a liberation of this new world by and through Christ; notions of escapism are, *pace* Nietzsche, absent from a strong Christology. Picking up on Bonhoeffer’s Penultimate/Ultimate distinction-relation (which I will discuss further in section 1.2.1), the eschatological dimension (Ultimate) that is promised and hoped for can only come through the structures and liberating efforts made in the here-and-now (Penultimate).⁷² This stance provides the impetus to work towards the here-and-now liberation of every oppressed person; if Christ provides the anthropological definition of new humanity, then we must look to his affirmation of women and oppressed people, and his liberating efforts for them, as essential to understanding Christology in our current age.

This examination of a few of the major contemporary critiques of Christology has argued that Christological discourse continues to house resources that allow contemporary Christians to put forward viable responses to these issues, through a liberating understanding of the ongoing covenantal relationship between humanity and divinity in our current age. Since through Christ there has been a genuine newness that has broken into the world, “it is not only worth the effort to think about him, but it is also worth it to challenge the arguments against”⁷³ these sentiments. As the most accepted, orthodox, and ‘classic’ Christological formulation shows, there can never be a fully articulated understanding of Christ; Christ is essentially mysterious, and his question—

⁷⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 113.

⁷³ Ibid., 117.

“Who do you say that I am” (Mark 8:29)—continues to call out to us today for an answer.⁷⁴ As we move into the next chapters of this thesis, ones that look to the theological and philosophical contributions of Bonhoeffer and Kearney, we will see further how a strong Christology is able to respond to current issues in these fields: immanence/transcendence, difference/sameness, and ontology/ethics.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 120; Don Schweitzer, *Contemporary Christologies: A Fortress Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 140: “... Christology is always on the way, never finished but continually developing; encountering new questions, returning again to its sources, rediscovering riches in its past, being enriched by encounter and dialogue with new forms of thought, other religions, cultural developments.”

CHAPTER I | CONVERGENCES

In this first chapter, I will examine convergences in the thought of Bonhoeffer and Kearney. Though writing decades apart, and coming from different confessional and academic positions, their thought agrees in many areas. Both hold post-metaphysical understandings of God, although their respective reasons for doing so are slightly different; both have an understanding of the ‘not yet’ in and through the ‘now’; both emphasize ‘this-worldly’ concerns; and, in accord with all of these convergences, both adhere to a form of ‘incarnational humanism’. I will begin this examination, then, by exploring their post-metaphysical views of God.

1.1| Post-Metaphysical Understandings of God

It seems safe to say that people in the West, and certainly most Christians, have grown up with distinct notions of God, notions that depict God as some sort of Supreme Being. While these views have changed over time, and also differ between various denominations and branches of the Christian faith, several core beliefs span these differences. Such metaphysical notions of God as *causa sui*, *ipsum esse subsistens*, or *ens supremum* all emphasize the strength of God, i.e., the aseity or self-sufficiency of God. This is what Richard Kearney calls the “Omni-God,” referring to the characteristics that have been granted to God by various philosophical and theological traditions: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc.⁷⁵ Because such metaphysical and ontological concepts would have been quite foreign to Jews in the Old Testament, and largely for the Jews and early Christians of the New Testament as well, they would have viewed the God with whom they covenanted in very different terms.⁷⁶ All the same,

⁷⁵ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 73.

⁷⁶ Pascal’s distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob comes to mind. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973), para. 449.

the incorporation of Greek metaphysical categories into Christian doctrines of God that began in the first few centuries AD sent Christianity down a path that continues today, a path that continues to influence our theology and relatedness to God, not always for the better.

In hopes of helping Christians, God, and even those who are atheists because they reject historical and current conceptions of God, Bonhoeffer and Kearney seek to redefine this Omni-God in service of hope (and even hope against hope),⁷⁷ possibility, and the promise of the Kingdom. Both thinkers intend to resurrect a truer, more biblical understanding of God, of what is going on in the name of God. And for both thinkers this name is one of relationality, possibility, and hope for the future and for the Kingdom. As Kearney avers, “one cannot begin to return to a new—‘messianic’ or ‘eschatological’—sense of the holy until one has left the old God of metaphysical causality and theodicy behind. God cannot advene until we have resigned our attachment to divine omnipotence. God cannot come until we have said our final adieu.”⁷⁸

Kearney starts his 2001 book *The God Who May Be* with the enticing statement “God neither is nor is not but may be.”⁷⁹ This statement inaugurates his ongoing wager to overcome ontotheology, which he sees as a tradition that has “granted priority to being over the good”⁸⁰ and actuality over possibility.⁸¹ He attributes the connection or fusion of ontology and theology into ontotheology to the interpretative missteps that led the *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14—that mysterious name of God which, as we will see later, has a plurality of possible, and ever-growing, meanings—to be understood as “I AM that I AM.” Greek translators translated the Hebrew verb *'ehyeh* as *einai*, and later Latin thinkers translated it as *esse*, as they assumed there

⁷⁷ John D. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

⁷⁸ Richard Kearney, “Returning to God after God: Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur,” *Research in Phenomenology* 39, no. 2 (2009): 167–68.

⁷⁹ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

to be no fundamental difference between the original Hebrew and the Greek translation.⁸² When read in light of Greek philosophical categories, this translation encourages us to see no future or past in God, but instead to understand God's essence as synonymous with God's existence; God IS. When religious thinkers (especially in the scholastic period) interpreted God and scripture through Greek metaphysical categories, the "conflation of Yahweh with the supreme Being of the philosophers [was] sealed."⁸³ This can be seen in a way as the beginning of the death of God. Yahweh as passionate and mercurial has now become the God of metaphysics, and, as Heidegger made clear, all ontology has now become ontotheology, or what Kearney calls "the conceptual capture of God as a category of substance."⁸⁴

In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger points out that theology and ontology are really theo-logic and onto-logic due to their desire to "fathom Existence as such and seek its ground in the Whole."⁸⁵ When metaphysics is concerned with Existence as it relates or applies to that which concerns all individual things, then metaphysics is onto-logic; when metaphysics is concerned not with individual things but the Existence of the whole, then metaphysics is theo-logic. However, as Heidegger opines, these two cannot be, or historically have not been, thought apart: "[M]etaphysics is at one and the same time uniquely ontology and theology by virtue of the unifying oneness of the issue."⁸⁶ Expanding on this theme, Heidegger writes that

[M]etaphysics is not only theo-logic, but also onto-logic. Metaphysics, above all, is not only one and/or the other. Rather, metaphysics is theo-logic because it is onto-logic. It is this because it is that. The essential onto-theological constitution of metaphysics cannot be explained either on the basis of theologic nor on that of ontologic, provided an explanation will even suffice for what we still have to reflect on.⁸⁷

⁸² Ibid., 22.

⁸³ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Essays in Metaphysics: Identity and Difference*, trans. Kurt F. Leidecker (New York, NY: Philosophical Library Inc., 1960), 51–52.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 53.

By looking at the onto-theo-logical nature of metaphysics, Heidegger seems to have found out where, and how, God entered philosophy.⁸⁸ The human desire (or at least the desire of philosophers and theologians) to understand Existence and Being, the Whole and its Cause, led to the subsumption of God within Metaphysical thinking.

The problem with ontotheology, however, is that it does not line up with the biblical God, and more, this concept actually restricts God and makes God into something negative. The attempt of the scholastics and others to cast God as the “highest, first, and most indeterminate of beings,”⁸⁹ or even Being itself, became a self-defeating doctrine, and the desire that informed it points to our human, all too human weakness to think that we can know it all. Unfortunately, this doctrine has reduced and constrained God, putting God inside a metaphysical box that delimits what God can do (by ironically saying that God can do everything). The Hebrew writers of the Old Testament, and commentators thereon, seem unconcerned with these ontological understandings or worries about God. As Kearney quips, the Hebrews did not need ontological and metaphysical proofs about God, but only an eschatological promise to be-with.⁹⁰ God cannot be contained or constrained by the boundaries of being anyways, but always exceeds these; God, or in John D. Caputo’s language, the Event harboured within the name God, is an uncontainable, unconstrainable infinite that always exceeds and surprises our best attempts at understanding and systematizing.⁹¹ God is promise, then, or love, not Being, which explains the proliferation of post-Heideggerian attempts to liberate our understanding of God from these metaphysical bonds.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁹ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 24.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁹¹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2–5.

What is more, ontotheology is at its core idolatrous “because it circumscribes the divine by a concept.”⁹²

In *The God Who May Be*, Kearney takes a closer look at the mysterious name of God given to Moses as described in Exodus 3:14. The Hebrews, especially in their suffering in Egypt, needed to know that God would always be with them, journey with them, and deliver a future and eschatological paradise where there would no longer be suffering and pain, but instead joy, life, and flourishing. A God who “IS” offers no hope in suffering, and fortunately is not the God described in the Bible; rather the God described in the Bible is a God who is ‘with’, one who provides both comfort and hope. Part of Kearney’s work in this book is to offer an eschatological (and slightly deconstructive) reading of Exodus 3:14, one that opens it up to the plurality of meanings that it already contains. In spite of the fact that, since the scholastic period, the verse has often been reduced to “I am who I am,” in actuality there is no one correct translation of this passage. Old Testament scholar Máire Byrne conveys that the “text is extremely difficult to translate,”⁹³ and that “there is a large degree of ambiguity with the translation of the term.”⁹⁴ She offers such possibilities as ‘to be’, ‘to become’, and ‘to happen’.⁹⁵ Kearney cites Rashi’s Midrashic commentaries according to which God is here saying “I shall be what I shall be.”⁹⁶ The plurality of meanings for this name show that God cannot be contained even within a name, never mind a concept, and also that God’s nature harbours possibility, and not only actuality.

Because of the pluralities of meaning contained within this mysterious name of God, we cannot reduce God to Being, or a being (even if it is the highest one). Rather, God’s name is a

⁹² Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 39.

⁹³ Máire Byrne, *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: A Basis for Interfaith Dialogue* (London, England: Continuum, 2011), 22.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 25.

promise and a call, and calls need responses. Kearney suggests that “God’s ‘I shall be’ appears to need Moses’ response ‘Here I am’ in order to enter history and blaze the path towards the Kingdom.”⁹⁷ God can then be thought of as beyond being, or between being and non-being, and requiring us to answer a call to allow God to be. Kearney explicates that God may or may not be, that God is not required to be. If God is not required to be, if God is then a may-be (*peut-être*) God, what are the conditions upon which God moves from may-being to being proper? Is the realization of God dependent on a human response? I will wait until Chapter 3 to answer these questions; first we must examine Bonhoeffer’s own unique way of overcoming metaphysics.

Bonhoeffer’s thought anticipates many of the themes present in post-Heideggerian philosophers of religion like Jean-Luc Marion, Caputo, and Kearney, and should thus be seen as complementary to, and even a precursor of, these later post-metaphysical discussions of God. Although Bonhoeffer’s post-metaphysical understandings of God can be clearly seen in his prison writings, where he writes, for example, on the necessity of God’s suffering, one finds these views already in his early writings. For instance, in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer’s *habilitationsschrift* written in 1929-30, he writes that “[t]he eternal ‘is’ remains a speculative notion which ... is inadequate for theological ontology. God is not primarily God the sheer ‘is’” (DBWE 2:75). As soon as we think we have God, such that God would then be, and therefore be past, we assuredly do *not* have God; Bonhoeffer thus insists, agreeing with Karl Barth, that we understand God as always coming and never existing (DBWE 2:85). To this end, he writes that “[t]here is no God who ‘is there’” (DBWE 2:115); “the being of God is no ‘there is’” (DBWE 2:122).⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁸ “God ‘is’ not in the sense that an objective entity is” (DBWE 2:93).

In the 1932-33 Winter semester, shortly after writing these words, Bonhoeffer wrote an exegesis of the first 3 chapters of Genesis, later published as *Creation and Fall*, wherein he claims that the “abstract concept of God, precisely because it seeks not to be anthropomorphic, is in actual fact much more so than is childlike anthropomorphism” (DBWE 3:75). Here we already begin to see Bonhoeffer attack metaphysical and ontotheological conceptions of God as conceptions that bear the marks of human weakness and idolatry. “What does it mean that in the beginning is God? Which God? Your God, whom you make for yourself out of your own need because you need an idol ...?” (DBWE 3:29). Metaphysical conceptions of God, for Bonhoeffer, portray the fallenness of humanity, amounting to little more than mere projections of what they see as their best qualities onto God in purest form. However, in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer writes that “God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid belief, or a law; God became human” (DBWE 6:99).

Bonhoeffer continues these early anti-metaphysical readings through to his last days, as seen in his prison writings. One of Bonhoeffer’s main expositions on a post-metaphysical understanding of God comes from a letter to Eberhard Bethge on April 30, 1944. In this letter he flushes out how to think about God and Christianity in an age that was becoming religionless; that had abandoned the religious *a priori*. He questions: “How do we talk about God—without religion, that is, without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, the inner life, and so on?” (DBWE 8:364). Much of Bonhoeffer’s concern about metaphysical understandings of God is that these human creations acted as a stop-gap for human knowledge. “Religious people speak of God at a point where human knowledge is at an end (or sometimes when they’re too lazy to think further), or when human strength fails. Actually, it’s a *deus ex machina* that they’re always bringing on the scene, either to appear to solve insoluble problems

or to provide strength when human powers fail, thus always exploiting human weakness or human limitations” (DBWE 8:366). This metaphysical and stop-gap God is, for Bonhoeffer, a human creation that is at root idolatrous and “has become superfluous” (DBWE 8:500).

Who is God? Not primarily a general belief in God’s omnipotence, and so on.... Our relationship to God is no ‘religious’ relationship to some highest, most powerful, and best being imaginable—that is no genuine transcendence.... The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation. God in human form!... [N]ot in the conceptual forms of the absolute, the metaphysical, the infinite, and so on ... [b]ut rather ‘the human being for others’! therefore the Crucified One. The human being living out of the transcendent. (DBWE 8:501)

Bonhoeffer’s critique of metaphysical understandings of God is total. Yet this critique is not only negative, but also plays a constructive role in his positive understanding of God.

A large motivation for Bonhoeffer’s post-metaphysical understanding of God arises out of an attention to the suffering of Christ in the world. Metaphysical abstractions of God separate God from the world, which goes against the understanding of ‘God with us’ as seen in the incarnation. “This grasp of suffering puts Bonhoeffer far from understanding God in any way that makes theology referential to metaphysics or inward subjectivity as the primary categories with which to understand or grapple with the reality of the divine. The remoteness of the God of metaphysics leads us far away from the reality of God’s life as Bonhoeffer understood it.”⁹⁹ To truly understand God, we must understand the truest revelation of God: in the incarnation, in Christ, in Emmanuel, God with us. “*Jesus Christ, the God who became human*—this means that God has bodily taken on human nature in its entirety, that from now on divine being can be found nowhere else but in human form” (DBWE 6:400; italics in original).

As Gregor and Zimmermann make clear, “[t]he key to understanding Bonhoeffer’s contribution to contemporary discussions of God after metaphysics is his incarnational

⁹⁹ Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London, England: T&T Clark International, 2008), 113.

Christology.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, post-metaphysical understandings of God only come about because of a strong understanding of Christology.¹⁰¹ However, while important to contemporary debates on understanding ‘God after God’, Bonhoeffer’s work is much more constructive than that of other post-metaphysical thinkers; unlike many other philosophers and theologians that deal with post-metaphysical understandings of God, Bonhoeffer’s “incarnational Christology allows him to combine a number of elements that remain all too opposed in current discussion.”¹⁰² I will further expand on relevant concepts—such as immanence/transcendence and sameness/difference—as well as Bonhoeffer’s understanding of and rationale for these—in the next chapter. Next, though, we look at another point of comparison between Kearney and Bonhoeffer, one that is closely connected to post-metaphysical understandings of God.

1.2 | The Penultimate/Ultimate Distinction-Relation and Onto-Eschatology

Both Bonhoeffer and Kearney emphasize the dialectical tension between the things that are, and have been, and the things that are to come. Yet this tension does not only apply to things, but also to God. The Christian understanding of the radically new, and of an eschatological understanding that is positioned between the ‘already’ and the ‘not-yet’, seems to be singularly unique.¹⁰³ This dialectical tension comes across explicitly in the gospel of John, where it is written that “the hour is coming, and is now here” (4:23; 5:25). John Manoussakis describes this complex notion well when he writes that “the things-themselves are precisely *not* the things-to-come,” and that in spite of this opposition, he maintains “that reconciliation is

¹⁰⁰ Gregor and Zimmermann, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy,” 17.

¹⁰¹ Jens Zimmermann, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Heidegger: Two Different Visions of Humanity,” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 124.

¹⁰² Gregor and Zimmermann, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy,” 19.

¹⁰³ John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “The Promise of the New and the Tyranny of the Same,” in *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now*, ed. Neal DeRoo and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 73.

possible in the retrieval of the things-to-come *in* the things-themselves.”¹⁰⁴ This ‘*in*’ gets at the crux of the discussion for both Bonhoeffer and Kearney.

It is this retrieval of the ‘to-come’ ‘*in*’ the now that is relevant to understanding the theoretical stance of both thinkers, for they both think that the ‘not-yet’, the ‘to-come’, is found only within the here-and-now. As such, the two aspects for each thinker are necessarily connected, but not in a linear fashion. The penultimate and ontological structures are not such that they are temporal to the ultimate and eschatological, but relational; there is not a procession from one to the other, but the former is always already pregnant with the latter.¹⁰⁵ What is more, for both thinkers this ‘birthing’ of the ‘to-come’ in the now is the product of a decision or response on our part. From Manoussakis again: “[T]he structure of the eschaton is outlined as the future that flows into the present, as the moment that cuts an in-cision in the flux of time and therefore, calls for a de-cision. It calls us to decide either to refuse it or to receive it, either to accept things as they are and let them be what they are (the things-themselves) or to desire things otherwise, as the things-to-come.”¹⁰⁶ I turn now to an examination of how the not-yet/now framework functions for each thinker.

1.2.1 | Bonhoeffer’s Penultimate/Ulimate: The ‘Not-Yet’ in the ‘Now’

One of Bonhoeffer’s most prominent ideas, and one of his main contributions to theological thought, is his understanding of the relation between the penultimate and ultimate.¹⁰⁷ This relation, which he delineates in his unfinished work *Ethics*, is the outworking of his ideas

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 69 n. 1. Italics in original.

¹⁰⁵ John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “‘At the Recurrent End of the Unending’: Bonhoeffer’s Eschatology of the Penultimate,” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 231.

¹⁰⁶ Manoussakis, “The Promise of the New,” 84.

¹⁰⁷ This is picked up in a more philosophical manner in Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004).

concerning eschatology. For Bonhoeffer, the whole of the universe has already been redeemed by and taken up into Christ.¹⁰⁸ However, the outworking of this redemption is still taking place. Bonhoeffer explains this ‘already’/‘not-yet’ tension with his distinction between the penultimate and the ultimate, i.e., the things before the last and the last, respectively. In Bonhoeffer’s words, the penultimate is “all that precedes the ultimate . . . and that is addressed as penultimate after finding the ultimate. At the same time it is everything that follows the ultimate, in order to again precede it” (DBWE 6:159). Bonhoeffer is clear that, after the Christ-event, the ultimate is the defining factor for our world. “[W]e must also speak of penultimate things not as if they had some value of their own, but so as to make clear their relation to the ultimate. For the sake of the ultimate we must speak of the penultimate” (DBWE 6:151). We can clearly see, then, how these two elements are both separate, yet indelibly caught up with one another.¹⁰⁹

Why does Bonhoeffer opt for this understanding of the penultimate/ultimate relation? In what ways does he find that it performs a corrective to previous understandings of eschatology? He describes two main solutions to the eschatological tension between the penultimate and ultimate that he finds to be extreme and inadequate: the radical and the compromise. The first—the radical solution—views the ultimate and penultimate to be mutually exclusive. What is (the things that are, ontological things) is completely destroyed by Christ, and seen as irrelevant; the world as such is meaningless, and so we have no relation to it or impetus to ‘be’ in it or work toward its redemption. This view arises “from a conscious or unconscious hatred of what exists” (DBWE 6:155). The second solution—that of compromise—also sees a mutual exclusivity between penultimate and ultimate things; however, although the penultimate is affirmed in the compromise solution, the ultimate remains completely divorced from it. This view “arises from

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Col. 1:15-20; 2 Cor. 5:16-21.

¹⁰⁹ Manoussakis describes it as a “chiastic intertwining.” Manoussakis, “At the Recurrent End of the Unending,” 231.

hatred of the ultimate” (DBWE 6:156). In the former view, the end is absolutized and the penultimate sacrificed, and in the latter, the things that are are absolutized and the ultimate sacrificed. In both cases, “the very unity of God is itself dissolved” (DBWE 6:154). To be truly Christian is to live in this “fragile balance” without trying to “manipulate the kingdom either by delaying or by hastening its coming.”¹¹⁰

Bonhoeffer’s solution to the tension between the already and not-yet, then, is to see these two—the penultimate and the ultimate—as necessarily co-related in Christ. While I will wait until section 2.1.3 to engage in a fuller exploration of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ in connection to reality, suffice it to say for now that Bonhoeffer constructs his understanding of the penultimate/ultimate upon Christ as the lynchpin that holds them in tension. For Bonhoeffer, Christian life “neither destroys [radicalism] nor sanctions [comprise] the penultimate. In Christ the reality of God encounters the reality of the world and allows us to take part in this real encounter” (DBWE 6:159). The penultimate and ultimate exist only in relation to one another, and only as they exist in relation to Christ. “The ultimate has become real in the cross—as judgement on all that is penultimate, but at the same time as grace for the penultimate that bows to the judgement of the ultimate” (DBWE 6:158).

While Bonhoeffer does write that the “penultimate remains in existence, even though it is completely superseded by the ultimate and is no longer in force” (DBWE 6:151), he is also firm that the penultimate is the *sine qua non* of the ultimate. “[T]he penultimate must be preserved for the sake of the ultimate. Arbitrary destruction of the penultimate seriously harms the ultimate” (DBWE 6:160). For this reason, Bonhoeffer affirms that “Christ gives up nothing that has been won, but holds it fast in his hands” (DBWE 6:66). In this formulation, we are already beginning to notice some very interesting things, the most important of which is the strong integration, but

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

not conflation, of the penultimate and the ultimate. These are clearly two distinct ‘realms’¹¹¹ or concepts for Bonhoeffer, but one is not known or experienced without the other. “The ultimate and the penultimate are closely bound to one another. From this perspective the task is to strengthen the penultimate through a stronger proclamation of the ultimate and to protect the ultimate by preserving the penultimate” (DBWE 6:169).

For Bonhoeffer, the work of caring for the penultimate is thus justified and necessary (which, as we will soon see, is also true for Kearney), because it is the only site where the ultimate is found. In slightly different terms, the eschatological is found only in the ontological, the ‘not-yet’ only in the ‘now’: “The way from the penultimate to the ultimate cannot be abandoned” (DBWE 6:151). Commenting on Bonhoeffer’s eschatology, Manoussakis writes that “the emphasis here lies not on some beyond-this-world, end-of-times utopia but on the quiet and unnoticeable unfolding of the eschaton through the ephemeral and the everyday.”¹¹² There is no harsh break between the ‘now’ and the ‘not-yet’, the penultimate and the ultimate, such as one would expect in a temporal framework; rather, there is the simultaneous one *in* the other.¹¹³ But again, these two are not fused together, as Bonhoeffer makes clear: While “the ‘supernatural’ [is found] only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, the revelational only in the rational . . . , that which is Christian is not identical with the worldly, the natural with the supernatural, the revelational with the rational” (DBWE 6:59). With Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the integral relational between the penultimate and the ultimate in hand, let us now turn our attention to Kearney and his similar onto-eschatological framework.

¹¹¹ I put realm in scare quotes here because Bonhoeffer explicitly tries to overcome the ‘two world’ or ‘two kingdom’ thinking that had plagued theology, such as expressed in the two solutions discussed above.

¹¹² Manoussakis, “At the Recurrent End of the Unending,” 229.

¹¹³ Denying the existence of a harsh break between these two does not deny that there can be an explosive rupture or event of the ultimate in the penultimate. However, these movements will often be small: a cup of cold water (Matt. 10:42), for example.

1.2.2 | Kearney's Onto-Eschatological

Similar in many ways to Bonhoeffer's penultimate/ultimate dynamic, Kearney adopts what can be described as an onto-eschatological framework to guide the way he envisions God, the world, and eschatology. Kearney's efforts at freeing God from metaphysical trappings, as described above in section 1.1, carries naturally into this section. As Kearney conveys, "God must die to *being* so that God may be reborn as *can-being (posse)*."¹¹⁴ Kearney deconstructs a vision of God and the world as pure act, devoid of both possibility and the *nova*, in favour of emphasizing a divine possibility that is co-extensive with actuality. "Unlike 'metaphysical' thinkers who presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility," Kearney sides with thinkers who "reverse the traditional priority and point to a new category of possibility—divine possibility—*beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible."¹¹⁵ Kearney, operating in the between space, the beyond places, of philosophy and religion, seeks a God that neither is nor is not, that is neither ontological (and so surely not onto-theo-logical) nor eschatological, but onto-eschatological.¹¹⁶ This third way approaches God "neither as non-being nor as being but as the possibility-to-be."¹¹⁷

Kearney claims Nicolas of Cusa as one of the primary supporters for this view. The 15th century German mystic provides a way of thinking "in terms of a mystical category of 'actualised possibility'" as opposed to the traditional and dominant "ontological/substantialist

¹¹⁴ Richard Kearney, "Capable Man, Capable God," in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), 61. Italics in original.

¹¹⁵ Kearney, "Enabling God," 43. Italics in original; Heidegger is one of the thinkers that Kearney draws on for putting possibility higher than actuality. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), ¶ 7: "Higher than actuality stands *possibility*." Italics in original.

¹¹⁶ Kearney wants to retain some amount of ontology in his understanding of God because to have God be completely without being risks entertaining a form of alterity in which God becomes monstrous. See Richard Kearney, "The God Who May Be," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 167.

¹¹⁷ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 8.

categories.”¹¹⁸ Kearney is attracted to Cusa because he thinks Cusa is able to chart a middle way of sorts, a way that tries to think beyond traditional notions of pure act, or the binary of being and non-being. When it comes to an understanding of God and the world, Cusa wants to overcome the primacy of the totality of *esse*; however, a move to complete *posse* would have been incoherent, and would have likely entrapped Cusa in the same failings those related to pure *esse*. Informed by this likely pitfall, he proposes the novel notion of *possest*—a compound expression of *posse* and *est*¹¹⁹—as the possibility-to-be, or actualized-possibility. “[A]bsolute possibility, actuality, and the union of the two are coeternal.”¹²⁰ And further, Cusa argues that this conceptuality must necessarily be. He writes, “without possibility and actuality and the union of the two there is not, and cannot be, anything.”¹²¹ Nevertheless, as much as Kearney draws from Cusa’s creative work, he parts ways where he sees Cusa’s formulation falling back on a structural and ontological necessity.¹²² If God and all things that are contained within the Godhead necessarily have to happen, then, for Kearney, *posse* is subsumed under *esse* once again, *potentia* under *necessitas*. Kearney is drawn to the notion of the *possest* God, but in such a way that the eschatological possibilities (the *posse* of *possest*) remain as radical possibilities, and so not part of a necessary unravelling of a pre-ordained structure (*à la* Hegel or Marx, e.g.).¹²³

¹¹⁸ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 75.

¹¹⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest*, translated into English as *On Actualized-Possibility* by Jasper Hopkins, in Jasper Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 77, 93.

¹²⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest*, 69. “[A]bsolute possibility, about which we are speaking and through which those things that actually exist are able to actually exist, does not precede actuality. Nor does it succeed actuality; for how would actuality be able to exist if possibility did not exist?” (69). This tripartite structure is also how Cusa envisions the trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively (119).

¹²¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest*, 117.

¹²² Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 105. This can be seen on, e.g., pg. 81 of Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest*.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Kearney's development of an onto-eschatological understanding of God and the world—the hermeneutics of which he calls a "*poetics of the possible*"¹²⁴—is an attempt to work out Cusa's idea of a *possest* God in a manner that is open to radical possibility. He desires a conceptuality that is "before, beyond, and between"¹²⁵ being and non-being, that contains both ontology and eschatology but is not fully beholden to either. Although a one-sided emphasis on ontology and *esse* has had negative consequences throughout history, these are not negative *tout court*, but only as they are totalized and devoid of genuine and actual possibility. We can thus safely translate from Cusa to Kearney: where we read in Cusa "[f]rom *possest* the world has (1) what it is able to be, (2) what it is, and (3) the union of these two,"¹²⁶ we can see in Kearney (1) eschatology, (2) ontology, and (3) onto-eschatology. While certain critics criticize Kearney for having a God who "shrinks from concrete enfleshment in ontology,"¹²⁷ and for privileging eschatological possibility absolutely, he seems to be quite clear that the *possest* God within an onto-eschatological framework wants to become enfleshed, but that this can only happen in ways that are participatory and eschatologically open.¹²⁸

For instance, in the epilogue to *Reimagining the Sacred*, Kearney writes that God is "desperately trying to be heard and heeded, to become incarnate."¹²⁹ This incarnating of God is part of the outworking of Kearney's onto-eschatological framework, where he conceives of the 'not yet' in the 'now' occurring by way of 'micro-eschatologies' and 'epiphanies of the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 37. Italics in original.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹²⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Triologus de Possest*, 133.

¹²⁷ Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 236.

¹²⁸ Kearney, "Enabling God," 40, 45.

¹²⁹ Richard Kearney, "Epilogue: In Guise of a Response," in *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, ed. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, *Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 254.

everyday’.¹³⁰ This understanding of the world maintains a stance that aims at charting a middle-way for Kearney. He writes that “[n]o longer forced to choose between triumphal macro-eschatologies of an omnipotent God and the anonymous causality of atheistic scientism, the retrieval of the eschatological in the everyday allows us to rethink eschatology as occurring somewhere between these alternatives.”¹³¹ Kearney’s onto-eschatological middle or beyond way highlights a stance of co-possibility for humanity and divinity, one that affirms embodiment; I will discuss the latter of these next, as well as in the section on Kearney’s Christology, and I will address the former in chapter 3.

1.3 | This-Worldliness: Religionless Christianity and Anatheism

While the term ‘this-worldliness’ is strongly associated with Bonhoeffer, both Bonhoeffer and Kearney use the concept; for Bonhoeffer it figures centrally in his discussion of ‘religionless Christianity’, and Kearney emphasizes it in his notion of ‘anatheism’. While not identical ideas, ‘religionless Christianity’ and ‘anatheism’ do align in a number of key areas. Both ideas strongly affirm living in this world, as we have already seen clearly above. Since for both thinkers the ultimate and eschaton are known only in and through the penultimate and ontological, they each place a great deal of emphasis on the affirmation of ‘here-and-now’ life. Bonhoeffer and Kearney’s similar approach to present life flows quite naturally from their aforementioned views of God and the eschatological. Both agree that we should not opt for a form of religion that necessarily separates us from the world, but instead we should opt for a form that acknowledges how the sacred and the divine can only be found in the secular: “from

¹³⁰ Richard Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 3–20.

¹³¹ Richard Kearney, “Sacramental Imagination and Eschatology,” in *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now*, ed. Neal DeRoo and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 56.

now on divine being can be found nowhere else but in human form,” writes Bonhoeffer (DBWE 6:400). In a similar vein, Kearney points our attention to “the divine in the stranger who stands before us in the midst of the world. ... [T]he presence of the sacred in flesh and blood.”¹³²

In a letter to Bethge during his last year of life, Bonhoeffer writes, “[w]hat keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” (DBWE 8:362). Although these questions, in this form, come to him near the end of his life, he maintained his ‘this-worldly’ affirmation and thus an ‘anti-religious’ stance throughout his life. For example, his anti-religious views are easily seen in a sermon he delivered in Barcelona in 1928, where he points out the escapist tendencies in religion: “At the same time, the most grandiose and the most gentle of all human attempts to attain the eternal from out of the anxiety and restlessness of the heart—is religion” (DBWE 10:482). In the last year of his life, Bonhoeffer writes that he had come to understand the “profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus* but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being” (DBWE 8:485). Although his understanding of religion and ‘this-worldliness’ changed and matured over the course of his life, his work also displays a consistent strain of thought throughout.¹³³ What Bonhoeffer shows is that Christians are called to be humans as Christ was a human, to live in and affirm the world rather than try to escape from it, and in this sense to forego what is commonly understood to be included under the term ‘religion’.

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of reality also forms an integral part of his religionless Christianity: Bonhoeffer consistently affirms that God’s reality and the reality of the world,

¹³² Kearney, *Anatheism*, 166.

¹³³ A good analysis of Bonhoeffer’s thinking about religion is found in Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

though not identical, are inseparable.¹³⁴ In *Ethics*, he writes that “[i]n Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ” (DBWE 6:55). As Bonhoeffer makes clear, to experience God, and to be in God’s reality, one must at the same time be fully immersed in the world. “Worldliness does not separate one from Christ, and being Christian does not separate one from the world. Belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time completely in the world” (DBWE 6:62). Far from separating us from the world, God’s reality demands that we be fully engaged with the world and its concerns (e.g., humanity, suffering, justice, peace, reconciliation). Bonhoeffer writes that the “isolation of the person from the world of things is idealistic, not Christian” (DBWE 16:546). For Bonhoeffer, the only way to be genuinely worldly is through the word of the cross of Jesus Christ (DBWE 6:400-401; DBWE 16:550).

As I discussed in section 1.1, one of Bonhoeffer’s reasons for adopting a post-metaphysical understanding of God stems from his response to the idolatrous nature of metaphysical notions of God—that they act as a *deus ex machina* stop-gap developed out of and used for human weakness. However, for Bonhoeffer this is not the God to which the Bible witnesses. As Frits de Lange writes: “The metaphysical ‘God’ is a religious wish construction that sanctions escape from this world, but the God in whom Jesus Christ did put his trust does not estrange us from life, but—Jesus himself proves it—sharpens our eyes for the contours of

¹³⁴ I will address Bonhoeffer’s reasons for holding these two worlds together in Christ when I address his Christology. For now, though, we will look at the aspects of this stance relevant to comparing his thought to Kearney’s.

reality.”¹³⁵ While Bonhoeffer never formulates a theory of religion *per se*, and his work offers differing definitions of it,¹³⁶ it is clear that he by and large has a negative view of what he calls religion.¹³⁷ Contrasted with faith, religion for Bonhoeffer is that which separates and disengages humans from the world. Religion—with its metaphysical understanding of God and a separate heavenly realm that Christians go to upon death—leads to escapism and a disavowal of this earth.¹³⁸ “Those who say ‘God’ are not allowed simply to cross out the given world in which I live; otherwise they would be speaking not of the God who in Jesus Christ came into the world but rather of some sort of metaphysical idol” (DBWE 16:602).

Bonhoeffer refused to understand God’s reality in this manner; for him, Christians “do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity. Like Christ (‘My God ... why have you forsaken me?’), they have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop.” (DBWE 8:447-448; ellipses in original). Our relation to God is not a religious abstraction, then, but an existence for others that is defined by our participation in the whole being of Christ (i.e., life, crucifixion, and resurrection). This is a hard life that takes us into the heart of the suffering of the world—“Bonhoeffer offers no peace to those who look for God in the space of human weakness.”¹³⁹ For Bonhoeffer, this affirmation of the world, including the human effort to be a redemptive presence in the face of suffering, and take on suffering oneself if necessary, is what it means to be Christian. In a letter from July 18, 1944, Bonhoeffer writes:

¹³⁵ Frits de Lange, “Aristocratic Christendom: On Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche,” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 78.

¹³⁶ Ralf K. Wüstenberg, “Philosophical Influences on Bonhoeffer’s ‘Religionless Christianity,’” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 138–40.

¹³⁷ In another sermon delivered in Barcelona in 1928, Bonhoeffer writes that religion is what makes humans happy, and life tolerable (DBWE 10:522-523).

¹³⁸ “This escape into another life is the last place that a religionless Christianity concerns itself with, rather it is the very earthly being of Jesus that is of primary concern.” Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*, 104.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

Our lives must be ‘worldly,’ so that we can share precisely so in God’s suffering; our lives are *allowed* to be ‘worldly,’ that is, we are delivered from false religious obligations and inhibitions. Being a Christian does not mean being religious in a certain way, making oneself into something or other (a sinner, penitent, or saint) according to some method or other. Instead it means being human, not a certain type of human being, but the human being Christ creates in us. It is not a religious act that makes someone a Christian, but rather sharing in God’s suffering in the worldly life. (DBWE 8:480; italics in original)

Bonhoeffer’s religionless and this-worldly stance is, for him, quite biblical, drawing from, and evening deepening, the Old Testament’s notion that the focus of redemption lies on this side of death. “The Christian hope of resurrection is different from the mythological,” writes Bonhoeffer, “in that it refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way, and more sharply than the OT” (DBWE 8:447).¹⁴⁰ As such, for Bonhoeffer religionless Christianity is not about abandoning Christianity *tout court*, but about redeeming the essence of faith.¹⁴¹ This is why Bonhoeffer questions whether religion today, much like circumcision in the Apostle Paul’s day, is necessary; if justification happens without circumcision, cannot faith and Christianity happen without religion? (DBWE 8:365-366).

This same mentality provides the impetus to Kearney’s notion of anatheism. Like Bonhoeffer, Kearney is critical of religion’s negative aspects. He is thus seeking to overcome religion in the name of what is going on in religion, and in so doing places a high importance on

¹⁴⁰ See also his May 5, 1944 letter: “Does the question of saving one’s soul even come up in the Old Testament? Isn’t God’s righteousness and kingdom on earth the center of everything? ... What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there *for* this world—not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystic, pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.... I am thinking about how the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, rebirth, and sanctification should be interpreted in a ‘worldly’ way—in the Old Testament sense and in the sense of John 1:14” (DBWE 8:372-373; italics in original).

¹⁴¹ “Bonhoeffer did not mean that the ideas of repentance, reconciliation, salvation, as such were to be totally jettisoned. They must be recovered in such a way that the truths to which they attest can be heard without all the trappings of tradition that had domesticated them in the first place. The words and ideas may need to be deconstructed in order that the power behind them might become living realities in the world.” Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*, 158.

the necessity of faith, or a ‘wager’.¹⁴² Kearney writes that he “is not advocating some new religion,” and that we should not see anatheism as the *Aufhebung* that results when we pass through the dialectic of theism and atheism to a teleological endpoint.¹⁴³ No, anatheism is not about an absolute end—or beginning for that matter—but is about an ongoing approach to life that can never rest. The anatheist response is one that seeks to discern how a “faith beyond faith may serve new life.”¹⁴⁴ With this third option between the polar absolutes of theism and atheism—which are both adamantly religious in their own manner—Kearney aims to chart a middle way, “seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove.”¹⁴⁵

Religion for Kearney is a human creation that, although at its heart contains the virtues of faith, hope, and love, tends towards ossification and violence. Whether they are theistic or atheistic, positions that are rigid, dogmatic, and ascribe to metaphysical absolutes to escape life, attempt to do that which humans, by nature of their creatureliness, cannot do.¹⁴⁶ Kearney writes that “anatheism differs from dogmatic atheism in that it resists absolutist positions *against* the divine, just as it differs from the absolutist positions of dogmatic theism *for* the divine. It is a movement—not a state—that refuses absolute talk about the absolute, negative or positive; for it acknowledges that the absolute can never be understood *absolutely* by any single person or religion.”¹⁴⁷ Kearney’s anatheism attempts a recovery, then, of that which is at the heart of Christianity: pilgrimage and sacramental vocation.¹⁴⁸ Anatheism is the ongoing journey from a

¹⁴² See, e.g., Richard Kearney, *Strangers, God and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 211. Kearney also discusses the wager of anatheism in the first two chapters of *Anatheism: “In the Moment: The Uninvited Guest”* and “In the Wager: The Fivefold Motion”.

¹⁴³ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 6.

¹⁴⁴ Kearney, *Anatheism*, xix.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ See Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 232, where he refers to absolutism as a trap.

¹⁴⁷ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 16. Italics in original.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

religion of absolutes towards faith and art.¹⁴⁹ The kingdom is still to come, and so we are impelled to go out to the stranger; the kingdom is also here and now, and so we welcome the stranger into this experience. Anatheism seeks to “combine the pilgrim commitment to protest and prophecy with a sacramental return to epiphanies of the everyday. It endeavours to balance the journey outward with a sojourning in the sacred here and now.”¹⁵⁰

Kearney’s focus on ‘epiphanies of the everyday’ also lines up well with Bonhoeffer’s position, in that it understands a similar joining or integration of realities that are often considered separate. Overcoming the trappings of dualistic thinking, which radically splits heaven and earth, transcendent and immanent, this world and the next, Kearney affirms that, though these are indeed distinct realities, they are inseparable and only ever experienced together. “Once again, the sacred in the secular, *kairos* in *chronos*, the first in the last, the near in the far.”¹⁵¹ On Kearney’s view, the dualist thinking that has dominated philosophical and theological thinking for the past few millennia has been primarily destructive and must therefore be jettisoned. “Absolutism – however finessed by postmodernism – invariably leads to binarism,” so we must “deconstruct such binary dualisms.”¹⁵² Kearney sides with Husserl and Heidegger, among others, who see the real and the possible as equiprimordial and inseparable—they are not “diametrically or dualistically opposed.”¹⁵³ In line with this way of thinking, we cannot afford to be ‘otherworldly’ and ‘split’ in our thinking (i.e., ‘religious’, in Bonhoeffer’s sense), but must be attentive to the ‘here-and-now’ (i.e., ‘this-worldly’).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 85–86.

¹⁵¹ Richard Kearney, “Secular Epiphanies: The Anatheistic Hermeneutics of Gerard Manley Hopkins,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54, no. 4 (2015): 374.

¹⁵² Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 187–88.

¹⁵³ Richard Kearney and Felix Ó Murchadha, “A Conversation with Richard Kearney,” *Symposium* 8, no. 3 (2004): 676.

Since, for Kearney, the eschatological intersects and is inseparable from the ontological— and, indeed, this must be the case for us to understand God as ‘everything we hope for’ (Augustine)—the driving force behind our actions and thoughts must be ‘this-worldly’.¹⁵⁴ We must be attentive to the call of the Other—the stranger, the widow, the orphan—in order to meet their needs. It is through these acts, even acts as small as giving a cup of cold water, that the world is reconciled and redeemed. Kearney suggests that, because the disciples were religiously focussed on the beyond, they missed the divine in their midst. “Eschatology is realized in the presence of the alien in our midst,” argues Kearney.¹⁵⁵ This focus on hearing and heeding the stranger in our midst is the touchstone for anatheism; if we are not attentive to the concerns presented to us by the concrete other, then we are doing an injustice to what is at the heart of God and faith.

The preceding exploration of the similarities between Bonhoeffer and Kearney’s post-metaphysical understandings of God (including their similar notions of penultimate/ultimate and ontology/eschatology) allows us to glimpse their similar understandings of religion. For both thinkers, religion is that which naturally tends towards a false metaphysical understanding of the world and God, and acts as a medium to separate us from the world. While Bonhoeffer tends to be more ‘anti-religious’ than Kearney—and admits as much (DBWE 16:329)—they both put stock in a type of ‘religionless Christianity’ that, in contrast to religion as just described, highlights faith and trust, eschews absolutes as something outside of our fallible creatureliness, and so aims for something that takes place at the heart of religion but that ‘religion’ also tends to

¹⁵⁴ “And this *being present* here and now before the summons of the fragile other, requires that the *eschaton* still-to-come already intersects, however enigmatically and epiphanically, with the ontological order of being as loving possible.” Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 228. Italics in original.

¹⁵⁵ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 29.

hide.¹⁵⁶ This move, inspired by an arguably more faithful interpretation of the biblical text, leads both thinkers to emphasize a greater attentiveness to the concerns of this world, i.e. ‘this-worldliness’. In the final section of this chapter, I will address how all these beliefs lead to one of the main topics of this thesis: incarnational humanism.

1.4 | Incarnational Humanism

As we have been discussing above, both Bonhoeffer and Kearney prominently emphasize a position that we can describe as ‘incarnational humanism’. Staunchly against conceptual systems and beliefs that act as mechanisms of escape and separation from the world, their thinking places an impetus on incarnating the divine in this world, and being aware of how the divine is already being incarnated in and through others. In addition, both thinkers necessarily link such a ‘this-worldly’ and ‘bodily’ focus to humanism. Everything in the penultimate/ontological must be preserved and cared for in service of the ultimate/eschatological, because the penultimate/ontological is the very site of the coming of the ultimate/eschatological. To ignore the call of the other, to deny the rights of the needy, to cause harm directly or indirectly—all of these moves destroy not only the here-and-now, but also the more complete healing and restoration that is to-come. For, as we have seen, the one cannot be had or experienced without the other.

Although both Bonhoeffer and Kearney have an incarnational humanist push to their thought, in this section I will engage primarily with Jens Zimmermann’s book, *Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World*, as a guide for delineating the history, definitions, and outworking of this way of thinking. Zimmermann is well acquainted

¹⁵⁶ “Religionlessness does not mean a lack of faith, it points to the incognito that lies underneath the present forms.” Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*, 158. See also Kearney, *Anatheism*, 72, where he mentions “the promise of living faith curled within the shell of historical religion.”

with the thought of both Bonhoeffer and Kearney, and in this work he helps to articulate the similarities that are present in the two thinkers around the theme of incarnational humanism.

For Zimmermann, incarnational humanism is at the core of Christianity; a way of life that has been present from its inception, but has slowly waned throughout history. To properly engage with Christianity so that it can address the problems of our current age, Christians must repeat forward this ancient way of being. Zimmermann highlights four main reasons why it is desirable to recover incarnational humanism as the definitive characteristic of Christianity: 1) “incarnational humanism unites church and culture based on a common humanity without blurring the church-world boundary”¹⁵⁷; 2) “incarnational humanism stresses an interpretive Christian life in the common public sphere”¹⁵⁸ (since God revealed Godself in and through humanity and language, our knowledge of both humanity and divinity must be accessed hermeneutically through interpretation); 3) “incarnational humanism expects the Christian to apply hermeneutic reasoning in freedom and responsibility,” in such a way as to become “shaped in Christ’s character of ‘being-for-another’”¹⁵⁹; and 4) incarnational humanism “is not diluted Christian doctrine, but only the fullest Christology that brings out the humanistic nature of Christianity by reflecting God’s passion for humanity in the sense of ‘suffering,’ empathic endurance.”¹⁶⁰ Let us look more closely, then, at what Zimmermann means by humanism and incarnationalism, and thus at how ‘incarnational humanism’ can be a fitting descriptor of the philosophical and theological aspects that both Bonhoeffer and Kearney’s works share.

1.4.1 | Why Humanism?

¹⁵⁷ Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 321.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 322–23.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

Today, many people understand whatever goes by the name ‘humanism’ to be the product of rationalist, secular, and Enlightenment thought.¹⁶¹ However, this interpretation misses the whole truth with respect to this term. The secular Enlightenment and its attempted self-distancing from religion did not introduce modern notions of humanism, rather the secular Enlightenment is better understood as carrying forward ideals that emerged historically from within religious culture itself (especially Christianity). As Zimmermann points out, “[r]eligion is not the enemy of humanism, but its very source.”¹⁶² Because humanism has these religious roots, they “are worth recovering for the sake of a cultural ethos that no longer has to oppose religion to humanistic aspirations for human dignity, freedom, and rational inquiry.”¹⁶³ Although defining what is meant by ‘humanism’ is notoriously hard, due to the many ‘humanisms’ present throughout history,¹⁶⁴ it is generally accepted that humanism is a set of beliefs that affirm human welfare. Humanism concerns itself with the flourishing of humans and human communities, and as such is related to rights, ethics, dignity, living and working conditions, etc.

Looking first to Graeco-Roman influences on humanism, Zimmermann illuminates how the ancient understanding of humanism geared itself toward educational change. This ancient tradition espoused a desire to change and ennoble the human being (understood in exclusively masculine terms) so that he could become all that he was able to become. In this sense, philosophy itself was originally conceived as a ‘spiritual exercise’ aimed at helping one achieve the good life.¹⁶⁵ Of course, the philosophical mindset of the time encouraged the understanding

¹⁶¹ “[T]he secularist master narrative ... portrays the development of humanism as a natural progress from religion to atheism.” Jens Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion: A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ See *Ibid.*, 36ff for a sampling of different humanisms.

¹⁶⁵ For a full discussion of this notion of philosophy as spiritual exercise, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

that humans are called to map themselves onto the immutable form of true humanity. This version of humanism thus encouraged a process of changing and growing into this ideal human, and becoming part of a community of similar humans; however, this form of true humanity remained an abstract concept. This was the intellectual milieu in which early Christian thinkers found themselves, yet the concrete actuality of the God-Man Jesus Christ made their humanism much more robust.

1.4.2 | Why Incarnational?

The incarnation of God as Jesus Christ provided humanistic thinking with its missing element, so to speak. As Zimmermann argues, “God’s becoming human is central to a true and vital understanding of humanism,” and was central to the Church Fathers’ adaptation of Graeco-Roman thought into Christian theology.¹⁶⁶ The incarnation as the site of correlation for transcendence and immanence, mysterious though it has always been, provides the answer to overcoming problems within a Platonic worldview. How were mutable and temporal humans to access and conform to the atemporal and immutable forms?¹⁶⁷ Christ as the mediator between these worlds, the Church Fathers’ asserted, was the answer to this problem. “The incarnation is an affirmation of creation and of God’s deep involvement with it, but this in no way compromises the distinct difference between God and his creation.”¹⁶⁸ This understanding of God’s deep care for all creation, leading to incarnation, provides the true fullness of humanism.

Through God’s enfleshment in Christ, God identifies with all humanity—even in their fallen state (Rom. 8:3)—and as such this enfleshment reveals God’s deep affirmation of

¹⁶⁶ Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 60.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

humanity.¹⁶⁹ Out of his deep love for creation (“for God so loved the world,” John 3:16), God became human (Emmanuel, God with us: Matt. 1:23) in order that we may become truly human. Incarnational humanism thus affirms that a strong view of Christology and incarnationism leads to a strong humanism. Indeed, “one could argue that high Christology is precisely what makes early Christian theologians champions of social justice. ... High Christology was not a hindrance to social justice but its very foundation, because it encouraged Christians to follow in the footsteps of the human-divine philanthropist.”¹⁷⁰ The incarnation was, is, and will continue to be God’s affirmation of fleshly and embodied life, and so the root of true humanity.¹⁷¹ As we have seen, both Bonhoeffer and Kearney reflect this affirmation of here-and-now, embodied life in their work.

1.4.2.1 | Incarnational Humanism as ‘Being-for-the-Other’

The concept of ‘being-for-the-other’ follows naturally from the foregoing discussion, and it also appears in the culmination of Zimmermann’s argument in *Incarnational Humanism*. It will come as no surprise, then, that this concept features as a fundamental aspect of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christology. Regarding incarnational humanism as ‘being-for-the-other’, Zimmermann writes that as a result of the participatory understanding that arises from a strong view of the incarnation, “[t]he Christian life is thus inherently, in its very ‘being-in-Christ,’ ontologically structured as being with and being for others.”¹⁷² Starting from a view that sees Christ’s essential being as being for me (*pro-me*, as we will see in our later discussion of Bonhoeffer), incarnational humanism sees all humans as ‘being-for-the-other’. This

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹⁷¹ “The incarnation has thus greatly exalted and ennobled humanity. ... Jesus came to found a new humanity and to redeem the cosmos.” Ibid., 53.

¹⁷² Ibid., 108.

understanding arises by way of a participation in Christ: “Via participation in Christ the character of the new humanity’s originator, ‘being-for-another,’ is imparted to the new creatures in Christ.”¹⁷³ Participation in the being of Christ is facilitated in the sacraments of the Church; through Christian practices like the Eucharist and preaching, “the Christian is called to participate in Christ’s humanity, which is ontologically structured as *being for others*.”¹⁷⁴

This ‘other-oriented’ impetus of incarnational humanism lies at the heart of both Bonhoeffer and Kearney’s thought, who see this orientation as essential for understanding both who Christ is and who we are to be. Having looked at many of the similarities in the thinking of Bonhoeffer and Kearney—including a post-metaphysical understanding of God, the similarities between penultimate/ultimate and ontological/eschatological structures, religionlessness, worldliness, and incarnational humanism—I turn now to examine the differences in their thought. Through tracing their similarities, we have ended up examining incarnationalism and Christ; however, as we will see in the next chapter, Bonhoeffer and Kearney do not arrive at identical Christological positions. Our task, then, will be to investigate the differing Christologies of both figures, the reasons for their respective stances, and the implications these differing stances have for developing a contemporary Christian understanding of anthropology and eschatology.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 315.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 110. Italics in original. Cf. Ibid., 316.

CHAPTER II | CONVERGENT DIVERGENCES

In this second and middle chapter, we enter the crux of this thesis, for it is truly Bonhoeffer and Kearney's respective understandings of Christ that form the lynchpin that connects their thinking of a post-metaphysical God and 'this-worldliness', on the one hand, with a God and a Kingdom whose full realization in history is dependent upon human responsibility and responsiveness, on the other. Yet in spite of this connection, their Christological views also contribute the main points that distinguish them as thinkers. Bonhoeffer, a pastor and theologian steeped in theological thought, presents a by and large orthodox view of Christ. Although he definitely diverges from aspects of traditional views, his final formulations reveal an indebtedness to the language and thought of the Church Fathers. Kearney, on the other hand, emerges as a philosopher focussing on hermeneutics and phenomenology. Although he is a Christian, and discussions of God, religion, and even Christ feature prominently in his work, his discussion of Christ cannot be said to form a Christology in the usual understanding of the term. In this chapter, then, I will elaborate upon the key points of Bonhoeffer's clear and 'high' Christology, and then unravel and piece together what may be called Kearney's 'low' Christology, in order to show that, though they come at Christology from different angles, they arrive at somewhat similar formulations.

2.1 | Bonhoeffer's 'High' Christology

It would be redundant to say that Bonhoeffer's thought was both theological and Christological. For him, to be theological necessarily entails being Christological. Indeed, the whole of Bonhoeffer's thinking is Christological. While I touched on this point in various ways above, I will flesh it out further in this section. Although I will not explore everything that Bonhoeffer says about Christ here, the three following main sections will provide enough of an

overview to the essential aspects of his thought in this regard. In these sections I will explore 1) Bonhoeffer's focus on the 'who' and not 'how' of Christ; 2) the Church community as the Person and body of Christ; and 3) his understanding of the one 'Christ-Reality' (*Christuswirklichkeit*). In his inaugural lecture at the University of Berlin in 1930, Bonhoeffer writes that "the human being can understand himself no longer from within himself but rather from within the Christ who exists as church-community" (DBWE 10:407). Relating this to our overall theme, then, we can see that, for Bonhoeffer, any anthropology worthy of the name must be defined Christologically; therefore, humans (and so humanism) must be understood in a fully incarnational way (i.e., this understanding must take into account human incarnation, death, and resurrection in Christ).

2.1.1 | Focussing on the 'Who' and not 'How' of Christ

As we have seen above, during his time in prison Bonhoeffer continued to seek an answer to the crucial question, 'Who Christ is for us today?' This question occupied his intellectual attention throughout his entire career, and his later thought retains much of his early understanding of Christ, with its focus on the 'who' question.¹⁷⁵ This focus is clearly present, for example, in his Christology lectures from Berlin in 1933. In his preface to a translation of these lectures, Edwin Robertson writes,

Bonhoeffer is not prepared to find a category for Christ. His questions are not, 'How is it possible for Christ to be both man and God?' His question about Christ is never, 'How?', but always, 'Who?' He will not even have a disguised 'What?' or 'How?' in the form of a 'Who?' Every avenue of his thinking leads him to confront Christ and ask, 'Who are thou, Lord?' or to be confronted by Christ and hear his question, 'Whom do you say that I am?'¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Translator's preface to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 9.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

Below, I will examine primarily Bonhoeffer's lectures on Christology in order to ascertain his reasons for emphasizing the 'who' and not 'how' of Christ, as well as its implications for contemporary understandings of Christology and incarnation.

When humans approach things in a scholarly and scientific manner, the questions ultimately reduce to two: "First, what is the cause of X? Second, what is the meaning of X?" (DBWE 12:301). Bonhoeffer considers this approach to be generally problematic, especially when it relates to theological, and so Christological, questions. Because the questions in this approach are ultimately concerned with classification (i.e., fitting this X into an existing structure), the questions concerning X are reduced to questions of 'how'. This approach reduces the object in question to the immanent, human logos (DBWE 12:302). Yet for Bonhoeffer Christ is the Logos—the counter Word or counter Logos to human logos. As such, Christ as the counter Logos resists classification into the 'how' structure of the human logos. "Here it is no longer possible to fit the Word made flesh into the logos classification system. Here all that remains is the question: Who are you?" (DBWE 12:302).

Christology's main concern and focus is thus this question: Who are you? Questions that focus on the 'how' of Christ remain trapped in an immanent mindset that is endemic to fallen humanity. Bonhoeffer writes that this type of questioning shows that humanity remains "chained to [its] own authority" (DBWE 12:303), and does not honour the otherness of the other, but, in essence, reduces the other to the same. It is the 'who' question that is truly transcendent, and that "expresses the otherness of the other" (DBWE 12:303); it causes the questioner to ask about the limits of their own being. Asking the 'who' question is to live out of our true nature—"the language of the obedient Adam" (DBWE 12:303). However, this can only come about after the Christ has been revealed to us and enables us to recognize our true nature. As Bonhoeffer

explains, if we continue to ask the Christological question from the standpoint of the human logos, the question will always be ‘how’; it is only when the question is asked from the standpoint of faith that there is the possibility of asking ‘who’ (DBWE 12:307).

The focus on the ‘who’ question—which for Bonhoeffer is the only question that matters, and is a revelation to humanity—leads to the question of Christ’s being. Bonhoeffer writes that “the christological question is in its essence an ontological question” (DBWE 12:304). However, he thinks we must address this question in a careful and attentive manner. Chastising the early church for focussing on the ‘how’, and post-Enlightenment theology for focussing on the ‘that’,¹⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer insists that ontological questions avoid these immanent-logos trappings and instead focus on the revealed ‘who’ of Christ. The ‘who’ question, *the* question of Christology, is central to all scholarship and knowledge for Bonhoeffer because it frames the question of existence within the ontological question of a real person: Jesus Christ. It is through the revelation of this person as the Logos of God that humanity is judged as logos, and so able to understand itself in its true and new form (DBWE 12:304-305).

The focus on the ‘who’ question, leading to the ontology of Christ, ushers in both relational and sacramental understandings of who Christ is for us today. Bonhoeffer affirms that Jesus and God cannot exist in isolation, and therefore says that “[t]he only question that makes sense is: who is present, who is with us here and now? The answer is: the human-God Jesus. ... The starting point for Christology has to be the God-human” (DBWE 12:313). Bonhoeffer understands this God-human relationality as Christ’s ‘*pro-me*’ structure. “The being of Christ’s person is essentially relatedness to me. His being-Christ is his being-for-me” (DBWE 12:314). Careful not to fall into certain traps inherent in other Christological formulations, Bonhoeffer

¹⁷⁷ “So the christological question is in its essence an ontological question. Its purpose is to bring out the ontological structure of the *who*, without getting caught in either the Scylla of the ‘how question’ or the Charybdis of the ‘that question’ (DBWE 12:304). Italics in original.

points out that this *pro-me* is not an emanation of something from Christ, or a form that he takes; rather, it “is to be understood as the being of his very person. The very core of his person is *pro-me*” (DBWE 12:314). Pointing out the necessity of viewing Christ as *pro-me*, Bonhoeffer draws the corollary points that Christ is the firstborn of a new family, he *is* the new humanity, and as such is present as “Word, sacrament, and church-community” (DBWE 12:315). I now turn to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the presence of the person of Christ.

2.1.2 | The Church *is* the Person and Body of Christ

While Bonhoeffer does write that Christ is present to us today as Word, sacrament, and church-community, he places precedence on the church-community, as this is the form wherein the first two are known and carried out. First, Bonhoeffer describes Christ as the Word of God. Although God could have revealed Godself in other ways, this manner of thinking is irrelevant for Bonhoeffer; God *has* revealed Godself in this manner, in and through the Word, and is henceforth committed to speaking to humans via this Word (DBWE 12:315-316). This Word is not a timeless abstraction or idea that can be grasped, obtained, and manipulated by the human logos, for this would be a simple reversion to the ‘how’ thinking of fallen human nature. No, it is as a word spoken to us that the Word is present. For the Word to be present, then, there must be community, for there must be both the one speaking and the one spoken to (DBWE 12:316-317).

The Word, as truth, is, according to Bonhoeffer, “not something eternally at rest within itself” (DBWE 12:317), but is actively seeking out community based on a desire to bring others into truth. To have truth, the Word of God, or even Godself, as complete abstractions that are eternally distanced from humanity is completely alien to Bonhoeffer’s way of thinking. He is adamant that truth, the Word, “only happens in community [*Gemeinschaft*] between two persons” (DBWE 12:317). The church community, or communion of saints, is that interaction

where the Word is revealed in the act of preaching. Interestingly, Bonhoeffer does write that since Christ is not an abstract and manipulable idea, the Word is only present “where he allows himself to be heard” (DBWE 12:317). If Christ as the Word is only revealed and incarnated in certain situations and interactions, it behooves us to understand the ways in which this does and does not happen, that is, what kind of community precludes the Word taking place, and what kind of community encourages or allows it to happen. I will address this matter more fully in Chapter 3 and the Coda. For now, we turn to Christ as present in sacrament.

Bonhoeffer writes that the sacrament is wholly Word, and so it is wholly Christ (DBWE 12:318). But again, shying away from abstraction (or, actively moving away from it), he writes that “[t]he Word in the sacrament is the Word in bodily form. ... The bodily form of the sacrament exists only through the Word, but only as Word, as Word in bodily form. The sacrament, in the form of nature, engages human beings in their nature” (DBWE 12:318). This focus on the bodily presence of the Word in sacrament builds on Bonhoeffer’s notion of Christ as being-for-me, *pro-me*. Christ comes to us in a communal sense, and engages us in a way that is central to who we are: an embodied way. The sacraments are not symbols that point to Christ; rather they *are* Christ present for and with us (DBWE 12:319). In this manner, we can say that the sacrament is how Christ is embodied and present with us in community.

Here again, Bonhoeffer points out that we must ask the ‘who’ question and not the ‘how’ question when it comes to the sacrament. “Who is the Christ who is present in the sacrament? This is the way the question must be put. The God-human, the Exalted One! Jesus exists in such a way that he is the one who is present in the sacrament *existentialiter* [existentially] (DBWE 12:322). Clearly this interpretation of the sacrament pushes the limits of how we understand bodies and fleshly embodiment. Referring to Luther, Bonhoeffer writes that Christ’s resurrected

body is unbounded (DBWE 12:320). However, picking up on what I discussed above regarding the presenting and absenting of the Word, we can hold to a notion that Christ comes to be embodied in the sacraments freely, and is made present in ways, and perhaps *only* in ways, that honour him. Again, this is a matter that I will address more fully later on. We turn lastly to Christ's presence as church-community, a community of relationships, the place where Word and sacrament are known.

According to Bonhoeffer, Christ is manifested in the church-community; it "*is* the body of Christ" he writes (DBWE 12:323; italics in original). Because the Word and the sacrament only take on meaning when they are experienced communally, and truly can only be experienced at all communally, they must exist within the form of the church. In addition to being the Word and the sacrament, Christ is also embodied as the church-community, wherever and whenever it may be found. To make this point strongly, Bonhoeffer writes that "[t]he church-community, between his ascension and his second coming, is the form he takes" (DBWE 12:323). Christ is thus definitely affirmed as not some thing or idea that is abstracted from human reality, but as a person that we experience in the here and now, through community. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer adds the important qualification that "this concept of the church is to be developed not in terms of institutions but in terms of persons" (DBWE 2:105), and in *Sanctorum Communio* he discusses the church community in the form of the "collective person" (DBWE 1:77-78).

Because Bonhoeffer always emphasizes the 'who' question, his position always ends up with asserting that Christ is personally related to others via his being-*pro-me*. While this understanding of Christ has clear implications for our understanding of the importance of human relations, especially in the church-community, it also has ramifications for another realm that

Bonhoeffer comments on—the reality of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, everything is taken up into Christ’s being. I now turn to this notion of ‘Christ-Reality’.

2.1.3 | Explicating Bonhoeffer’s *Christuswirklichkeit* (‘Christ-Reality’)

Keeping Bonhoeffer’s answer to the ‘who’ question (his understanding of Christ as Word, sacrament, and Church) in mind, in this section we can safely proceed to answer a type of ‘what’ question. Where the ‘who’ question addressed who Christ is, both as we address him and he addresses us, this ‘what’ question looks at the implications of our answer to that question. What does Christ mean for humanity? What does Christ mean for all of creation? What are the implications for our understanding of reality when we view it through such a Christocentric lens? Even here we could be tempted to examine ‘how’ any of these conclusions may be reached; but, following Bonhoeffer, we will try to stick with ‘who’ Christ is and ‘what’ the implications of this are for reality. Bonhoeffer addresses this question most fully in *Ethics*, where he argues that all of reality has been taken up and holds together in Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s Christocentric focus leads him to develop his notion of the ‘Christ-reality’, or *Christuswirklichkeit*. While touching on this theme in his lectures on Christology—where he writes that Christ is the centre of human existence, nature, and history (DBWE 12:327)—he most fully develops the notion of *Christuswirklichkeit* in *Ethics*. There he describes the conviction that there is one reality in Christ as the “central message of the New Testament” (DBWE 6:66). He sees Christ’s centrality especially in passages like Colossians 1:16-20, 2:9, and Ephesians 1:23, which talk about everything being held together in Christ, who is also in everything. Touching on these themes, Bonhoeffer writes:

In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the

world are enclosed in this name. In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17). From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions. (DBWE 6:54; italics in original)

For Bonhoeffer, it is clear that Christ is more than just a person. While he continues to emphasize the person of Christ, we can see that Bonhoeffer sees that in Christ the whole of the universe receives its meaning, and that it is only through Christ that we can talk about and understand both God and the world.

In sections 1.2.1 and 1.3 of the previous chapter, we examined Bonhoeffer's discussion of the penultimate/ultimate distinction-relation and this-worldliness. As I noted in these sections, Bonhoeffer thinks we can only make complete sense of these two ideas in light of the notion of *Christuswirklichkeit*. The following excerpt from Bonhoeffer aptly describes how these concepts are all interrelated:

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ. (DBWE 6:55)

Here we can finally see how the distinction-relation of the (ultimate) reality of God and the (penultimate) reality of the world are only experienced together; the former (ultimate) sets me firmly in the latter (penultimate). The reality of God places me within this world. Bonhoeffer goes on to suggest that this relation can only be rightfully understood against the background of a more encompassing notion: the reality of Christ, the reality *that is* Christ. Bonhoeffer's main reason for positing this unity is that it directly opposes a view that sees either of these dimensions existing statically, independently, or 'in-themselves', apart from their relation to one another.

In all of these musings, we may begin to wonder: Has Bonhoeffer not shifted from the ‘who’ question to the ‘what’ question after all? Does his understanding of *Christuswirklichkeit* reduce Christ to some sort of ontic principle that defines reality? While this reading is definitely available, I think to interpret him in this way uncharitably betrays and ignores his primary aim. In Bonhoeffer’s words: “... [T]here is one place where God and the reality of the world are reconciled with each other, at which God and humanity have become one. ... This place does not lie somewhere beyond reality in the realm of ideas. It lies in the midst of history as a divine miracle. It lies in Jesus Christ the reconciler of the world” (DBWE 6:82). In another section of *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer refers to Jesus’ claim that “I am the life” (John 11:25, 14:6), averring that such a claim is directly at odds with philosophical principles and ideas. “We can only live life, but not define it. ... The question of *what* life is changes here into the answer *who* life is. Life is not a thing, an essence, or a concept, but a person—more specifically, a particular and unique person” (DBWE 6:249-250; italics in original).¹⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer’s writings repeatedly emphasize that questions about God, life, the world, reality, etc. can never be answered honestly by appealing to abstract concepts; rather, it is only by relating to the person of Christ, present to us via revelation and faith, that we come to understand anything.

To conclude this section on Bonhoeffer’s Christology, let us summarize what we have learned so far. Although the different aspects of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ are all interrelated, they all revolve around one key element: a focus on the here-and-now person of Christ. Bonhoeffer’s work displays a consistent impetus to divert attention away from abstractions and ideas, of understandings and explanations that seek to understand ‘how’, and redirect attention to the ‘who’ of Jesus Christ. All of reality holds together within the living person of Christ, and today the Church is this living person of Christ. With Bonhoeffer’s ‘high’

¹⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer adds later in the paragraph that “Jesus Christ is life itself.”

Christology (which, although unique in many ways can be considered a generally orthodox view) in hand, we turn now to an examination of the Christological views of Richard Kearney, and what we will describe (at least for now) as his ‘low’ Christology.

2.2 | Kearney’s ‘Low’ Christology

The descriptor ‘low’ has been added to Kearney’s Christology for the express reason that, simply put, he cannot be said to have a Christology *per se*, as astute critics of Kearney have made clear. Zimmermann writes that “the orthodox Christian idea of Christ’s incarnate and cosmic presence is largely absent from Kearney’s construal of the Christian faith.”¹⁷⁹ Jeffrey Bloechl claims that Kearney’s “Christology” focuses on the transfiguration, but downplays “the transubstantiation, the passion, the crucifixion, [and] the resurrection.”¹⁸⁰ While it is proper and necessary for these critics to point out that Kearney’s implicit Christology is not exactly orthodox,¹⁸¹ it is also important to note that they do not thereby write him off as a heretic. This is because, upon closer scrutiny, Kearney’s position is more orthodox than it seems on first blush; it contributes something positive to current Christological discussions and so needs to be heard.

I want to test these critiques, then, through engaging in some constructive work: drawing out and making (more) explicit the Christological elements that definitely operate in Kearney’s thought, yet which remain somewhat implicit and veiled. Kearney does not hide the fact that his

¹⁷⁹ Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 236.

¹⁸⁰ Bloechl, “Christianity and Possibility,” 135.

¹⁸¹ Immediately following the above quote, Bloechl writes that “Kearney’s Christology, let us then note, does not need Jesus to have actually died in order to fulfill its role within his eschatology.” *Ibid.* However, Kearney does seem to refute this claim. In *Strangers, God and Monsters*, Kearney writes in agreement with William Desmond against “the tendency of speculative metaphysics and dialectics to explain away the story of suffering (e.g. the story of Jesus for Hegel) as a mere ‘representation’ which must be sublated into an abstract concept which takes the harm out of it.” Richard Kearney, *Strangers, God and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 258 n 57. Echoing what we have seen in Bonhoeffer, Kearney states “[t]his is what the cosmic Christ of St Paul was originally about: discovering the transcendent in the immanent and the immanent in the transcendent.” See Richard Kearney, “Toward an Open Eucharist,” in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 149. “... Christ is the soul of the cosmos.” *Ibid.*

work is not expressly theological or confessionally orthodox.¹⁸² Instead, he only claims to allude to and use biblical stories and metaphors for their hermeneutic and phenomenological merit. Yet despite focussing on these areas of philosophy, Kearney remains a Christian, and this commitment does reflect itself in his work. As such, he does hold Christological views that inform his work, however implicit they may be. The task, then, will be to elucidate these views. Knowing that Kearney himself is sympathetic to key elements of Bonhoeffer's Christology will help us make this implicit Christology explicit.

2.2.1 | Levinasian Influences on Kearney

The influence of Levinas on continental philosophy cannot be understated. By shifting the first questions of philosophy from ontology and epistemology to ethics and responsibility, Levinas drastically alters the way in which those who follow him understand the aim of philosophy, at the same time forever changing the way that they conceive of phenomenology and intersubjectivity. Given that Levinas was one of Kearney's mentors, we can include Kearney in this group. Yet, although Kearney has incorporated many of Levinas' philosophical insights into his own work, he self-consciously distances himself from other aspects of Levinas' thought. Because a full examination of Levinas' ideas is outside the scope of this thesis, I will instead begin this section on Kearney's Christology by exploring how Kearney sifts and selects Levinas' ideas about God, incarnation, and the 'face'.¹⁸³

As a religiously-committed Jewish thinker, Levinas is keenly interested in questions of religion and God, and so his reflections on these questions are central to his thought. As a Jewish

¹⁸² Kearney, "Enabling God," 41. See also *Anatheism*, xv-xvi for Kearney's justification for not being theological.

¹⁸³ There are also quite fascinating connections between Bonhoeffer and Levinas that are outside the purview of this paper. See, e.g., Brian Gregor, "Shame and the Other: Bonhoeffer and Levinas on Human Dignity and Ethical Responsibility," in *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Michael Mawson and Adam C. Clark (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 72–85; Clark J. Elliston, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Ethical Self: Christology, Ethics, and Formation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).

thinker, there are certain features of the Christian notion of the incarnation of God in Christ that he finds unacceptable. For him, God, as the Infinite, could never be reduced to or contained within a single human being. In “A Man-God?,” a paper originally presented in 1968, Levinas discusses the notion of incarnation, while making clear that he is addressing it philosophically as someone outside the Christian tradition. He writes that *if* the incarnation were to be true, it would happen as a “still small voice,” and “manifest itself as humble, as allied with the vanquished, the poor, the persecuted.”¹⁸⁴ However, God would never become fully manifest in this way. Levinas says that “[t]o solicit a thought thinking more than it thinks, the Infinite cannot incarnate itself in a Desirable, cannot, being infinite, enclose itself in an end. It solicits through a face. A Thou is inserted between the I and the absolute He.”¹⁸⁵ God is thus presented in absence, as this ‘trace’ that occurs through the face of the other. “But the trace is not just one more word” writes Levinas, “it is the proximity of God in the countenance of my fellowman.”¹⁸⁶ As such, God is never incarnate, but is only experienced as a ‘trace’ in and through others.¹⁸⁷

Ultimately, then, Levinas shies away from the traditional Christian understanding of the incarnation. While he does talk about God as the infinite passing through the face of the other, it is only ever a trace of God, the absence of God that is present through the face of the other. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas could not be more explicit on this point: “The other person is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, the manifestation of

¹⁸⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 55.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁸⁷ For further explication of Levinas’ paper and its relation to incarnation and kenosis, see “Hermeneutics of Kenosis: The Road of Dispossession,” chapter 6 in Renée D.N. van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas’ Hermeneutics of Kenosis* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2007), 173–205; see also Lucien Richard, “The Possibility of the Incarnation according to Emmanuel Levinas,” *Studies in Religion* 17, no. 4 (1988): 391–405.

the height in which God is revealed.”¹⁸⁸ Like other Jewish thinkers of messianism and meontology (the philosophy of non-being), Levinas understands the human as the privileged site of the divine. Yet for him, this site is never “a unique site of an incarnation in history which lies beyond history. ... [The trace] is a photographic negative of incarnation, an inversion of incarnation from light to shadow.”¹⁸⁹

Despite all that Kearney finds attractive and helpful about Levinas, he does ultimately take his leave from him on a few points, and especially for our concerns, on this issue of incarnation and embodiment. While Kearney appreciates Levinas’ understanding of messianism—the idea that the divine can and does show up in and through anyone at any time—he finds Levinas too reticent when it comes to affirming the incarnate way in which the divine shows up in these acts. Here Kearney shows that, in addition to ethics, he is also centrally concerned about being/ontology. Whereas Levinas intends his notion of ‘trace’ to move beyond and away from ontology, Kearney affirms a move back to being and ontology, to the divine actually manifest in each specific thing.¹⁹⁰ In this vein, Kearney also notes that Levinas’ ethical thought leads to an asymmetry, whereas Kearney’s own notion of the *prosopon* (which I will address in section 2.2.3) leads us back to an incarnate, “face-to-face symmetry that Levinas and certain deconstructionists decry.”¹⁹¹ While Levinas’ phenomenological writings on ethics, intersubjectivity, the face, and messianism are influential for Kearney, they only go so far (which

¹⁸⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 78. For a good examination of this quote in relation to the non-incarnation of God, see Robert Gibbs, “The Disincarnation of the Word: The Trace of God in Reading Scripture,” in *The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, ed. Kevin Hart and Michael A. Signer, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), 32–51.

¹⁸⁹ Martin Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 190.

¹⁹⁰ Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” 6–7.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7. For another helpful take on symmetry versus asymmetry in reference to Levinas, see James H. Olthuis, “Face-to-Face: Ethical Asymmetry or the Symmetry of Mutuality?,” in *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality*, ed. James H. Olthuis, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), 131–58.

is ultimately positive when it comes to Kearney’s Christology). Kearney finds that Levinas’ distancing from incarnation and embodiment continues to support a dualistic separation of sacred and secular. Since Kearney understands the biblical narrative as pointing to the real presence of the divine embodying itself in humanity, and especially in the person of Christ, he looks to other sources for support of this stance.

2.2.2 | ‘Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places’

In order to understand Kearney’s insistence on the divine as incarnate, we must now turn to his exploration of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. With Hopkins’ help, Kearney is able to articulate the possibility of seeing the sacred in and through the secular, and, in particular, seeing Christ in and through the incarnate faces of each and every other. For Kearney, Hopkins’ work provides a “wonderful Scotist poetics of ‘thisness.’ The divine in the very *haecceitas* of things. The sacramentality of the everyday.”¹⁹²

Hopkins’ poetry, beyond its simple and profound elegance, points to singularities, and events even, where the sacred shines out from the secular; when that which is divine comes to be known through our direct, incarnate encounters with each and every thing. In one of his most famous poems—“As Kingfishers Catch Fire”—Hopkins highlights these themes quite well:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

¹⁹² Richard Kearney and Simon Critchley, “What’s God? ‘A Shout in the Street,’” in *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, ed. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 163.

Í say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
 Chríst. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.¹⁹³

Lines like “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same” and “*What I do is me,*” show the *haecceitas* or ‘thisness’ of singular and individuated things. There is a ‘me-ness’ that only I can do or be; though what I do may look similar to what others do, it represents a wholly singular occurrence. Moreover, Hopkins goes on to say that it is through these singularities that we come to know the divine. We are in God’s eyes Christ, for “Christ plays in ten thousand places.” Christ, as the divine, lives through ‘secular’ things, is known in each and every individuated being.

Hopkins’ poem “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection” also deals with the notion that Christ is revealed in the *haecceitas* of distinct creaturely entities. At the end of the poem, Hopkins writes: “I am all at once what Christ is,/since he was what I am, and/This Jack, joke, poor potsherd,/patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,/Is immortal diamond.”¹⁹⁴ Hopkins here poetically asserts the notion that the everyday things, the nobodies, jokes, and potsherds, are the very sites through which Christ lives. This notion of the sacred in the secular harkens back to images of Matthew 25, the idea that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Christopher Devlin, a Jesuit who edited *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, summarizes Hopkins’ understanding of the ‘sacred in the secular’ quite well: it is, he says, as if “a man said: That is Christ playing at me and me playing at Christ, only that it is not play but truth; That is

¹⁹³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1967), 90. Italics in original.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

Christ *being me* and me being Christ.”¹⁹⁵ Throughout these and other poems, we can see the Christological way that Hopkins stresses the singularity of all things by describing these singularities as the very presence of Christ, the sacred incarnated.

Kearney’s understanding of Christ is indebted to Hopkins’ poetry. For Kearney, Christ and the Divine can and do show up, but there is no restriction *per se* on where or as whom the divine will appear. I add the caveat *per se* for this reason: Kearney seems to imply that Christ can show up in a plurality of people (‘ten thousand places’), and so in this sense is not restricted to one particular person; however, he does seem to indicate a preference for the sort of person Christ will show up as: the widow, the orphan, the alien, etc. Is this just a form of Docetism though? As looked at briefly in the introduction, Docetism is a heterodox Christological position in which Christ only ‘seems’ to be human; where Christ is fully divine and not also of human flesh (notwithstanding illusory appearances to the contrary). Hopkins’ description of Christ’s playing in and through others, but not *being* them, may portray a docetic understanding of Christ.

But if we look at Hopkins’ two poems in the light of Devlin’s comments, we see that Hopkins provides a stronger identification of Christ with incarnated reality: when looking at me, God sees Christ; or, Christ is being me and I am being Christ. If this is the sense of incarnation that Hopkins intends to convey, and thus the view that Kearney appropriates, then it would seem that we need not entertain any worries of Docetism. Humanity is not just a site wherein Christ or the divine flashes in and out (as per Levinas’ trace), but rather humans genuinely incarnate Christ in their selves as bodies. Kearney writes: “As the Word becomes flesh in humanity, humans become God through the same process of mutual embodiment, echoing the patristic teaching that

¹⁹⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1959), 341. Italics in original.

God became man so that man could become God. This understanding likewise provides a powerful rebuttal of docetism and other Gnostic attempts to deny the full carnality of Christ.”¹⁹⁶

As we have seen, Kearney takes issue with certain key points in Levinas, especially the depiction of the divine trace as an immaterial absence, a notion that, when taken into Christology, can open the door to a docetic denial of Christ’s simultaneous divinity and carnality. Instead of Levinas’ trace, Kearney prefers the early Christian notion of the *prosopon*. As I explain in the next section, for Kearney “*Prosopon* is not a mask (*prosopeion*). It is not a mere pretext for God, some faint trace of transcendence. It is the divine itself manifest in the ‘least of these’.”¹⁹⁷ In favouring the *prosopon* over the trace, Kearney opts for real manifestation and enfleshment of the divine in the ‘least of these’ over mere shadows and traces. I now turn, then, to a more complete examination of Kearney’s understanding and use of the theological term *prosopon*.

2.2.3 | Christ as the *Prosopon Par Excellence*

An exploration of Kearney’s reasons for adopting the notion of ‘*prosopon*’ provides an effective way to make his implicit Christology more explicit. Kearney describes the idea of *prosopon* in *The God Who May Be* as a way to understand intersubjectivity and the chiasmic crossing over of human and divine. As he sees it, the idea of *prosopon* “signals the otherness of the other in and through the flesh-and-blood person here before me. Trans-cendence in and through, but not reducible to, immanence. *Prosopon* is the face of the other who urgently solicits me, bidding me answer in each concrete situation, ‘here I am’.”¹⁹⁸ We here see that Kearney’s

¹⁹⁶ Kearney, “Toward an Open Eucharist,” 146.

¹⁹⁷ Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” 7.

¹⁹⁸ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 18.

use of this idea draws from certain understandings we already explored in the previous chapter: a focus on ‘this-worldliness’, embodiment, and the location of the sacred in the secular.

Kearney makes clear that the *prosopon* is not something that we have, but something that we are. Although there are close connections between *prosopon* and *persona*, and so to the idea of theatrical masks, Kearney is clear that he is using the term *prosopon* in a “strictly phenomenological and ethical sense.”¹⁹⁹ Since, according to Kearney’s use of the term, we ‘are’ and do not ‘have’ a *prosopon*, we can conceive of humans in a new light. As he explains, “to be a *prosopon* is to be-a-face-toward-a-face, to be proximate to the face of the other.”²⁰⁰ The ethical and intersubjective understanding is immediately clear: I am only an I when I am faced by and in relation with an other. “[T]he *prosopon-persona* may be said to be radically intersubjective, invariably bound up in some ethical vis-à-vis or face-to-face.”²⁰¹ For Kearney, this captures the thrust of Judaeo-Christian ethics, and seemingly also his Christology.

Kearney writes that the idea of *prosopon* “perfectly captures that double sense of someone as both proximate to me in the immediacy of connection and yet somehow ineluctably distant, at once incarnate and otherwise, inscribing the trace of an irreducible alterity in and through the face before me.”²⁰² While the duality which is present within the concept of *prosopon* is relevant for understanding Kearney’s Christology, we must ask whether this duality leads to a dualism, and so to the trappings of Christological formulations we have already discussed (and have seen Bonhoeffer reject). In reference to the *persona-prosopon*, Kearney offers the following: “Not the other person as divine, mind you—that would be idolatry—but the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

divine in and through that person. The divine as trace, icon, visage, passage.”²⁰³ The question becomes, then, what is this passing through, this trace? As we have discussed, Kearney wants to be post-Levinasian in certain ways, and points this out shortly after this quote, as well as in later works.²⁰⁴ So we cannot read this ‘trace’ and ‘passage’ as a version of Docetism. To better understand this, we must turn to Kearney’s actual discussions of the historical Jesus Christ.

In the chapter ‘Transfiguring God’ in *The God Who May Be*, Kearney looks at different accounts of Christ’s incarnation and transfiguration (both pre- and post-paschal). He starts by looking at the transfiguration of Christ (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36), writing that the event “is marked not by Jesus abandoning his original person to become *someone* else, but by a change of ‘figure’ which allows his divine *person* to shine forth—in singular fashion—through his flesh-and-blood embodiedness.”²⁰⁵ In this event, Christ comes fully into his own; his being is fully “‘othered’ as Christ” and thereby “becomes the *prosopon par excellence*.”²⁰⁶ Kearney’s commentary brings to the fore an event in which Jesus is altered, but also remains the same. That is, while Jesus changed recognizably, his disciples still recognized him as Jesus. Pointing out the Greek text for the Lucan version of this story, Kearney explains that it is Jesus’ face (*prosopon*) that is ‘othered’ (*heteron*) in this event.²⁰⁷

If, for Kearney, the notion of the *prosopon* perfectly elucidates the simultaneity of transcendence and immanence, of radical alterity in the very flesh-and-blood here-and-now face of the other before me, and if Jesus is indeed the *prosopon par excellence*, then it would seem that Kearney in fact understands Christ in a completely singular way. For Kearney, Christ is not

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ See especially Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” 6–7.

²⁰⁵ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 39. Italics in original.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 40. Italics in original.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. Kearney specifically refers to the Lucan account, as Matthew’s account uses face, but not othered, and Mark’s account uses neither.

just *an* instance of the divine manifested in and through the human, but *the* perfection of this manifestation. Through this ‘othering’ event (the transfiguration), Christ is affirmed as being the fully realized incarnation of God. Commenting on Kearney’s use of *prosopon*, Manoussakis (also drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar) points out that while we only ‘see’ God in and through Christ (John 14:5-7), in this very act of seeing we are “see[ing] someone *like* me, a mere human being.”²⁰⁸ If Christ, as the second Adam, is in us to the same extent that Adam, as the first man, is in us, then it is possible for me to encounter Christ through every other, and for every other to encounter Christ through me. As Manoussakis writes, “the face of God cannot be anything else but this one: Christ’s. However, by entering into this face-to-face relationship with Christ, every face reflects His face.”²⁰⁹ It would seem, then, that with the notion of *prosopon* Kearney understands Christ in a singular and specific role, such that he is the mediator between every other, and between every other and God. Yet for Kearney, attributing such a singular role to Jesus Christ does not lead to exclusivity. I now turn to this theme, and the final aspect of Kearney’s Christology.

2.2.4 | Radical Plurality and Radical Kenosis

One of the guiding themes in Kearney’s work is hospitality, or openness to the stranger. While this theme occurs throughout most of his work, it figures most notably in both *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* and *Anatheism*. In line with his emphasis on hospitality, Kearney adheres to a pluralistic stance when it comes to the beliefs and cultures of others, especially in the realm of religion and divinity. He writes that “[i]f divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in

²⁰⁸ John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “Prosopon and Icon: Two Premodern Ways of Thinking God,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 288. Italics in original.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.”²¹⁰ While Kearney admits he is no expert on other religious traditions, his work does incorporate those insights he has learned from other religious traditions and which he finds congenial. He justifies such incorporation by explaining that “to do less would be to ignore the essentially ‘interreligious’ nature of anatheism. To ignore strange Gods is ... to neglect the basic experience of God as Stranger.”²¹¹ Kearney’s Christology is necessarily tied, then, to the understanding that God has shown up, and continues to show up, in different people, religions, and cultures.

For Kearney, the importance of remaining hospitable to God as a stranger supplies the rationale for moving away from a traditionally orthodox Christology, and also informs his understanding of the manifestation of the divine in and through people of various religions and cultures. In addition to being inclusive of others, his view also ensures that we do not box God into idolatrous concepts. He writes:

Because the eschatological One cannot be named absolutely in any one way, it can be named only in multiple ways. The One in the midst of the many is not at the expense of the many. It is, rather, the path that leads to other paths. A refusal of both absolutism (one without many) and relativism (many without one). So that if Christ, for example, famously announces that it is ‘only’ through him that one can get to the Father, we might interpret this ‘only’ as excluding nothing but exclusiveness itself.²¹²

In this passage, Kearney makes salient his view that no human conception can fully comprehend or exhaustively name God; God is free to show up in many and diverse places, through a variety of peoples, cultures, and religions. Kearney’s intent in the final sentence of this passage seems to convey the very notion that Christ opens us up to plurality, rather than closes us down to it.

When he writes that “[t]he One in the midst of the many is not at the expense of the many,” we may also read that ‘the One in the midst of the many is not at the expense of the One’. As

²¹⁰ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, *Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), xiv.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹² Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” 9.

Kearney opines elsewhere, commenting on the thoughts of Abhishiktananda (formerly the Benedictine monk Henri le Saux):

The singularity of Christ becomes the very basis of his universality. ... In other words, the point of most ostensible exclusivity (Christ is the only one) becomes in truth the most intimate point of inclusivity (Christ is each ‘only one,’ that is everyone I welcome in their singular uniqueness and ‘thisness’). It is not stretching things, I think, to hear echoes here of Christ’s identification with each stranger (*hospes*) in Matthew 25. The singular and universal in one.²¹³

Tying the singularity and universality of Christ together with the Scotist/Hopkinsesque notion of *haecceitas*, Kearney affirms that the singularity of Christ does not foster exclusivity, but opens us up to the fullest inclusivity possible.

Another key factor in Kearney’s Christology, and one that has direct correlation to pluralism, is that of *kenosis*. While *kenosis*—the idea of God’s self-emptying into Christ—is a prominent theme in orthodox Christology, it takes on a slightly different hue within Kearney’s thought. His use of the idea is indelibly tied to his notion of God as *posse*, and so to notions of loving-possibilizing and ongoing self-emptying and incarnating. He writes that God’s preference for powerlessness “expresses itself as self-emptying, *kenosis*, letting go. 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.”²¹⁴ While I will address this notion of ‘co-accomplishment’ in the next chapter, we can see that, for Kearney, God’s *kenosis* is not a one-time event, but is ongoing. This action also opens God up to suffering, and to the possibility that we will not honour God or the stranger. On these points, B. Keith Putt writes that “in doing his

²¹³ Kearney, “Toward an Open Eucharist,” 143.

²¹⁴ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 108. Italics in original.

imaginative theology of the Christomorphic, kenotic God Who May Be, Kearney does a theopassionism, a postmodern theology of the suffering God.”²¹⁵

That *kenosis* and incarnation are ongoing does not deny the specificity and importance of Christ for Kearney, but affirms his view that God’s loving-possibilizing desire cannot be contained in one event. On this notion of ongoing incarnation, Kearney writes:

It is then the dis-possessed self, emptied of ego and naked as a child, that becomes a ‘lodging’ for the ‘in-dwelling’ of God. Or to put it another way, it is in the renunciation of my will-power, and even in my refusal to rest satisfied with my ownmost totality as a being-toward-death, that I open myself to the infinite empowering-possibilizing of God. Abandoning ego, I allow the infinite to beget itself in my persona.²¹⁶

Two things must be said here with respect to the biblical warrant that Kearney may have for reading the incarnation and *kenosis* together. First, the Bible is clear that the fullness of God dwells in Christ (Col. 1:19), and understands this as a novel occurrence. If one accepts the biblical understanding of Christ that I addressed in the previous section on Bonhoeffer—concerning the redeeming power of Christ and the idea that all things hold together in him—one will accord a special place to Christ. For all our attempts to make Kearney’s Christology more explicit, there is no overcoming the fact that Kearney does not wade into exactly the same pond here with Bonhoeffer. Second, and in spite of this, Kearney can still claim biblical grounding for the idea of an ongoing incarnational *kenosis*, for his conception of a desiring God that wants to possibilize us out of love, and to continually move in and through us. While the Bible understands Christ as the incarnation of God, it also describes him as the first fruits of many (1 Cor. 15:23) and the firstborn of many brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:29). Read in this way, the incarnation starts with Christ, but does not stop with Christ. Read together, then, Christ becomes the first incarnation—in whom God fully dwelled—that makes possible all further incarnations

²¹⁵ B. Keith Putt, “Imagination, Kenosis, and Repetition: Richard Kearney’s Theopoetics of the Possible God,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 60, no. 4 (2004): 974.

²¹⁶ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 108.

of God's loving-possibilizing. Therefore, while Kearney's ideas of ongoing *kenosis* and incarnation are helpful, and can even claim biblical warrant, his position may still fail to fully recognize the uniqueness of Christ's revelation that the Bible tells us makes this ongoing incarnation and *kenosis* possible.

Before moving on from this chapter on comparative Christologies, and to the last chapter examining ways of mediating the differences between Bonhoeffer and Kearney, I will make one brief note on the relevance of Christ to pluralism in Bonhoeffer. In a 1933 memorandum on the 'Jewish-Christian question', Bonhoeffer writes that "[t]he exclusion of the Jewish Christian from our communion of worship would mean: The excluding Church is erecting a racial law as a prerequisite of a Christian communion. But in doing so, it loses Christ himself, who is the goal of even this human, purely temporal law. The Christian Church cannot deny to any Christian brother the Christian communion which he seeks" (DBWE 12:372). In reference to this topic, Brandy Daniels says that "since the transcendent Christ mediates our relationships, confronting us through one another and thus precluding us from determining who that other might be, to exclude Jewish Christians from worship means the exclusion of Christ himself."²¹⁷ Daniels is quick to point out the criticisms of Bonhoeffer's stance here, that he is writing only of Jewish *Christians*; however, if Bonhoeffer's stance is lived to its fullest, such that we are precluded from determining for ourselves a judgement upon the other, then the strongly Christological Christian community must necessarily accept others. That is, a strong Christology must be strongly pluralistic, relying on the mediation of Christ, and accepting the idea that to deny others is to deny Christ. Reading this back into Kearney, his Christology need not be seen as 'low'

²¹⁷ Brandy Daniels, "Ethics beyond Biopower: Bonhoeffer, Foucault, and the Problem of Race," in *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 160.

simply because it is pluralistic; rather, to be fully pluralistic, one must see every other as Christ—a 'high' Christology in which 'Christ plays in ten thousand places'.

CHAPTER III | MEDIATING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BONHOEFFER AND KEARNEY

In this final chapter, I will seek to mediate to a degree the differences that remain between Bonhoeffer and Kearney. In the last chapter, we examined a key difference in their thought: their differing Christologies. Bonhoeffer, from a background heavily steeped in the theological tradition, has Christological views that can be considered more or less orthodox. Kearney, operating from within a different, much more philosophical context, evinces a Christology that in many ways cannot be considered orthodox. Kearney's somewhat heterodox views, however, still provide novel, interesting, and helpful ways to conceive of Christ and the incarnation of the divine. In spite of these differences, we have also seen that these thinkers agree in many areas. As we saw in the first chapter, Bonhoeffer and Kearney adhere to similar views when it comes to a post-metaphysical understanding of God, religionless Christianity and 'this-worldliness', and their comparable notions of onto-eschatology (Kearney) and penultimate/ultimate (Bonhoeffer). Although we must not allow these similarities to explain away their differences, in this final chapter I will, keeping their similarities in mind, aim to draw their remaining differences together in a loose synthesis. I will do so by juxtaposing Bonhoeffer's maxim '*etsi deus non daretur*' ('as if God did not exist') with Kearney's 'The God-Who-May-Be'. In the Coda to this thesis, I will conclude with an incarnational humanism that expresses the deep connection between these two otherwise very different thinker, and the praxis of incarnating the God they both adhere to.

3.1 | *Etsi Deus Non Daretur* as 'The God Who May Be'

The most obvious problem that we run into when comparing these two thinkers around these comparable ideas is how to relate 'possibility' and 'actuality'. As we saw in the discussion

in Chapter 1 about post-metaphysical understandings of God, Kearney wagers on a “God [who] neither is nor is not but may be.”²¹⁸ That is, Kearney posits a God of *posse* or *possest*; a God that is not traditionally understood as pure act or actuality, but rather a God that is the possibility to be. Although Bonhoeffer also pushes for understandings of God that are post-metaphysical, as we saw in section 2.1.3 he also understands all of reality as the one ‘Christ-reality’ (*Christuswirklichkeit*). However, while Bonhoeffer’s English translators always translate *wirklichkeit* as ‘reality’, this German word can also be translated as ‘actuality’. So, one can also read Bonhoeffer’s one ‘Christ-reality’ as the one ‘Christ-actuality’. Obviously trying to mediate the distance between actuality and possibility is nigh impossible, but it seems that Bonhoeffer distinguishes between these two. So, while I stick with defining *wirklichkeit* as reality, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer makes a distinction between this and actuality, a point that I will address later. However, there is also another avenue we can take that may prove more promising: to reinterpret Bonhoeffer’s infamous maxim ‘*etsi deus non daretur*’. While this phrase tends to be translated as ‘even if there were no God’, or ‘as if God did not exist’, I suggest that a more apt reading might be, ‘as if God were not given’, or ‘as if God were not a given’. This translation, while perhaps not Bonhoeffer’s original aim, may provide a way for contemporary readers to understand his overall thought better. Since this will be the trickier and more exploratory exercise in this chapter, I will begin by examining that which is clearer, Kearney’s ‘God-who-may-be’.

3.1.1 | If We Say No to the Kingdom, the Kingdom Will Not Come

As we saw in Chapter 1, Kearney seeks to reconceive the terms under which we understand and talk about God. As opposed to “metaphysical” thinkers “who presuppose an

²¹⁸ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 1.

ontological priority of actuality over possibility,” Kearney sides with “poetical” thinkers who “reverse the traditional priority and point to a new category of possibility—divine possibility—*beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible.”²¹⁹ Kearney, exploring the between space, the beyond places, of philosophy and religion, seeks a God that neither is nor is not, but who may be (i.e., a God who is onto-eschatological).²²⁰ This third way approaches God “neither as non-being nor as being but as the possibility-to-be.”²²¹ This possibilizing middle way is where we “encounter the nuptial nexus where divine and human desires overlap.”²²² The middle way, or beyond way, that Kearney proposes highlights a stance of co-possibility for humanity and divinity.

Whereas traditional (i.e., ontotheological) understandings of God understand God as pure actuality, as *esse* and “the actuality of being as fait accompli”²²³ (a view that sees possibility as incompatible with God), Kearney proposes quite the opposite. According to him, “it is divinity’s very potentiality-to-be that is the most divine thing about it.”²²⁴ Yet if God is (a) possibility, or at least if God’s nature includes possibility (the idea behind *possest*), that is, if God is a ‘may-be’ (*peut-être*), then upon what, or whom, is God contingent in order to be? For Kearney, the answer is creation, specifically humans. The very creatures that God has created and covenants with are the very creatures upon whom God depends in order to be in this world.²²⁵

Undertaking a fascinating exegesis of Exodus, Kearney asks us to consider a God of potentiality and possibility as opposed to a God who is fixed and static. He looks for a God of

²¹⁹ Kearney, “Enabling God,” 43. Italics in original.

²²⁰ Kearney wants to retain some amount of ontology in his understanding of God, as to have a complete God without being is to risk such alterity that God becomes monstrous. See Kearney, “The God Who May Be,” 2001, 167.

²²¹ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 8.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 4.

²²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²²⁵ Although I believe that God covenants and reveals Godself with and through all of creation, God has granted a special responsibility to humans to facilitate the fullness of God’s glory in becoming all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

divine *posse* as opposed to mere *esse*. Through his exegesis of Exodus 3:14, Kearney aims to retrieve a view of God “not as the I-am-who-am of abstract and subsistent being (as scholastic theologians assumed) but as the one who-will-be,” in an “eschatological, rather than purely ontological perspective.”²²⁶ While this interpretation of God as eschatological possibility definitely opens things up, how does Kearney think that this possibility becomes actual? He suggests, again in response to the mysterious name of God in Exodus, that God’s actualization (or full actualization in this world, i.e., God’s becoming all in all) depends on human action: “God is saying something like this: I will show up as promised, but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call ‘Where are you?’ with the response ‘Here I am.’”²²⁷ Here Kearney draws our attention to two items that are *sine qua non* for his project: First, that God is a call, a promise, and has promised to show up and be God and to fulfill that promise. Second, that God will fulfill this promise, and only *can* fulfill this promise, when we respond to the call. The message from this seems clear: God promises that God *will* be, but unless and until we respond to the call, God *is* not (i.e., God remains a possibility that never fully enters actuality).²²⁸

Looking to the Bible, especially the gospels’ telling of incarnational acts of justice and compassion, Kearney shows that the God of justice, of love, of promise, shows up as the stranger to whom we are called to respond. This God is “one who cannot come or come back, who cannot be conceived or become incarnate, until we knock, until we open the door, until we give the cup of cold water, until we share the bread, until we cry, ‘I am here. Where are you? Who are you?

²²⁶ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 3–4.

²²⁷ Kearney, “Enabling God,” 43. Italics in original.

²²⁸ Cf. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 4: “God will be God at the eschaton. That is what is promised. But precisely because this promise is just that, a *promise*, and not an already accomplished possession, there is a free space gaping at the very core of divinity: the space of the possible.” (Italics in original.)

Why don't you come?"²²⁹ In *Anatheism*, Kearney looks more fully at the praxis this understanding of divinity implies, of the tangible and real ways in which humans bring the Divine into being. He suggests that this coming-to-be occurs through the stranger, through hospitality shown to the other, for, according to Kearney, God comes to us in the guise of a stranger as a "transcendent Guest."²³⁰ The sacred only comes in and through the secular, as we have discussed already.²³¹

Applying Walter Benjamin's eighteenth and final thesis on the philosophy of history to the biblical figure of the stranger, Kearney states that "every moment is a portal through which this stranger may enter."²³² As divine stranger, the messiah can enter through anyone, and this is what Jesus describes to his followers in Matthew 25. What we do for the least of these, what we do for the widow, the imprisoned, the naked, the hungry, what we do for the stranger, we do to and for the divine. "Are we not all called to be chosen ones?" Kearney asks. "If you do it to the least of these you do it to me. *For Christ plays in ten thousand places ... To the Father through the features of men's faces.*"²³³ God appears in the face of everyone, as Levinas affirms;²³⁴ we can respond with love—a hospitable response—or we can reject the stranger—a hostile response. Following Emile Benveniste, Kearney notices that the root Latin terms for hostility and hospitality, *hostis* and *hospes*, give our common approach to the figure of the stranger an

²²⁹ Kearney, "Enabling God," 40. Kearney here seems to echo a 1928 Bonhoeffer sermon almost exactly: "And today his soft voice answers us: Behold, I stand at the door, and knock. And do we not quake at this word? The spirit we have summoned, the spirit of the redemption of the world, is not far; indeed, he is standing at the door, knocking, has already been standing there a long time, waiting for the door to be opened. The Lord is coming, God is coming, coming to us. Admittedly it is a soft voice we hear speaking there, and few people hear it" (DBWE 10:543).

²³⁰ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 15.

²³¹ Richard Kearney, "God After God: An Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God," in *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, ed. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, *Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 18.

²³² Kearney, *Anatheism*, 16; cf. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 396–97.

²³³ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 46. Italics and ellipses in original. The end of the quote is from the poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

²³⁴ "The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face." Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

ambiguous colouring; we experience the stranger simultaneously as both potential guest and enemy.²³⁵ Which interpretation we choose, in an atheistic moment of undecidability, leads to either good or ill, heaven or hell. If, and only if, we say yes to the stranger's call, if we are hospitable rather than hostile, will the Kingdom come. However, the answer to this call must never be done blindly, as Derrida calls for with deconstructive non-judgmentalism. Kearney insists that we must engage in a form of diacritical hermeneutics when it comes to the stranger, so that, in wisdom, we can differentiate "*ethically* between good and evil aliens."²³⁶

For Kearney, God's full realization, and thus the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven come to earth, can only come about in and through human responsiveness. As we have already touched on, while Kearney does read God in Exodus 3:14 as saying that God *will* show up as promised, he maintains that this can only occur when we answer the call. God is then unconditioned giving, and we provide the conditional response. "For if God's loving is indeed unconditional," writes Kearney, "the realization of that loving *posse* in this world is conditional upon our response. If we are waiting for God, God is waiting for us. Waiting for us to say 'yes,' to hear the call and to act, to bear witness, to answer the *posse* with *esse*, to make the word flesh—even in the darkest moments."²³⁷ However, it must be said that, at best, we humans respond positively to this divine call only infrequently. Our failure to do so consistently adversely affects God's ability to be, and, says Kearney, to the extent that we fail to answer the knock at the door, the Kingdom will not come—"God can be God only if we enable this to happen."²³⁸

²³⁵ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 38. See also John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), 109–13.

²³⁶ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 70. Italics in original.

²³⁷ Kearney, "Enabling God," 45.

²³⁸ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 2. See also John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2015), 119.

3.1.2 | Bonhoeffer on Living Before God and With God, Without God

Turning from Kearney's provocative work on 'the God who may be', I now look to Bonhoeffer in order to explore the ways in which his non-metaphysical understanding of God might align with Kearney's position. In this section, I venture into the deepest waters of this thesis. While my attempt in the last chapter to draw out Kearney's implicit Christology was a somewhat constructive exercise, it was still an attempt to pull together the explicit ideas about Christ that one in fact finds in his work. When it comes to Bonhoeffer, however, I will attempt to offer a deconstructive reading that will truly take us into uncharted territory. My deconstructive exercise will centre on his infamous maxim '*etsi deus non daretur*'. While this phrase in Bonhoeffer's works is usually rendered 'as if there were no God', or something similar, I will be reading this phrase against the grain—but still within interpretative boundaries that the original Latin allows—in order to uncover something deeper that I judge to be going on in Bonhoeffer's thinking. By reading against the standard interpretation of the maxim, and in the line with the subjunctive mood of the Latin, I will show how this maxim can describe a possible God, and not just the absence of God. This interpretation will then allow me more easily to align Bonhoeffer's understanding of God with Kearney's understanding of 'the God who may be'. The secondary literature on Bonhoeffer I have surveyed does not appear to consider the possibility of such a deconstructive reading, and, indeed, such a reading even *seems* to run contrary to the whole direction of Bonhoeffer's thought (especially due to the importance of Bonhoeffer's notion of *Christuswirklichkeit*). For these reasons, I bid the reader to approach the ensuing discussion with an open mind, and read what follows as offering only tenuous yet potentially promising insights that could make a helpful contribution to contemporary Christological discussions.

As mentioned above, part of what makes this deconstructive reading tenuous is Bonhoeffer's understanding of the one 'Christ-reality'. Knowing that *wirklichkeit* can also be translated as 'actuality', which evokes a sense of completion or *fait accompli*, it seems that it will be difficult to interpret Bonhoeffer in a way that resonates with Kearney's understanding of God as *posse, possesit*, or some other similar notion. In spite of this difficulty, I suggest that it is still possible to read Bonhoeffer along these lines. In order to demonstrate this possibility, I will first examine Bonhoeffer's maxim '*etsi deus non daretur*', found in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and then proceed to explore relevant material from his *Ethics*. As we have already seen, Bonhoeffer's thought becomes increasingly radical as his time in prison progresses. At this time he introduces such themes as the need for God to suffer, 'religionless Christianity', 'worldliness', and the need to overcome metaphysical or 'God of the gaps' notions of God.

On July 16, 1944, a little over halfway through his time in prison, Bonhoeffer penned a letter to his close friend and confidante Eberhard Bethge that contains the now infamous phrase, '*etsi deus non daretur*'. Elaborating on his ideas of 'religionless Christianity' and a "nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts" (DBWE 8:475), Bonhoeffer attributes an early use of the phrase to Hugo Grotius. "Grotius," writes Bonhoeffer, "very differently from Machiavelli in content, but following the same trend toward the autonomy of human society, sets up his natural law as an international law, which is valid *etsi deus non daretur*, 'as if there were no God'" (DBWE 8:476). Somewhat later in the letter, he continues:

[W]e cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world—'*etsi deus non daretur*.' And this is precisely what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. Thus our coming of age leads us to a truer recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God. The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34!). The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents

to be pushed out of the world onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us. (DBWE 8:478-479)

While this oft-quoted passage contains far more than I can comment on here, in what follows I will attempt to distill those elements that support my intuition that the understanding of God that Bonhoeffer here introduces aligns rather well with Kearney's 'God who may be'.

As we can see in the above passage, Bonhoeffer has not given up on God *tout court*. He only gives up on certain conceptions of God. This assessment agrees with my discussion in section 1.1, where I explored Bonhoeffer's attempt to overcome metaphysical understandings of God, especially those created from human weaknesses to act as stop-gaps (where God is a *deus ex machina*). Bonhoeffer's attempt to get rid of these metaphysical understandings is almost a form of protest atheism: we are to give up on a certain (wrong) sense or conception of God in service of, or in order that we may live in relation with, the true God. Taken this way, then, we are to 'live without God', as if *this* God did not exist. However, we are called to live before and with another God. This God, I argue, can be found 'hidden' within the phrase '*etsi deus non daretur*'.

In Bonhoeffer's reference to Grotius above, we see the phrase translated as: 'as if there were no God'. Yet a slightly altered translation is also possible; in line with my deconstructive intent in this section, I suggest that we reinterpret the phrase to read: 'as if God were not (a) given'.²³⁹ This reinterpretation hinges upon a particular interpretation of the Latin '*daretur*'.

'*Daretur*' is the passive, imperfect, and subjunctive form of the Latin verb '*do*', which means to give, render, offer, etc. (from which we receive the English words 'donor' and 'donation'). The

²³⁹ This is the translation that McGrath, e.g., gives the phrase. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th edition (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 258. While this translation is not new, to the best of my knowledge my use of this translation to relate the work of Bonhoeffer and Kearney is novel. I thank ICS Senior Member Bob Sweetman and Junior Member Julia de Boer for their help with parsing the different possible translations of the original Latin.

mood of this verb is also relevant to my reinterpretation of the phrase. In Latin, the mood is the manner or way in which a “verbal action or state of being” is expressed.²⁴⁰ The subjunctive mood (the mood of ‘*daretur*’) is the mood of “potential, tentative, hypothetical, ideal, or even unreal action.”²⁴¹ It is the mood that in Latin describes *possibility*. Typical English words used for translating this mood are: may, might, should, would, may have, would have, etc.²⁴² So, first and foremost, we must not ignore the fact that the mood of the verb *daretur* in this phrase is one that evokes possibility.

Taking what we have seen here, it is not hard to move from the immediate reading of ‘as if God were not (a) given’ to the more Kearneyan ‘as if God *is* not but *may* be’, for the very mood conveys a sense of potentiality and ideality, rather than concrete actuality.²⁴³ Translating the maxim in this way (which, again, the original Latin allows), makes it possible for us to forge a strong connection between Bonhoeffer and Kearney’s respective understandings of God. Yet this reading of Bonhoeffer’s phrase already suggests itself in material from his first work, *Sanctorum Communio*. In this work, Bonhoeffer differentiates between the completion and actuality of the church. As such, there is the divine reality of the completed church, and there is the temporal and historical process of the church’s actualization on earth (DBWE 1:139, 144). Although Bonhoeffer does not want the category of possibility associated with Christ, for this “virtually destroys the reality-character of redemption” (DBWE 1:144), he writes that “the church that is established in Christ and already completed in reality [*wirklich vollendet*] must necessarily be actualized [*aktualisiert*]” (DBWE 1:144).²⁴⁴ Here he makes clear that this *must*

²⁴⁰ Frederic M. Wheelock, *Wheelock’s Latin*, 6th edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 186.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁴⁴ For original, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine Dogmatische Untersuchung Zur Soziologie Der Kirche*, ed. Joachim von Soosten, vol. 1, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 89.

happen, but he also displays a clear distinction between the reality of the church and its actuality in history. It seems that for Bonhoeffer, actuality is more concrete and historical than reality, which includes actuality and, to some degree, possibility. This distinction in Bonhoeffer's thought between reality and actuality bolsters my reinterpretation of the '*etsi deus non daretur*' maxim, for if the reality of the church, which, as we have seen, is also the reality of Christ, still needs to be actualized, then it becomes, though not identical to Kearney's understanding of possibility, a close analogue. And how does Bonhoeffer describe the actualization of this reality: "Love actualizes the Realm of God" (DBWE 1:165). For both of these thinkers, then, God is not a given but becomes present to us as the possibility to be.

Beyond just this phrase and his comments in *Sanctorum Communio*, we can also connect Bonhoeffer and Kearney's respective understandings of divinity through certain things that Bonhoeffer writes in *Act and Being*. When discussing God, and the being of God, in this book, Bonhoeffer writes that "the being of God is no 'there is'" (DBWE 2:122). This claim bears witness to Bonhoeffer's post-metaphysical understanding of God, in that for him God cannot be an object for and of our conceptual grasping, but is instead connected with the characteristics of unrealized possibility (as opposed to grasped actuality). He writes further that "the Christian revelation ... is qualified as future" (DBWE 2:111). (I will explore Bonhoeffer's ideas concerning revelation further in the next section.)

Bonhoeffer's understanding of God as *not* given, but rather as possibility (and so a God who 'may be'), aligns with other key themes in Kearney's thought. I believe that Bonhoeffer's work supports themes of possibility and of a kingdom whose coming depends on human responsiveness that are very similar to the ones we find in Kearney. In the section 'Ultimate and Penultimate Things' of *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer discusses ways in which the penultimate prepares the

way for the ultimate. While he discusses the necessity of the penultimate for the coming of the ultimate, he also discusses ways in which the penultimate can stave off the ultimate's coming: "There is a depth of human bondage, of human poverty, and of human ignorance that hinders the gracious coming of Christ. ... There is a degree of power, of wealth, and of knowledge that is a hindrance to Christ and the grace of Christ" (DBWE 6:161-162). Bonhoeffer writes that where people are treated as means to ends, as objects, "a special hindrance is placed in the way of receiving Christ that goes beyond the world's general sinfulness and forlornness" (DBWE 6:165-166). In this same section, Bonhoeffer also comments that the destruction of the penultimate could be a hindrance to the ultimate (DBWE 6:160). Here, we see Bonhoeffer's implicit recognition that God's redemptive mercy can be interfered with and delayed by human action, which could be taken to mean that it in some sense also depends on human action.

Bonhoeffer's comments on the penultimate's ability to hinder the arrival of the ultimate reveals that he thinks there is a special role for humans to play in the coming of the ultimate. As we can see, Bonhoeffer recognizes that humans have real power to say 'yes' or 'no' to the full coming of the kingdom. To feed the hungry, house the homeless, free the slaves, deliver justice to the needy, and to befriend the lonely are all exemplary acts within the ambit of the penultimate that help bring the ultimate into being (DBWE 6:163). In very Levinasian language, Bonhoeffer writes in a 1928 sermon that:

Jesus is at the door, knocking, in reality, asking you for help in the figure of the beggar, in the figure of the degenerate soul in shabby clothes, encountering you in every person you meet. Christ walks the earth as long as there are people, as your neighbor, as the person through whom God summons you, addresses you, makes claims on you. ... Christ is at the door; he lives in the form of those around us. Will you close the door or open it for him? (DBWE 10:545)

It seems clear from Bonhoeffer's words here, especially his final sentence, that the divine wishes to become fully incarnate in the world, but in order for this to occur humans must play an

essential role: Will you ...? The various acts of justice and mercy that come to us in this call are guided by the ultimate and carried out by humans living incarnational lives. However, to the extent that we ignore, or worse, intentionally deepen the plight of those struggling with hunger, homelessness, loneliness, and mental health issues, etc., we say no to the ultimate, and hinder its arrival. If we connect Bonhoeffer's ideas here with our discussion of the translation of '*etsi deus non daretur*' above, we see the way in which Bonhoeffer's 'as if God were not given' can be read as similar to Kearney's claim that 'God neither is nor is not but may be'. Forging such a connection leads to an interesting, albeit tenuous conclusion: Could we not say that for Bonhoeffer, just as for Kearney, the ultimate will not be fully realized in the penultimate, and thus God will not fully *be* in the world, unless and until we say 'yes' to the call.

Now, this may prove to be a tantalizing conclusion, a new way of reading Bonhoeffer that more closely aligns him with certain figures in the postmodern camp. Yet, does this interpretation hold water? Although Bonhoeffer's writing does convey the sense that humans may impede and hinder the ultimate from coming, he does not think that this resistance could be absolute or total. For, as he also writes in *Ethics*: "No one can hinder Christ's coming, but we can oppose that coming in grace. There are conditions of the heart, of life, and in the world that especially hinder the receiving of grace, that is, which makes it infinitely difficult to believe. We say hinder and make difficult, not make impossible" (DBWE 6:162). Here Bonhoeffer seems to answer the question of his possible alignment with Kearney. Yet his position still retains a certain ambiguity with respect to the question. He tells us that there are states of being that make faith 'infinitely' difficult. If this is the case, then it would seem that people could live lives such that the ultimate would remain impeded, and so, the ultimate, and God, would remain available as possibility without ever fully coming into actuality. However, although Bonhoeffer also writes

that though humans may ‘impede it and render it difficult’, he maintains that we can never make the coming of the ultimate, and thus God’s fully coming to be, impossible.

In spite of this ambiguity, I hold that it is still possible and defensible to read Bonhoeffer’s understanding of humanity and divinity as more closely approaching Kearney’s understanding than one may think at first blush. Both draw on post-metaphysical understandings of God, and both insist that the sacred is found only in and through the secular (onto-eschatology for Kearney, and the penultimate/ultimate for Bonhoeffer); they both appear to affirm that God and the eschaton/ultimate *will* come, while maintaining that humans are capable of staving off this eventuality indefinitely; both seem to say that the coming of the kingdom involves positive human responsiveness, an affirmation of the divine call. We have just looked at Bonhoeffer, who writes that humans can make the ultimate’s coming infinitely hard, but never impossible. Kearney, in a similar vein, writes that God *will* show up as God has promised, but that God’s full realization, God’s becoming all in all, requires humanity’s positive responsiveness. While there is this similarity in their thought on this matter, Kearney tends to use stronger language (e.g., prevent) than Bonhoeffer (e.g., hinder), and, as such, any affiliation between them must live in this tension. Both these thinkers, then, affirm the idea that the eschaton always remains open in some sense; that *esse* always requires *posse* so as not to exclude any possibilities in which God may come to be. We now turn to this relationship between *esse* and *posse*.

3.1.3 | *Esse Always Needs Posse*

In the previous section, we compared and contrasted Kearney and Bonhoeffer on the idea that God should be conceived as a ‘may-be’. While Kearney appears to be the originator of this idea, we saw that a similar notion could also be detected in Bonhoeffer. Picking up on thinkers

such as Cusanus and Heidegger, among others, Kearney re-interprets the divine in such a way that there is possibility present, and that this possibility takes precedence over actuality. I then provided a reading that argues that Bonhoeffer conceives of God in a similar way, that is, where, for Bonhoeffer, God is also a ‘God who may be’, a God who is not a given but the ‘possibility-to-be’—a God whose coming to be relies upon affirmative human responses. In this section, we will examine how Kearney and Bonhoeffer construe the relation between actuality and possibility, of *esse* and *posse*, and then assess the importance of their insights for our understanding of God’s coming-to-be.

In *The God Who May Be*, Kearney clearly explains that most traditional notions of God see God as pure act, as a *fait accompli*. Instead of pure act, he claims that “it is divinity’s very potentiality-to-be that is the most divine thing about it.”²⁴⁵ For Kearney, our conception of God should not be restricted to *esse*, but also include *posse* (and so the idea of Cusa’s *possest*). This God that includes *posse* is the God of promise and the possible, the God who has passed “into the future which awaits us as the surplus of *posse* over *esse*—as that which is more than being, beyond being, desiring always to come into being again, and again, until the kingdom comes.”²⁴⁶ In this anticipatory context, we must be responsible, Kearney opines, never resting on our laurels and assuming that the Kingdom has already come. No, we must always be cued to reality in order to see the ways that eschatological possibility hopes, and needs, to come into being; we need to become attuned to those possibilities in which the Divine appears to us as a stranger, seeking to be enfleshed in this world.

In order to understand the way Bonhoeffer construes the relation between *esse* and *posse*, we must turn to his work on transcendental philosophy and ontology, *Act and Being*, focussing

²⁴⁵ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 2.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

specifically on his discussion of the mode of being of revelation. In this book, Bonhoeffer attempts to “come to an agreement about the problem of act and being,” (DBWE 2:25) to pull together the dialectic of transcendentalism and ontology.²⁴⁷ As we have just seen above, for Bonhoeffer “Christian revelation ... is qualified as future” (DBWE 2:111). This futural, or ‘to come’ aspect, construed now as possibility and *posse*, is highly relevant to our present discussion. For Bonhoeffer, revelation always points to a futural possibility that is ‘to come’, for once it has come, then it is past, and becomes something manipulable. In words that eerily prefigure Kearney’s opening remarks in *The God Who May Be*,²⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer writes: “Thus, for a purely ontological interpretation of revelation, it is as false to define revelation purely as something that is, as it is to evaporate it into something that is not. Rather, it must be seen in a manner of being that includes both of these in itself and, at the same time, ‘suspends’ in itself the human process of thinking about it (faith)” (DBWE 2:106-107). To put this in Kearney’s language, we could say that the revelation of God neither is nor is not, but may be, that is, it contains both of these within itself (*possest*) as it lives in the between space of the possibility-to-be.

When discussing the present, or what we may understand as ontology or the penultimate, Bonhoeffer writes that it can be determined by either the future or the past. That is, the present is either a contingency “that comes to us from the outside,” or is “determined by the past” by the “principle of the ‘priority’ of the coherence of reason” (DBWE 2:111). Yet Christian revelation, Bonhoeffer insists, serves to “lift even the past into the present, or paradoxically, into something ‘in the future’”. It follows from this that the Christian revelation must not be interpreted as

²⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer understands transcendentalism, or transcendental philosophy, as the attempt to locate the ‘thinking I’. However, because the ‘thinking I’ sets its own boundaries for thinking, it does not point to anything transcendent, but back to itself: “reason remains by itself, understands itself not ‘in reference to’ that which transcends it, but ‘in reference to’ itself” (DBWE 2:45).

²⁴⁸ “God neither is nor is not but may be.”

‘having happened’, but that for those human beings living in the church, in each present, this once-for-all occurrence is qualified as future” (DBWE 2:111). If revelation is fixed and objective (an *is*), then it is “existentially of no interest”; if it is completely non-objective (an *is not*), then its “continuity is lost” (DBWE 2:114). As such, Bonhoeffer affirms that revelation must hold both of these moments in tension, and that it can only exist in the form of the person in community.

Bonhoeffer’s analysis makes it abundantly clear that revelation, which he understands as the revelation of God in the person of Christ, is only experienced in Christian communion, in the corporate person of Christ, the Church (as we saw in section 2.1.2): “[R]evelation happens in the community of faith; ... [T]he being of revelation ‘is’, rather, the being of the community of persons that is constituted and formed by the person of Christ ...” (DBWE 2:113). The revelation of God in Christ is always experienced in, and indeed *as* community, and is defined by its futurity, the dimension of its ‘yet to come’. Bonhoeffer’s reflections on revelation here run parallel to Kearney’s insights, although it remains difficult to specify this parallel exactly. Kearney and Bonhoeffer both seem to affirm that God neither is nor is not, but is instead a type of possibility that is only present in its ‘to come’ or futural dimension. The main way in which their thinking differs, however, is around their respective understandings of community. As we have seen, both here and in previous sections, Bonhoeffer places an enormous emphasis on the Church and the communal person of Christ. A robust understanding of community is, unfortunately, one of the biggest lacunae in Kearney’s thought; one could well criticize his emphasis on ethical actions, and of incarnating and enfleshing the God-who-may-be, for being too individualistic.²⁴⁹ While he would, like Bonhoeffer, say that God only ‘is’ in situations in

²⁴⁹ He does hint at community when he mentions, e.g., “a promise for humanity as a universal community (to be reassembled as the mystical body of Christ on the last day, . . .).” Kearney, “Enabling God,” 51. We may also posit

which God is incarnated by and through people, his position lacks Bonhoeffer's much more robust understanding of the communal way in which such incarnation takes place.²⁵⁰

When juxtaposing Bonhoeffer and Kearney's various thoughts on the relationship between possibility and the revelation of divinity, it is important to keep in mind that for both thinkers terms like *posse*, the 'to come', or the ultimate always stand for a surplus that leads and directs *esse*, the 'now', and the penultimate. In his discussion of the penultimate/ultimate distinction-relation, Bonhoeffer writes that "[t]he penultimate does not determine the ultimate; the ultimate determines the penultimate. The penultimate is not a condition in itself; it is a judgment by the ultimate on what has gone on before. It is therefore never something present, but always something already past." (DBWE 6:159). Here Bonhoeffer makes clear that, though not unimportant, the penultimate is nothing in itself, but only matters insofar as it opens itself to the ultimate, insofar as its coming to fruition is guided by the ultimate. The ultimate always possesses a freedom of possibility that directs and empowers the penultimate (DBWE 6:160). The ultimate, in connection with revelation, is that which is 'to come', and so that which guides us and exists only in community; outside of the communal person of Christ, it will never come to be, will never come to be an *is*.

Kearney too holds that the eschatological *posse* is always a surplus that draws us forward, and that requires an affirmative human response to its call in order to fully come into being. In his essay "Enabling God," Kearney speculates that if the earth were to be destroyed, if there were no more humans left to incarnate God, and so to bring *posse* into *esse*, then God would still remain as *posse* and as the eschatological promise to be: "The divine advent would be deprived

that Kearney believes that the revelation of God in Christ only takes places in the community that says 'yes' to the call; however, he is not explicit about this.

²⁵⁰ "There is no God who 'is there'; God 'is' in the relation of persons, and being is God's being a person" (DBWE 2:115).

of a historical, human future but would remain, in each moment, enduringly faithful in spite of all. It would still be a ‘yes’ in the face of our ‘no’.”²⁵¹ Again, although Kearney neglects a full discussion of the communal nature of incarnating divine promise, he does align with Bonhoeffer when he says that God only ‘is’ where there are humans incarnating and enfleshing God, only where they are there answering the divine knock on the door.

Having drawn Bonhoeffer and Kearney together through a reinterpretation of Bonhoeffer’s infamous maxim ‘*etsi deus non daretur*’, and thus having seen how the full coming-to-be of the Kingdom relies on a positive human response, we turn to the last section of this thesis to see more fully *how* this happens. As I have affirmed throughout this thesis, it is the person of Christ and an incarnational mode of life that bring the fullness of *posse* into *esse*, and the ultimate fully into the penultimate. Since both thinkers focus more on orthopraxy than orthodoxy, a point that shows their strong affiliation, I will conclude this thesis with a ‘coda’ that discusses how they perceive the praxis of incarnating the ‘God-who-may-be’.

²⁵¹ Kearney, “Enabling God,” 50.

CODA: THE NECESSITY OF CHRIST

In the editor's afterword to the German edition of *Sanctorum Communio*, Joachim von Soosten writes: "It is not particular answers that we ought to adopt from Bonhoeffer. Rather, it is the question as to how the reality of God becomes concrete in the here and now of this world, and also the question of the permanent becoming into which everyone is drawn who dares address this question. For these are the questions that again and again force us to listen" (DBWE 1:305-306).²⁵² It has been my intent throughout this thesis to join with Bonhoeffer and Kearney in asking certain questions, of probing further our understanding of humanity, divinity, and their eschatological intertwining. In the coda, I draw together all the ideas that we have discussed so far, primarily focussing now on how the reality of God is made concrete here and now.

As we have gone along, we have been tracing both the many similarities in Bonhoeffer and Kearney's thinking as well as some of their differences. We have seen how, drawing on their respective post-metaphysical understandings of God, they both understand God not in terms of a static and defined 'is', nor as an indefinite 'is not', but rather as a 'may-be', as the very possibility and potentiality to be. This understanding of God is indelibly connected to each thinker's understanding of the 'not-yet' in the 'now' (onto-eschatology for Kearney, and the penultimate/ultimate distinction-relation for Bonhoeffer). For both thinkers, possibility and the 'to come' set the eschatological direction that calls us forward toward the ongoing fulfillment of the kingdom. At the same time, this eschatological horizon necessarily pushes us back into the world; there is no escaping the world for either Kearney or Bonhoeffer, and no knowledge or understanding of God apart from the world, and especially apart from the human.

This human dimension becomes especially important when it comes to Bonhoeffer and Kearney's respective Christological viewpoints. As we saw in Chapter 2, their different

²⁵² This afterword is translated into English and included in the English translation of this work.

Christologies provide the main tension between what would otherwise be quite similar patterns of thinking. Although the thought of both thinkers is quite incarnational, and both discuss Christ in their work, they place different emphases on the role Christ plays. For Bonhoeffer, all of reality is defined by and in the person of Christ. This person, Christ, through his resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is now also a corporate person, the Church (which again, for Bonhoeffer, is always people, not an institution). While Kearney does not say that Christ defines reality, not even in terms of the Church as a collective person or community proper, he still places a high importance on the person of Christ. For Kearney, the singularity of Christ becomes, in a pluralistic and kenotic way, the very source of universality; and via the notion of the *prosopon*, every face becomes the face of God as mediated through Christ. Both of these thinkers, then, believe that the ‘may-be’ God comes to fullness in history (being and time) in and through Christ.

Having traced the ‘that’ of their thinking on the coming to be of the ‘may-be’ God, we turn now to the ‘how’. That is, *how* does this God come into fulfillment for each thinker? Here we return to the idea of incarnational humanism I addressed in section 1.4. In his book *Incarnational Humanism*, Zimmermann discusses the idea that incarnational humanism is a mode of life that, although necessary for today’s age, derives from a New Testament and patristic approach to life. He writes that “[t]he incarnation makes possible the attainment of true humanity through achieving godlikeness or deification—this is really the heart of incarnational humanism.”²⁵³ Further, to be human is to participate in a mode of being marked by the incarnation;²⁵⁴ to become fully human, then, is not about imitation, but rather involves an

²⁵³ Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 72.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

ontological restructuring of one's being to that of Christ.²⁵⁵ Like Bonhoeffer, Zimmermann emphasizes the necessity of community to this way of being: “Bonhoeffer’s pithy definition of the church as ‘Christ existing as community’ shows that ecclesiology (what the church is) is always also Christology (who Christ is).”²⁵⁶

In line with the thinking of Bonhoeffer and Kearney, Brian Gregor affirms that an incarnational way of life must be directed by, or oriented to, that which is ‘to come’. He writes that “a cruciform philosophical anthropology—an *anthropologia crucis*—must also be eschatologically oriented. The being of the self is not defined by static essences, but by faith and hope. Our substance is radically futural; it is not yet apparent what we will be (1 John 3:2).”²⁵⁷ To incarnate the ‘God-who-may-be’, to transform this *posse* into *esse*, we must live a cruciform life, one open to that which we do not fully know. “The cruciform self is called to a cruciform way of life,”²⁵⁸ which is the very way of God. As Gregor elaborates:

God discloses his power and wisdom in the weakness and folly of the cross; that is how God is present in the world, and that is how he helps us. God calls us to participate in his suffering by living a cruciform existence, which means living a ‘secular’ life in the world, without appealing to the consolations of ‘religion.’ This kenotic being-in-the-world is how one becomes genuinely Christian, and thus human.²⁵⁹

The influence of Bonhoeffer’s theology on this description of cruciform life is hard to miss. Recalling Bonhoeffer’s understanding of God—“God consents to be pushed out of the world onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us” (DBWE 8:478)—we can see that this cruciform way of life is the way of God in the world. Paraphrasing Leviticus 19:2, in light of the life, crucifixion, and resurrection

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 108.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 283. For a recent book exploring these connections, with reference to Bonhoeffer, see Patrick S. Franklin, *Being Human, Being Church: The Significance of Theological Anthropology for Ecclesiology* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2016).

²⁵⁷ Brian Gregor, *A Philosophical Anthropology of the Cross: The Cruciform Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 51.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 168.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 180.

of Christ (as discussed by Paul), Michael J. Gorman writes: “You shall be cruciform, for I am cruciform.”²⁶⁰

This impetus to be cruciform as God is cruciform lies at the heart of both Bonhoeffer and Kearney’s thought, although it plays itself out in different ways in each thinker. Both acknowledge the incoming force and direction of the possible and the ‘to come’ in the form of the eschaton and the ultimate. God, or the revelation of God in Christ, is not a given, but a ‘may-be’ that seeks us out, knocks on our door, and beckons us to bring divinity into being. As Kearney affirms, drawing from the writings of Paul, becoming transformed into the likeness of Christ “is the promise of the messianic *persona*. It is *all* humanity that is invited to be transformed according to the image-*eikon* of Christ. . . . This eschatological promise requires not only grace but ethical action on our part. The advent of the *eschaton* of Creation is inseparable from human innovation.”²⁶¹ In a way that draws together transcendence and immanence, difference and sameness, in a manner that still honours singularity, Kearney writes that “[t]his divine *persona*, finally, safeguards what is unique in each one of us—what stitches each in its mother’s womb, what knows every hair of our head—while convoking us to a shared humanity.”²⁶²

For Bonhoeffer, too, the true way of life, the way of bringing the revelation of God in Christ into the fullness of being and time, is through a cruciform life. Our goal, eschatologically and ultimately, is to incarnate Christ, and on this point I wish to quote Bonhoeffer at length:

To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ is not an ideal of realizing some kind of similarity with Christ which we are asked to attain. It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which

²⁶⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 106.

²⁶¹ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2001, 45. Italics in original.

²⁶² *Ibid.* This notion of a ‘shared humanity’ may be a hint of what Kearney sees as the community that incarnates God.

seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19). It is Christ's own form which seeks to manifest itself in us. Christ does not cease working in us until he has changed us into Christ's own image. Our goal is to be shaped into the entire *form* of the *incarnate*, the *crucified*, and the *transfigured one*. Christ has taken on this *human form*. (DBWE 4:284-285; italics in original)

In this passage, Bonhoeffer makes clear that the way of God, the way of Christ, the way to bring God into being, is to incarnate Christ, to let the form of Christ that each person has been given work itself within us. This way of living is, first and foremost, incarnational or enfleshed. For Bonhoeffer, God's revelation in Christ is indelibly tied up with humanity, a possibility ever-coming, but only attained and revealed fully in humans. In this vein, Bonhoeffer writes of the joining of the divine and human: "The result of the union is the *unio personalis* [Latin, 'unity of person'], that is, the henceforth indissoluble bond between the two natures. That means that the λόγος [logos] no longer exists otherwise than in σάρξ [sarx]. God is no longer other than the one who has become human" (DBWE 12:344). Since this 'God-who-may-be' exists in actuality in human form specifically, it is time that we come to recognize this, and to engage in words and actions that honour this strange God in our midst, allowing this God to be incarnated in our own bodies until God is all-in-all. As I have hoped to have shown in this thesis, both Bonhoeffer and Kearney have made clear that the possibility of the ongoing incarnation of 'the God-who-may-be' in Christ via an incarnational humanism forms the eschatological hope through which humanity and divinity are indelibly, and joyfully, connected.

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