Dec 9, 2008

Anatheism:

Returning to God after God

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'Thus says the Lord: you shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves…' (Exodus 22:20).

‘She walks with him as a stranger, and at first she puts him to the test; fear and dread she brings upon him and tries him with her discipline….then she comes back to bring him happiness and reveal her secrets to him’.

(‘On Wisdom’, Sirach 4)

Abrahamic religions testify to inaugural encounters with a divine stranger. In such primary scenes two responses are registered: hostility or hospitality. You decline the other or receive the other into your home. Let me give some examples drawn from the three Religions of the Book – Judaism, Christianity and Islam - which inform Western traditions of theism.

1: The Judaic Wager

I begin with the story of Abraham. It is a dry hot day in the desert of Mamre. An old man is sitting at the door of his tent, pitched under the shade of an oak tree. His wife, Sarah, is inside the tent, sheltering from the midday sun. She is not happy; she is over a hundred years and she is barren. Her servant woman, Hagar, is younger and more
attractive than she, and more fertile: a rival. Abraham is brooding, about his unhappy wife, about the future of Israel. Suddenly a shadow flits across the sunlit ground in front of him. He looks up to see strange men standing before him. He is filled with fear. Why have they come? he wonders. To kill him? There are three of them and he has two women to protect, his wife and his servant girl. But instead of reaching for a weapon or retreating to his tent, Abraham finds himself running towards the strangers. He greets them, bows to the ground, and invites them to a meal. He asks Sarah to knead three measures of her best flour to make loaves while he fetches a calf and prepares it with curds and milk. Then Abraham stands under the oak tree and watches the strangers eat. When they have finished they announce that they will return in a year and when they do Sarah will be with child. Sarah, standing inside the entrance of the tent, laughs when she hears this; it is quite impossible that she be with child! But the Lord Stranger repeats the promise: ‘Nothing is impossible to Yahweh. I shall come back to you at the same time next year and Sarah will have a son’ (Genesis 18:14).

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The New Jerusalem Bible offers an interesting translation of this scene. As the narrative progresses the ‘three men’ who first appear out of the desert mutate into a single ‘guest’ once invited to the table before finally appearing as ‘Yahweh’ himself in the final scene of annunciation. In other words, the divine Other first reveals itself in the guise of three unknown strangers before Abraham’s act of hospitality permits the further revelation of their promise to bring life not death. Potential hostility becomes actual hospitality. Abraham chooses a God of love over a God of fear. And this choice is, arguably, echoed in Sarah’s laughter. For is not humor the acceptance of contradiction, of
the impossible become possible, of the foreign finding a home within the familiar, of the Other entering the self and being reborn? Isaac, the son who results from this encounter with the Stranger, means in Hebrew, ‘the one who laughs’.

Abraham is the wanderer par excellence; he is the nomadic tent-dweller celebrated in Psalm 119, ‘I am a stranger on this earth’. Hegel famously describes him as ‘a stranger on earth to soil and men alike…’(1). But if Abraham is the first prophet of strangeness he is also the first to experience the temptation of closure: namely, the urge to confound the sacred with the tribe. The temptation, in short, to fold his tent and build a fortress. To reduce divinity to territory and and thereby exclude the stranger. Put in another way, Abraham is capable of both great and terrible things. While he welcomes the three strange men \( (anashim) \) who announce the birth of his son, Isaac, he does not hesitate, not long afterwards, to cruelly expel his foreign slave girl, Hagar, into the wilderness with their son, Ishmail.

Later in the Genesis story, Abraham is compelled to make yet another dramatic choice. This time, on Mt Moriah, he has to decide between two commanding angels: one who tells him to kill his son Isaac, the other who bids him abandon the tribal ways of blood sacrifice and embrace his son as a gift from life. He chooses life over death, but only after much ‘fear and trembling’ (as Kierkegaard aptly illustrated). And one realizes as one reads on - through Exodus and Kings and Deuteronomy and the Prophets, and further still through Christian and Islamic scriptures - that the decision for hospitality over hostility is never made once and for all; it is a wager that needs to be renewed again and again, anatheistically.
In sum, the great founder of biblical religion is capable of both hostility and hospitality. And Abraham’s descendants have followed suit throughout history. Reject the stranger or embrace the stranger. In fact, the annual Jewish festival of sukkot serves to remind the followers of Abraham that they are forever tent-dwellers, strangers on the earth committed to the welcoming of other strangers. This is a reminder that needs to be made, again and again, year after year, for biblical religion, like most other religions, is capable of the best and of the worst. It all comes down, in the first and last instance, to a wager of faith - a hermeneutic reading of the word of God. I repeat: Abraham’s heartless banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is totally at odds with his hospitable reaction to the arrival of the alien nomads from nowhere. Capable of the most cruel acts, Abraham is also capable of welcoming potentially threatening strangers into his home with open arms. As a result of his radical turning around, he opens himself and his wife Sarah to new life.

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The entire Bible, it could be said, is made up of struggles between two different ways of responding to the alien. Saul goes out to bring destruction on the Ameliketes but in the battle against the foreigners decides to abandon blood-lust for sacrifice and commit instead to mercy. Jacob wrestles with a dark anonymous ‘someone’ (eesh) right through the night; he fights with what he perceives to be a threatening adversary, until he finally opens himself to the Other (Gen 32;25). Receiving a divine mark upon his hipbone, and the new name of Israel, Jacob opts for peace, ultimately acknowledging ‘the face of God’ in the visage of his mortal enemy. Indeed it is significant that the very day after he has wrestled thus with the angel, he is able to finally embrace God in the guise of his
estranged rival brother, Esau. For the message seems to be this: the divine, as exile, is in each human other who faces us, defenseless and vulnerable, asking to be received into our midst. The face that serves as trace of transcendent divinity is also a portal to humanity in its flesh and blood immanence. Or as Emmanuel Levinas puts it ‘The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger’(2). My hospitable relationship with the stranger, in sum, gives meaning to my relations with all strangers, proximate or distant, human or divine. In this sense it is an option for justice over murder.

One of the most famous prayers of Passover says: ‘You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 22). And another Passover text, Sefer Ha-Hinukh 431, explains this Exodus passage as a reminder that ‘we have experienced the great suffering that one in a foreign land feels. By remembering the pain that we ourselves have undergone, from which God, in God’s mercy, delivered us, our compassion will be stirred up towards every person in this plight’. In support of this reading we might recall how three of the earliest books of the Bible are about strangers – Job, Ruth and the Song of Songs. Job challenges Yahweh before finally accepting his strange ways. Ruth is a Moabite alien accepted by Boas into his community, thereby initiating a long line of hybrid descendants including David and Jesus. While the last of these books, The Song of Songs, may be cited as paradigmatic of the coming together of Israel and its Egyptian adversary: King Solomon courts the foreign ‘Shulammite’ woman, defying tradition to embrace this ‘black and beautiful’ stranger as his bride. Indeed it is telling that the Song itself celebrates a Jewish love story about human-divine love in the borrowed form of a
Babylonian-Egyptian marriage poem or epithalmiam. Loving your Other is more divine than loving your own. Which is arguably why the Hebrew Bible has thirty six commands to ‘love the stranger’ (Deut 27:19, 10:18, 24:17, 16:11 etc) and only two to ‘love your neighbour’ (3).

Deuteronomy is one of the richest books in references to the stranger. Let me cite a few characteristic examples: ‘He shows his love for the stranger by giving him food and clothing’ (Deut 10.18) (the term ger here is rendered as xenos in Greek and peregrinus in Latin); ‘Cursed is he who distorts the justice due a stranger, orphan and widow’ (Deut 27.19) (here Ger is rendered as advena in Latin, and variously as ‘alien’ in English); ‘You shall not pervert the justice due a stranger or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge’ (Deut 24.17). Or again: ‘You shall rejoice to the Lord your God….and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name’ (Deut 16.11).

There are several telling things about these references to the stranger in our midst. First, the stranger is associated with the name of God. Second, the stranger is invariably linked with allusions to orphans and widows - vulnerable and defenseless ones without family or guarantor. Third, the advent of the stranger calls for a ‘justice’ that seems to go beyond normal conventions of homeland security, which tend to exclude strangers, orphans and widows. The very fact that the Lord must repeatedly enjoin justice to prevent hatred of the foreign is itself an acknowledgement that initial responses to aliens are more likely to be fear rather than love. So that if Deuteronomy recalls that ‘Our father was a wandering Aramean’ (Deut 26.5), the same text is also guilty of the most egregious expressions of exclusion towards wanderers beyond the tribe (viz the numerous
exhortations to smite the enemy in the *milchemeth mitzvah*). Finally, the Latin translations of the Hebrew *Ger* as *advena* and *peregrinus* are particularly suggestive in that they connote a) one who comes from outside, from afar, from the future (*advena*), and b) one who migrates across borders of nation, tribe or home (*peregrinus* as in the English *peregrination*). The stranger, in short, is the uninvited one with nowhere to lay its head unless we act as ‘hosts’ and provide a dwelling. There is a sense of surprising irruption about the coming of this estranged and estranging outsider – a sense of unknowability calling for risk and adventure on our part. Hospitality to the irreducibly Other does not come naturally. It requires imagination and trust. So while the Torah acknowledges the predictable impulse to persecute intruders, it exhorts us to overcome our murderous impulses and accept the advening one. ‘What is hateful to you do not do to another. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary’ (4).

It is noteworthy, I think, that the stranger is often treated as the *human* persona of the divine. Indeed what appears as an all-too-human stranger, emerging out of the night to wrestle with us, is only *subsequently* recognized as divine. The Latin translation of the Hebrew *eesh/iysh* as *vir* in Latin and *anthropos* in Greek carries this sense across multiple tongues. Though some English versions speak here of ‘angels’, most remain faithful to the original biblical sense of the divine revealing itself in and through the human, e.g. ‘Jacob was left alone, and a *man* wrestled with him until daybreak’ (Gen 32.24). And, we recall again, it is only after the long struggle with the stranger in the dark that Jacob realizes that he has been marked and blessed by the ‘Face of God’ (*Peniel*). God is revealed *après coup*, in the wake of the encounter, in the trace of his passing. And this episode demonstrates that if divinity moves towards us kataphatically in the face of the
stranger, it also absolves itself apophatically from the immediate grasp of cognition.

When God is revealed as having been present all the time, God is already gone. That is why God remains a stranger even in the most intimate embrace: ‘for my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways’ (Isaiah 55.8). The Other remains foreign in its most familiar guise. The divine and the human are neither separable nor the same, neither divorceable nor identical.

The great stories of Israel are, I am suggesting, testaments to the paradoxical origins of religion in both violent conflict and peaceful embrace. This, in effect, makes every dramatic encounter between the human and the divine into a radical hermeneutic wager: compassion or murder. You either welcome or refuse the stranger. Monotheism is the history of this wager. The fact that the Abrahamic legacy has witnessed both traditions of interpretation speaks for itself. On the one hand, we have ample evidence for those critics who see monotheism as an irremediable source of intolerance and war (from Enlightenment atheists to the likes of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens). On the other hand, the Abrahamic legacy provides powerful resources for those – like this author – who wish to post-critically retrieve a liberating message in the Bible, one which fosters radical attentiveness to the stranger as portal to the sacred.

II: The Christian Wager

The double legacy of Abrahamic religion continues on in Christianity. Here too we witness an ambiguous history of love and hate towards the stranger. For every Francis of
Assisi there is an Inquisitor; for every Saint James a Jim Jones. And here again the drama of the Stranger – *peregrinus, hostis, advena* – is powerfully enacted in a ‘primary scene’, in this instance, the Annunciation.

Recall: A young Nazarene woman meets an intruder. She is alone in her shuttered room. She is reading. The day is cool. In the air a fragrance of lilies. She is perhaps half thinking of her betrothed, Joseph, as she reads the *Songs of Songs* or the story of Rachel meeting Jacob at the well, or the story of Sarah being with child. (We do not know; we only have paintings). She hears a flutter of wings, puts down her book, half closes her eyes, listens. Suddenly, out of nowhere, someone appears. He is terrifying in appearance and Mary is full of fear. She withdraws, steps back, pauses. Then bowing her head and attending carefully to a voice that whispers ‘Do Not Be Afraid’, Mary opens herself to the stranger and conceives a child. In short, Mary chooses grace over fear. She responds to the call, trusts in the promise. She dares imagine the impossible as possible. She says yes. Amen. A Nazarene echo of Sarah’s laughter.

Denise Levertov captures this moment in her poem, ‘Annunciation’, when she writes of Mary’s audacious choice.

_*We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,*_

_*almost always a lectern, a book; always*_

_*the tall lily.*_

_*Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,*_

_*the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,*_

_*whom she acknowledges, a guest.*_
But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.

The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free to accept or to refuse, choice integral to humanness.

Mary is faced with a hermeneutic wager. She looks up from her lectern and reads the face of the stranger. She chooses to say yes, carnally, courageously. And word is made flesh.

Another poet, Andrew Hudgins, glossing Botticelli’s Cestello painting of the Annunciation, adds a further variation on this scene:

.....angel to virgin,

Both her hands held up, both elegant, one raised

As if to say stop, while the other hand, the right one,

Reaches toward his; and, as it does, it parts her blue robe

and reveals the concealed red of her inner garment
to the red tiles of the floor and the red folds

of the angel’s robe. But her whole body pulls away.

Only her head, already haloed, bows,

Acquiescing. And though she will, she’s not yet said,

Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord,

As Botticelli, in his great pity,

Lets her refuse, accept, refuse, and think again.

Ana, again, is the key. Mary’s thinking again, believing again, trusting again, is the first act of Christian anatheism. Repetition of Jewish anatheism, anticipation of Islamic anatheism.

The fact that the birth of the Nazarene child is worshipped by the advent of Three Wise Strangers from the East - the Magi - confirms the sentiment that epiphanies of divine eros and natality involve an incursion of the foreign into the frame of the familiar. And it is fitting that the trinity of strangers - exemplified by the three visitors, first to Abraham, then to Mary - was chosen by the great painter of Russian Orthodoxy, Andrei Rublev, as the perfect icon for the three divine persons of the Christian deity. In Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity (painted in 1411 AD and housed in the monastery of Zagorsk), the three angels are seated in a circle around an empty chalice – symbol of the gap in our horizons of time and space where the radically Other may arrive, unexpected and unknown. And this empty receptacle at the core of the circle is none other than the womb-heart of Mary.
herself (*khora*). As the Greek inscription of the Mother and Child Mosaic of the Monastery of the Khora in Istanbul still reads: *Khora akhoraton* – ‘Container of the Uncontainable’. Mary is the *khora* opening the heart of divinity. The aperture, without which, as in all human openings to the Stranger, the sacred could not be embodied.

The story of sacred strangers does not, of course, stop there. After the Incarnation comes the life of Jesus himself. Jesus was repeatedly experienced by his disciples as a terrifyingly alien apparition. On Mt Thabor when he was transfigured. On Lake Galilee when he appeared over the stormy waves or on the shores of the same lake when he appeared to his apostles after his death. In each of these episodes, Jesus’ most intimate followers responded to him as if he were a total stranger; and he responds, repeatedly, with the words, ‘Do not be afraid’. Each time Christ turns their terror into communion – preparing fish for them on the lakeshore, breaking bread for them at the Inn of Emmaus.

The famous Emmaus scene of epiphanic love flaring up in the darkness of suspicion is graphically evoked in Rembrandt’s series of portraits, most poignantly the Emmaus painting of 1628, where Jesus’ black silhouette is offset against the light of epiphany, a light which counters the fear of the disciples recoiling from the irruption of divinity (as Jesus breaks bread). This irruption is, of course, a return of Jesus through the incognito of the departed one, the posthumous Christ. He has to leave in order to come back. He has to die as estranged outcast, as a broken reed, a nobody and nothing, before he can live again. Unless the seed dies it cannot grow. *Ana-theos*. The return of God after the death of God.

Christ, as Michel de Certeau puts it, is that ‘Other’, present but also absent, whose ‘Follow me’, in the penumbra of the empty tomb, ‘comes from a voice forever irrecoverable’; but because of this irrecoverability (in any final sense) Christ functions as
an endless invitation to translate, remember and believe anew(5). This crucial insight into the radical estrangement of Jesus’ death is movingly captured in the Office of the Greek Orthodox Matins of Good Friday which tells of Joseph of Arimathea seeking the body of Jesus from Pilate:

*Joseph came before Pilate, beseeching him, saying:*

‘Give me this stranger (dos moi touton ton xenon),
who from infancy guested (xenisthenta) in the world as a stranger,
he cried,
Give me this stranger,
whom his own people have hated and slain as a stranger,
Give me this stranger,
at the sight of whose strange death I am estranged(xenothenta)
Give me this stranger,
who gave hospitality (xenizein) to the poor and the stranger….

Here we encounter the great paradox of the divine stranger as host *and* guest. Jesus is both the one who gives hospitality to the thirsting stranger and the one who calls to us to host him in turn as our guest (as Joseph does by receiving and caring for his scarred body). It is a paradox illustrated in this text by the linguistic play between the terms for ‘guested’ (*xenisthenta*) and ‘estranged’ (*xenothenta*), ‘stranger’ (*xenos*) and ‘hospitality’(*xeneia*). Tellingly, for our purposes, the Greek *xenizo* means to offer hospitality, by taking someone as guest; while the same verb in the passive voice,
xenizomai, means to be struck by something strange, to feel estranged and defamiliarized by the Other(6). This double direction of hospitality – at once active and passive - is reiterated in the celebrated Maundy Thursday hymn, Adore Te Devote, which concludes with this double image of Christ as the one who both offers the Eucharistic bread and is received by us as we consume the bread:

*Blest are you, my friends, invited to my wedding feast...*

*Lord, make known to us your presence at this table blest.*

*Stay with us forever, God our host and guest.*

But the stranger is not always recognized as either host or guest. In the case of Jesus, most of his contemporaries - friends and enemies alike - did not see him as divine. Even his close relatives, we are told in Mark 3: 21, ‘set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’! And if Jesus’s immediate acquaintances had such difficulty acknowledging the presence of the divine, is it any wonder that so many of his followers down through the ages misinterpreted his message, that is, mistook his call to hospitality and service as an invitation to triumphal dominion? The radical hermeneutic liberty of the Christ event makes each Christian believer a pilgrim who must become, as Kierkegaard put it, *contemporaneous* with Christ himself to be a true recipient of his ‘scandalous strangeness’. And perhaps it was out of fidelity to this role of radical stranger that Jesus refused to be captured in written words. He never wrote anything down except some illegible words in the sand which prevented a woman from being stoned to death. He left the rest to imagination (as the diverse evangelists show).
Likewise, Jesus pointedly refused the temptations in the desert to become a mighty emperor imposing a triumphant message on a credulous populace (a drama brilliantly portrayed by Dostoyevsky in the famous ‘Grand Inquisitor’ chapter of the *Brothers Karamazov*). Surely Jesus was announcing his role as unfamiliar guest when he described himself not as illustrious Monarch but as the uninvited alien knocking at the door, or as the ‘least of these’ (*elachistos*) wandering the streets, asking to be fed or housed. ‘If you give to the least of these you give to me’ (Cf. Matt 25.41). The rest of the passage reads: ‘For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, a stranger (*hospes*) and you welcomed me’ – to which the righteous answer and say ‘Lord when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?’ (Matt 25:35-44)). For they had not recognized the divine embodied in the alien before them. They were looking up not down, obsessed by some fantasy in the skies rather than heeding a flesh and blood presence here on earth.

This is no casual comment by Jesus. The invocation of the surprising divinity of the *hospes* is actually repeated four times in the same passage as key for entry to the kingdom. Eschatology is realized in the presence of the alien in our midst. Love of the guest becomes love of God (7). The cut comes, once more, in this crucial and ultimate choice: to welcome or repudiate the stranger. So it is not surprising that when Jesus, in another episode, is asked by the lawyer, ‘who is my neighbour?’ he replies with the story of the Good Samaritan – the alien outsider who brings healing to the wounded and the dying (Luke 10: 25-36). Theophany as the guest become host. And it is another ‘stranger’, again a Samaritan, who is the only leper to acknowledge his healer: ‘Has none but this foreigner (*allogen*) returned to give thanks to God’, asks Jesus (Luke 17:18).
To ‘love those who love you’ is normal, as Jesus says in Matthew 5.43-48. ‘To greet your brothers and sisters only’ is expected. But to love the alien, even when it takes the form of the adversary, that is the most difficult – and most divine – thing of all. So when Jesus says he is the Way he insists it is the Way of the Stranger not the Sovereign – with all that this implies in terms of radical hospitality and healing. This commitment to radical hospitality was central to the Christian mission of service throughout the centuries (down to the theology of liberation and the worker priest movements), as well as proving a core principle of St Benedict’s Rule in the sixth century, the founding guide of Western monasticism. The following passage of the Rule is characteristic, and pioneering: ‘Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say: ‘I came as a guest, and you received Me’. And to all let due honor be shown, especially to the domestics of the faith and to pilgrims…In the salutation of all guests, whether arriving or departing, let all humility be shown. Let the head be bowed or the whole body prostrated on the ground in adoration of Christ, who indeed is received in their persons’. The passage concludes with an invocation to the last becoming first: ‘Let both the Abbot and community wash the feet of all guests. After the washing of the feet let them say this verse: ‘We have received Your mercy, O God, in the midst of Your temple’ (Rule of St Benedict, ch 53).

But if the Benedictine legacy informed one Christian attitude to the stranger, the Crusades and Inquisitions informed another. The choice for Christians is as contemporary as it is historical.

III: The Islamic Wager
Recall the primary scene of Islam: A respected businessman called Muhammad Ibn Abdullah retires to a cave on the summit of Mount Hira. It is the month of Ramadan, 610 C.E. Here, as was his annual wont, Muhammad sets to praying, fasting and providing alms to the poor and outcast members of Meccan society who visited him. This time, however, on the night of 17 Ramadan something extraordinary happens. Muhammad is woken from his sleep by a strange presence in the cave. Something grips him until he can hardly breathe. All his certainties desert him, dissolving into the walls of the cave. His entire body is convulsed; he sweats profusely in the cool of midnight. He struggles, fearing his life may be in peril. Then, suddenly, he stops and listens. Muhammad decides to trust the incoming presence. And no sooner has he overcome terror and surrendered (islam) to the stranger before him than he hears a voice speak through him. The voice of the angel Gabriel. His lips open and the first words of a new Arab scripture issue from his mouth. The Prophet of Islam is born, discovering himself a foreigner within his mother tongue. ‘When I heard the Qur’an’, he announced after, ‘my heart was softened and I wept, and Islam entered me’(8). The words that he heard he did not speak or write. Only much latter did he cautiously recite them to various groups of followers who in turn recorded them in the sacred texs known as the Qur’an and Hadith.

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The deep ambiguity of Abrahamic religion recurs in Islam, the third confessional response to biblical revelation. We need no reminder of the manifold expressions of Islamic faith down through the centuries. In the wake of 9/11 the bloodier, if unrepresentative, chapters of this history have been rehearsed ad infinitum. And of course certain fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran, from the early civil wars of the 6th
century to the rise of Wahhabism in our modern era, have given sorry credence to this negative legacy. But it is only one legacy. Many forget that the words of the Prophet may be read in very different ways. Each episode of his Book, as of previous biblical testaments, is susceptible to different hermeneutic readings — namely, i) those in the name of hospitality to the stranger and ii) those in the name of war against the enemies of faith. Muhammad himself, it must be remembered, like Jesus and Abraham before him, never wrote anything down. His words were recorded and inscribed by witnesses, after the revelation at Mecca. And he was, in fact, so overwhelmed by the voice of the strange angel that for the first two years he spoke to no one about it but this wife Khadija and her cousin Waraqa Ibn Nawfal. Only in 612 did Muhammad feel ready to speak out more openly to a small group of family friends and young merchants, thereby ensuring that his vision of a society where ‘the weak and vulnerable were treated with respect’ could extend to wider circles(9). If the Divine Stranger was first experienced in fear and trembling by Abraham and by Mary of Nazareth, so too by Muhammad. The encounter, as noted, was painful and bewildering. ‘Never once did I receive a revelation’, confessed Muhammad, ‘without thinking that my soul had been torn away from me’(10).

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Through the centuries over seventy branches of Islam have emerged from the primary scene of Muhammad in the cave. And common to all, it seems, is this holy teaching of the Prophet: “Iṣlām began as a stranger, and it will become a stranger. So blessed are those who are strangers.” The Arabic term used in this celebrated Hadith is gharib in the sense of an outsider, beyond tribal ties and determinations. It was used in multiple
ways in later traditions, especially esoteric and mystical ones where it was considered a term of the highest praise. But it is not an isolated exception. Throughout the Islamic texts we find similar precepts of hospitality being cited again and again: ‘Not one of you truly believes unless you wish for others what you wish for yourself’ (‘The Golden Rule’). Or again: ‘We have made you into nations and tribes, so that you can get to know and befriend each other, not to be boastful of your heritage’ (Qur’an 49:13). Hardly recipes for war or conquest! Moreover, the Prophet’s teaching that no one knows the true interpretations of the Qu’ran except God, indicates that divine truth cannot be exhausted in any single human form; it ‘demands a variety of interpretations, especially by the spiritually adept, on themes concerning the nature of God and the nature of humanity’ (11).

The liberating legacy of Islam is one which – as in Judaism and Christianity - has to be reclaimed rather than assumed. It is, once again, a matter of bold hermeneutic retrieval. And in this instance a retrieval oft contested in Muslim culture arguably due to the fact that Islam, unlike Judaism and Christianity, escaped the disenchanting rigors of a secular Enlightenment. A number of contemporary Islamic scholars have, nonetheless, engaged in this task of pioneering critical reappropriation, among them Maqbood Siraj, Abdolkarim Soroush and other commentators discussed in chapter 6 below. In contradistinction to the bellicose readings of Islam in the 6th century Khalifat or later Wahhabi movements (from which Al Qaeda sprang), these thinkers offer alternative accounts of Islamic intellectual history (12).

Such counter-narratives – counter, that is, to fundamentalist assumptions – are more in keeping with the original intellectual legacy of Andalusian philosophers like Al’Farabi...
and Averroes (Ibn Rushd). Siraj, for example, explores the legacy of Islam on the Indian sub-continent as one of creative synthesis and imaginative accommodation. Particularly pertinent is his description of the interfaith vision of enlightened Mughal leaders like Babur and Akbar, or visionaries like Dara Shikoh committed to a vast enterprise of ‘translation’ between Islamic and Hindu texts (including renditions of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Upanishads in Persian). Akbar was even credited with the promotion of a new inter-spiritual philosophy known as Din e Ilahi, drawing from the wisest insights of the different faiths practised in his jurisdiction. He engaged in frequent discussions with delegates of various religions in his court – from Purkoththam Brahman and Sheikh Tajudden to Portuguese Christian missionaries and Zoroastrian representatives from Navsari in Gujarat (13). These exchanges led Akbar to believe in the commonality of all religions, or what he called a ‘general consensus’ (Sulhe kul) among different faiths regarding certain human values. Indeed it is humbling for Westerners to recall, especially in our time of anti-Islamic suspicion, that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Christian Inquisitors were persecuting witches, Jews, Muslims and heretics (Giordano Bruno was burnt alive in the Campo dei Fiori for his inter-religious imagination in 1600), Akbar was convening multi-faith symposia in his Indian palace! One sometimes forgets that there have always been multiple schools of Islam, not one monolithic authority. Indeed religious minorities and diversities were often better treated under the Mughal Empire than under most Western Empires of the time.

One might also recall other Muslim leaders’ willingness to engage in creative dialogue with their Christian and Jewish counterparts at crucial junctures in Western history. We could cite, for example, the fertile exchanges between Muslim and non-
Muslim thinkers in Andalusian Spain in the 12th century; the famous interreligious Council of Florence, convened by Nicholas of Cusa in the middle of the 15th century and attended by leading Islamic scholars of Constantinople and beyond; the welcome given to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Batholomew, by the Grand Mufti of Sarajevo during the height of the Bosnian war; or more recently, the intervention by 138 leading Islamic scholars in October 2007 in the interconfessional debate following Pope Benedict’s lecture at Regensburg, issuing in the path-breaking manifesto of interconfessional hospitality entitled ‘A Common Word’(14).

Arguably the most historically influential figure of a tolerant Islamic hermeneutics was the Great Averroes of Cordoba. Averroes, also known as Ibn Rushd, was one of the key figures of the famous Andalusian conversation between Muslims, Christians, Jews and ‘pagans’. Boldly opposing the fundamentalist clerics in his influential text, *Fasl al-maqal*, Averroes argued for a harmonious debate between the Islamic religion and secular (at that time mainly Greek) philosophy. Faith, he insisted, needed to be kept in critical dialogue with reason (however ‘pagan’ it might seem to certain clerics) if the rich plurality of meanings, human and divine, were to be properly respected. Indeed Fred Dallmayr has suggested that the most apt translation of Averroes’ formative work is ‘The Book of Differences’. Referring to the pagan Greeks (the intellectual ‘others’ of his own Islamic culture), Averroes argued that ‘those who do not share our religion’ were as likely to reach truth through the ways of reason as those who follow Islam. For Averroes the ideal philosopher was one who could combine ‘religious integrity’ with ‘natural reason’ (available to all humans). And, as a consequence of this intellectual latitude, he was an audacious proponent of non-literal and metaphorical readings of the Qur’an.
Where conflicts of interpretation occurred, as was inevitable, the matter should be consigned, he argued, to philosophers; for not only were they most attuned to the rational clarification of complex, multiple meanings - i.e. ‘depth interpretation’ - but they were also directed toward the same horizon of ‘truth’ as that disclosed in revealed scripture (15). In this sense, one might say that Averroes recognized the importance of the ‘anatheist’ wager within the ambit of Islamic faith. He knew that without the critical distance of philosophical inquiry revelation risked lapsing into mere authoritarianism.

With this commitment to intellectual freedom, Averroes and other critical scholars advanced a thoughtfully tolerant brand of Islamic hermeneutics against those literalists who, in his acerbic words, ‘threw people into hatred, mutual detestation and wars’(16). Open philosophical inquiry was hailed as the ‘friend and milk-sister of religion’, not its sworn enemy as the literalists held. Islam needed to learn from such critical outsiders – in particular the earlier Greek philosophers – if it was to be true to its mission of respecting the alien and the stranger. The Fasl concludes, significantly, with a moving paean to ‘differential friendship, to a loving relationship that respects difference without fusion or mutual separation’(17). We shall return to the contemporary relevance of such Islamic hermeneutics in our discussion of the relation between the sacred and the secular in Chapter 6 below.

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But Averroes is not the only thinker to advance a critical hermeneutics of Islam. Much contemporary scholarship by figures like Henri Corbin, James Morris and Hannah Merriman, has reemphasized the interfaith resources of progressive Islam conceived as a multi-sided pyramid whose apex is reachable by different paths. Commenting on the
extraordinary insights of Islamic sages like Ghazali, Biruni and Ibn ‘Arabi, Morris shows how they ingeniously sought to reconcile the historical multiplicity of religions with the unity of the One Din. Ibn ‘Arabi, in particular, treasured the process of ‘creative imagination’ and promoted the reciprocal translation between languages and religions as a means of articulating the invisible human-divine reality which the Qur’an called the ‘Heart’ (al-qalb) (18).

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The Islamic tendency towards intellectual pluralism and ‘cultural blending’ also found cogent expression in the poetic-spiritual works of Sufi mystics like Rumi, Hallaj, Hafiz and Das Kabir. Here the motif of hospitality to the stranger is pivotal and recurring. Indeed throughout their poems and ghazals, we find God being referred to as an ‘uninvited Guest’. Let me briefly mention two of these figures.

Hafiz of Shiraz was a 14th century poet who wrote in Persian. His name is short for ‘one who knows the Qur’an by heart’, and his famous Ghazals explored the central Islamic notion of the ‘heart’ (qalb) as locus of encounter with the Beloved Guest. Hafiz expresses his readers thus: ‘If God invited you to a party, and said, ‘Everyone in the ballroom tonight will be my special Guest’, How would you treat them when you arrived?’(19). In other words, if we are all God’s guests on this earth how should we behave towards each other and how do we know who is our host? God, suggests Hafiz, is the beloved host of hosts who teaches us hospitality by coming to us in the guise of the ‘guest’, inviting us to host Him in turn as we would a Lover. Terror before the stranger is thus translated into fascination for a new beloved whom we meet at a nocturnal feast full of musk, music, wine and dance. By visiting the house of the Other, taking on the role of
guest, we learn the art of hospitable refinement and attentiveness towards others. ‘What happens to the guest who visits the house of a great musician’, asks Hafiz. ‘Of course, his tastes become refined’(20). Refinement, in this context, means becoming apprenticed to the art of welcome, daring to embrace aliens and newcomers whose identity is unfamiliar and surprising. That is why Hafiz exhorts us, on meeting with a stranger, not to ask his or her history or allegiance. On the contrary, he says, make a wager of trust. ‘O my dear, Do not ask how we are, be a stranger and ask of no comrade’s story’(21).

In Hafiz’s universe, God plays variously the role of guest and host, and invites us to do likewise. And if God has invited many different people to celebrate in his house, ‘we must respect them no matter how strange their games’(22). We may not even know from time to time who is the divine lover and who the human? Who the friend and who the trickster? There is always a risk in the game of love; and the divine lover needs us, it seems, as much as we need him/her. Hafiz’s God is a ‘voyaging friend’ who comes and goes, calling and courting his creatures: ‘God has made love with you and the whole universe is germinating inside your belly’(23). God consummates his desire in the love between humans, as they mutually and endlessly exchange the roles of guest and stranger, giver and receiver, lover and beloved. In Hafiz’s world of mystical poetics the sacred and profane go hand in glove. He has taken the Qur’an so much to heart that his heart has become one of its privileged voices, translating each time into more novel and startling symbols. This is Islamic hermeneutics at its most transgressive, daring and imaginative(24).

Our second poet, Kabir Das, was a fifteenth century visionary raised in Islam in Northern India. His life and work brought together what he considered to be the most
promising aspects of both Muslim and Hindu faiths in the spirit of bhakti and Sufi practices. A prophet of ‘dual religious belonging’, Kabir composed poems renowned throughout all his native India in his time. He wrote in a hybrid language that broke down barriers to experiencing the divine. This is important: for unlike some of the more expert scholars and philosophers, Sufi poets like Hafiz, Rumi and Kabir were known to millions of Muslims throughout the world, learnt by heart, recited at weddings, funerals and feastdays. Their songs of the Qur’an were part of a lived religious imaginary, operating beneath and beyond official ideology (literalist or fundamentalist). Some of them, exposed to clerical courts, were executed for their imaginings. But they have lived on in popular Islamic cultures to this day.

Kabir, and his friend and mystic poetess, Mirabai, denounced the bigotry of narrow religious sects and invited people to seek God within themselves in simplicity, integrity and love. Indeed Kabir described himself as a hybrid ‘child of Allah-Rama’, considering these two deities as different names for the same unnamable God. Interestingly, Kabir refers frequently to God as a stranger at the door, an unexpected visitor from afar, a migrant lover with nowhere to lay his head. The traversal of otherness is, he believes, one of the surest signs of spiritual courage. ‘There is one thing in the world that satisfies’, writes Kabir, ‘and that is meeting with the Guest’. The welcoming of the divine Guest in our everyday midst is a constant theme for Kabir, leading him to transcend doctrinal constraints and tribal restrictions:

*I do not ring the temple bell:*

*I do not set the idol on its throne...*
When you leave off your clothes and
Kill your senses, you do not please the Lord.
The man who is kind and practises righteousness
Who considers all creatures on earth as his own self,
He attains the Immortal Being,
The true God is ever with him (25).

Formed and nurtured in the open culture of Sufi Islam, Kabir pushed the doors wide open to inter-religious belonging:

If God be in the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?
If Ram be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage,
Then who is there to know what happens without?
Hari is in the East: Allah is in the West.
Look within your heart,
For there you will find both Karim and Ram;
All the men and women of the world
Are His living forms.
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram.

Legend tells how on his death, when Hindu and Muslim sects rushed to appropriate his body for rival funeral rites, they found no one lying beneath the shroud - only a bed of jasmine (26).
We have seen how the three Abrahamic religions testify to a basic ambivalence in human responses to the divine stranger. You can kill the stranger as a threatening enemy or overcome the initial fear and respond with a gesture of welcome. Western religion is the history of this either/or and most of its chapters offer evidence of both. That is why it remains to this day a battleground of interpretations. In the beginning was the Word; which means in the beginning was hermeneutics. Emile Benveniste acknowledges the drama of this inaugural ambivalence towards the stranger in his analysis of the common root of our terms, hostility and hospitality. In Latin ‘guest’ is called both hostis and hospes. The first, hostis, can mean variously enemy or host, adversary or guest. As Benveniste explains, referring to the Indo-European genealogy of the term: ‘The primitive notion conveyed by hostis is one who repays my gift with a counter-gift. Thus, like its Gothic counterpart, gasts, Latin Hostis at one period denoted the guest. The classical meaning ‘enemy’ must have been developed when reciprocal relations between clans were succeeded by the exclusive relations of civitas to civitas (cf. Gr. Xenos ‘guest’- ‘stranger’)’ (27). In this manner, according to Benveniste, the ‘word hostis assumed a hostile flavour’(28). The related Latin term, hospes, as noted, also carries the ambivance of both host and guest: that is, the host who receives, or refuses to receive, the stranger as guest. This second term consists of the compound elements hosti-pet-s from both ‘guest’ and ‘master’, so that hospes literally means ‘Guest-Master’. The root pet or pot in turn carries the meaning of power and mastery (potestas) or capacity and potential (potest). So hospes can mean one who is master of the house (demipot) or of his own identity (pats). But it also means one who ‘can’, one who is ‘capable’ of difference,
otherness, of receiving the stranger into the home. And the ‘one who receives’, as Benveniste observes, ‘is not the one who is master of his house’ (29). On the basis of these rich ambivalences in the root terms, *hostis* and *hospes*, Benveniste can conclude that the connection between ‘guest’ and ‘enemy’ supposes that both ‘derive their meaning from ‘stranger’, a sense which is still attested in Latin. The notion of ‘favourable stranger’ developed to ‘guset’; that of ‘hostile stranger’ to ‘enemy’ (30).

‘Every angel is terrible’, as Rilke says in the *Duino Elegies*; and it is our decision as to how we respond. In many religions, we are told, the holy is experienced as a terrifyingly strange yet compelling event: ‘*fascinans et tremendum*’ - both inviting and fearsome (31). From its inception then, religion tells a double story of violence or compassion, of genocide or justice, of *thanatos* or *eros*. And often both at once.

The challenge, I am suggesting, is to struggle with the angels of life and death, turning the pressures of night into the promise of natality. But to return after nocturnal not-knowing, after the abandonment of old Master Gods, to a second light, to a second faith, we must first traverse the dark. And to do this in our time we must engage, I submit, with critical and iconoclastic atheism. For if one does not fully acknowledge the murderous potential of religion, exposed by honest atheistic critiques, how can one hope to embrace the stranger who comes from the desert rather than condemning him/her to exclusion or oblivion? That is why I understand atheism as a-theism, namely, a salutary moment of estrangement, a departure from God (*a-dieu*) which struggles with God (*contre-dieu*) thereby opening the possibility of a return to a God beyond God (*hors-dieu*), a God who may back to us from the future (32). Without such a-theism we would not have the *option*
of ana-theism. The former is a condition of possibility (if by no means necessity) for the latter.
NOTES CHAPTER ONE:


3) See Jonathan Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations* (London: Continuum, 2003). I am grateful to my brother, Tim Kearney, for bringing this text to my attention.

4) Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat, 31a. I am grateful to my Boston College assistant, Sarit Larry, for research on these etymologies and bringing several of these passages to my attention.

5) Michel de Certeau, ‘The Founding Rupture’ cited ‘The Quest of Michel de Certeau’, by Nathalie Zemon Davis, in *New York Review of Books*, Vol LV, no 8, 2008, p 58. Interestingly De Certeau sees the great Christian saints and mystics as visionaries of the epiphany of the Other, in both love and service. He sees Teresa of Avila, for example, as a ‘wanderer, creating convents across Spain for lovers of God; immersed in daily affairs, she can pass in an instant to ecstatic connection with the beloved Other’ (cited p 60). On the mystical rapport between the human and divine stranger, see De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, trans M. Smith (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1992) and Heterologies: Discourse on the Other, Trans W. Godwich
(St Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). See also Michel de Certeau,
‘Mysticism’, Diacritics, summer, 1992: ‘For the mystic to ‘prepare a place’ for the
Other is to prepare a place for others…The mystic is only one among many
others….joining with others and the Other’ (p 20).

6) I am grateful to my friend and colleague, John Manoussakis, for these references to
the Greek Orthodox liturgy.

7) See commentaries on this passage by Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation
Unity between the God of Love and Concrete Love of Neighbour’ in Foundations of
Christian Faith (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2007). See also the commentary
of Rahner’s account by Thomas O’Meara OP, God in the World (Minnesota,
Liturgical Press, 2007). Rahner says of this unity: ‘The other, which mediates the
person to itself, ever more clearly emerges as the personal other whom the person in
knowledge and love encounters. The human environment is such only as a human and
personal world in which man lives in order to come to himself, so that in love he
abides with the other and thereby experiences what is meant by ‘God’ who is the
sphere and the ultimate guarantee of interhuman love’ (cited O’Meara, p. 62). This
passage from the Gospel of Matthew together with the Sermon on the Mount ‘leads
the hearers from an external religion to an interior orientation, one human and
divine…..In religion, no scene is more important than the drama of the end of the
world, the final judgment on individual life. Curiously, in Jesus’ dramatic narrative at
the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, people are judged not by religious ideas
and rituals but by their human treatment of others….the effort (being) to go beneath religion to the reign of God’ (ibid, pp 82-83).


9) Ibid, p. 5

10) Ibid p 4


12) Maqbool Ahmed Siraj, ‘India: A Laboratory of Religious Experiment’ and also note 9 of my Introduction to *Interreligious Imagination*, op.cit, pp 319-328 and p 29. See also the pioneering hermeneutic work of western scholars like James Morris, *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London: Archeype, 2003) and Fred Dallmayr, *Dialogue Among Civilisations* (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2002) as well as the more popular and very influential work by Karen Armstrong, *Islam* (New York: Modern Library, New York, 2002), especially her arguments for an enlightened Islamic hermeneutics which refused dogmatic reductionism and emphasized instead the crucial role of symbols in the language of the Quran and its central message of tolerance, peace and respect for the weak and the stranger (dating back to its reclamation of the story of the estranged Ishmael); see in particular pp30-31, 101-103 and 70-77. On the important historical role of an Islamic hermeneutics of the Koran, see also Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, pp 335-337.

13) Maqbood Siraj, *op cit* pp 335 f.
14) For the full document issued by the Muslim scholars in October 2007 see www:acommonword.com. Several of the key points of this manifesto were in fact anticipated by the interreligious council in Florence in the late 15th century and Nicholas of Cusa’s text, De Pace Fidei where Christian-Muslim dialogue finds powerful expression. Nicholas of Cusa played a key role in the Council of Florence in bringing about the union of the Churches on the basis of the highest common denominator, to which several religions were also invited. At the time of the council’s conclusions in the 1493, Cusa was thirty eight years old and therefore, compared to the other Church fathers present, a relatively young man. However if one takes into consideration Cusa’s complete works, by which he became, so to speak, the ‘gatekeeper to the new era’ and a founder of modern natural science and advocate of a revolutionary mystical poetics and interconfessional exchange, then it is not surprising that he should have contributed so much in practice and content, to make the union of the churches possible – even if history failed to realize the promise. His book, De Pace Fidei, is considered to be one of the most pioneering works on interreligious conversation between the Abrahamic faiths. I am grateful to my friend, Joseph O’Leary, for bringing this and related points on interconfessional hospitality to my attention.

15) See Fred Dallmayr, ‘”Reason, Faith and Politics” in Dialogue among Civilisations, p 129. For Averroes important scriptural doctrines like ‘Creation from nothing’ or the ‘resurrection of the body’ called for a broad tolerance of ‘different readings and construals’ p. 129. Against the orthodox literalists he offered three different possible interpretations advising that ‘it is every man’s duty to believe whatever his study
leads him to conclude’; and he added that ‘a scholar who commits an error in this matter is excused, while one who is correct receives thanks and a reward’ (p.129).


17) Ibid, p 133. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘How Muslims Made Europe’, *New York Review*, vol LV, no 17, 2008 pp 59-62. Appiah writes that in Islamic al-Andalus, Christians and Jews were able to ‘share its manifold intellectual and material treasures. Had the three religions not worked together, borrowing from the pagan traditions of Greece and Rome, what we call the West would have been utterly different. In an age where some claim a struggle between the heirs of Christendom and of the Caliphate is the defining conflict, it is good to be reminded of this history of fruitful cohabitation’ (p 62).


22) For these and other references to Hafiz on the question of interreligious imagination, see Kascha Semon, ‘Atheism, Theism and Anatheism in Hafiz of Shiraz’, The Other Journal, Marshall College, April 2008.

23) Hafiz The Gift, 92


27) Emile Benveniste, Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européenes (Paris: Ed de Minuit, 1969) ; Indo-European language and Soceity, trans J. Lallot, (London : Faber and Faber, 1973), pp 71. A similar ambiguity may be found in related term such as ‘guest’, which derives from the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic terms ‘Gast’, connoting a ghastly intruder or a healing spirit – in other words holy or unholy ghosts pp 72-83).

28) Ibid. p 78. Benveniste begins his account of the process by drawing attention to the element ‘-pet-’ in the word, this “originally meant personal identity. In the family group […] it is the master who is eminently ‘himself’” (Benveniste, p 71) Thus, in the first place, inscribed within the term ‘hospitality’ is a fundamental concern with identity. In this light, it is particularly interesting that this etymology develops in what initially appears to be completely divergent directions. In other words, the word betrays its other, or/and the other is ‘always already’ inscribed within this site of identity. See also here Jacques Derrida’s commentary on Benveniste in Of Hospitality (Stanford,
Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). The traces of contradiction between self-identity and the stranger live on in what Derrida has termed the pact of hospitality, within which one’s contradictory status as host and guest is determined. Taking his lead from Benveniste, Derrida outlines how this pact of hospitality, "inscribes the xenos in the xenia, which is to say the pact, in the contract or collective alliance of that name. Basically there is no xenos, there is no foreigner before or outside the xenia" (Derrida, p 29). I am grateful to Aidan O’Malley for this reference. See also our analysis in ‘Aliens and Others’ in Strangers, Gods and Monsters (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 63-82.

29) Benveniste, p 78. This more positive sense of the hospitable host as one who receives and welcomes the ‘guest’ as other, stranger, foreigner in a reciprocal gesture is gradually overcome in the development of anonymous states and regimes: “one of the Indo-European expressions of this institution (of hospitality as reciprocal obligation) is precisely the Latin term hostis, with its Gothic correspondent gasts and the Slavic gospodi. In historical times the custom had lost its force in the Roman world: it presupposes a type of relationship which was no longer compatible with the established regime. When an ancient society becomes a nation, the relations between man and man, clan and clan, are abolished. All that persists is the distinction between what is inside and outside the civitas. By a development of which we do not know the exact conditions, the word hostis assumed a ‘hostile’ favour and henceforward it is only applied to the enemy’(p 78).
Ibid, p 75. *Hostis* preserves its ancient value of ‘stranger’ in the Law of the Twelve Tables, for example: *adversus hostem aeterna auctoritas est* (p 76). In addition to this meaning we find related terms like *hostorium* (a measuring instrument for keeping different entities level) and *hostilina* (equalization or equitable compensation in work) – both connoting a just exchange and reciprocity between self and other. We also find the more ritualistic sense of *hostia* meaning a compensatory offering to the Gods in return for their favours. In contrast to, *peregrinus*, the stranger who lived outside the boundaries of the pact or the territory, the *hostis* becomes the stranger who is recognized as having equal rights to those within the state (e.g. Roman citizens). Thus the emergence of a particular notion of hospitality as implying the reciprocity of a compact or agreement, a notion of compensatory exchange reminiscent of Marcel Mauss’s famous notion of *potlatch* – a series of gifts and counter-gifts practiced by the natives of Northwest America: a practice of instituting compelling economic and social bonds between tribes and families and their descendants. Benveniste notes accordingly: ‘Hospitality…is founded on the idea that a man is bound to another (*hostis* always involves the notion of reciprocity) by the obligation to compensate a gift or service from which he has benefited’ (p 77). And he goes on to note that the same institution exists under different names in Greek where the *xenos* is someone bound reciprocally in a pact (*xenia*) under the protection of Zeus Xenios. ‘The guest (the one received) is the *xenos* and he who receives is the *xendokhos*’ (p. 78) Hence the Homeric example of Diomedes and Glaucus cited in our text above
which exemplifies a symmetrical exchange which is, for Benveniste, contractually binding. And, moving further afield, this notion of mutual giving and return is exemplified in the Iranian term for ‘guest’ (aryaman) as ‘intimate friend’, or in the fact that Aryaman is the Indo-Iranian god of hospitality, associated in the Rig Veda with marriage: ‘Aryaman intervenes when a woman taken from outside the clan is introduced for the first time as a wife into her new family’ (p 83). Benveniste concludes his detailed analysis of the various etymological roots of hospitality in different cultures and languages thus: ‘These terms, far removed from one another, came back to the same problem: that of institutions of welcoming and reciprocity, thanks to which the men of a given people find hospitality in another, and whereby societies enter into alliances and exchanges’ (p 83). Benveniste’s socio-cultural-linguistic account of the complex and ambivalent genealogy of the terms for hospitality offers a useful ‘Indo-European’ counterpart to our own more ‘Abrahamic’ account in this volume. His sociological and anthropological method complements our own more philosophical and ethico-religious one (where the asymmetry or a transcendent Other giving itself to the human subject accompanies the symmetry of receiving and loving the Other as oneself or oneself as another).

‘mysticism…had for is place an *elsewhere* and for its sign an *anti-society*
which nevertheless would represent the initial ground (*fonds*) of man’ (p 12).
In other words, the mystical is the ‘strange’ and ‘marginal’ – ‘what becomes
mystical is that which diverges from normal or ordinary paths; that which is
no longer inscribed within the social community of faith or religious
references, but rather on the margins of an increasingly secularized
society…’”p 13). Mystical otherness is deeply paradoxical: ‘In one of its
aspects, it is on the side of the abnormal, a rhetoric of the strange; in the other,
it is on the side of an ‘essential’ that its whole discourse announces without
being able to express…but it is so in order to speak of what can be neither said
nor known…what is mystical remains secret and invisible…mystical in Greek
means hidden’ (pp 13, 16).

32) See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* (The
CHAPTER TWO: IN THE WAGER: THE FIVEFOLD MOTION

‘Great moments often knock at the door of our life like a heartbeat so small we scarcely hear it’ (Pasternak, Letter to Olga).

i: Five Movements

The anatheist wager I am trying to describe has five main characteristics: it is imaginative, comic, committed, discerning and hospitable. I will say a word about each in turn, though strictly speaking they do not constitute five sequential moments, chronologically separated in time, but rather equiprimordial aspects of a single hermeneutic arc. Wagers occur in an instant, all at once. But they are complex, shrouded in a halo of multilayered motions. And there is much, we shall see, that precedes and follows them.

a) Imagination: One cannot wager unless one has options to choose from. Such choice, to be free, presupposes our ability to imagine different possibilities in the same person, to see the Other before us as a stranger to be welcomed or rejected. This sense of primordial openness to the Stranger means that our perception is already a hermeneutic ‘seeing as’. From the start, it is a primary interpretation inscribed in our bodily response, emotion and affect, prior to any theoretical reflection. To respond in fear or welcome – as dramatised in the celebrated paintings of Mary in the
Annunciation or of Jacob wrestling with the angel – already implies a movement of primary imagining. Indeed the act of faith - as belief in the possibility of the impossible, of a possibility beyond the impossible - would be inconceivable without this instantaneous response of imagination. As the Islamic sage, Ibn al-Arabi put it, the angels of God always appear to us, first and foremost, through the ‘imaginal’ – the inner invisible meaning (ma na) becoming visible to us in the form of appearance (sura). And as so many great mystics noted, when describing visions and visitations, the imagination is a ‘bride of God’ serving as bridge between the spiritual and corporeal worlds. ‘Revelation begins with imagination…The angel imaginalizes (takhayyul) itself as a man, or as a person who is perceived….the angel casts the words of his Lord in the prophet’s hearing, and this is revelation’. If we have no imagination we cannot open our eyes and ears to the Stranger who comes. Here speaks the divine suitor in Ibn’ Arabi’s words:

_Dear_ly _be_ loved

_I have called you so often and you have not heard me_

_I have shown myself to you so often and you have not seen me._

_I have made myself fragrant so often, and you have not smelled me,_

_Savorous food, and you have not tasted me._

_Why can you not reach me through the object you touch_

_Or breathe me through sweet perfumes?_

_Why do you not see me? Why do you not hear me?_

_Why? Why? Why?_

This inaugural moment of imagining – divine call and human response – is also poignantly captured by modern artists of epiphany from Hopkins and Rilke to Chagall and Rouault. Indeed most great works of religious art may be seen as responses to such an imaginative summons. And perhaps that is what Dostoyevsky meant, in The Idiot, when he said that ‘only beauty can save the world’. I shall return to this question in my study of sacramental aesthetics in chapters four and five.

The primal moment of imagination is also crucial to ethics. For without imagination there is no empathy between self and other. Imagining the other as other is what enables the self to become a host and the stranger a guest. Empathy, as Edith Stein reminds us, is the ‘experience of foreign consciousness’. It is a’ primordial experience of the non-primaridal’, in that what is given to me by the other remains foreign to me in its very giveneness. It never becomes fully myself, but only another in myself and for myself. A gap thus always remains and, as such, solicits imagination to respond to the irreducible transcendence and alterity of the stranger before me. In the process I am transformed into a host (oneself as another) who receives the visitor as guest (another as oneself). But always as an act of gracious imagining, for the stranger is never ‘really’ translatable into my language of experience in any total or adequate sense. I greet the Other by imagining the Other ‘as’ Other (metaphorically) or ‘as if” the Other were like me (fictively).

Empathy can only work by analogy. For empathy to become sympathy – that is, feeling with the other as though one was the other - an act of imagination is called for. We can only murder strangers if we cannot imagine what it is like to be them. The ‘like’ carries both similarity and difference. In imagination, in short, I both am and am not the
stranger. And this in turn involves a double movement of action and passion: I actively imagine what it is to be like the stranger as I passively assume the stranger’s summons and sufferings. I will return to his point under our fifth heading, *hospitality*, below.

b) *Comedy*: This second movement is sometimes overlooked in official religious doctrines where cheerless sanctimony can mask the essentially comic character of the wager. By comedy I mean here the human ability to encounter and compose opposites: what I see is impossible and possible at one and the same time. So the barren Sarah, at the entrance of her tent, laughs when she hears she’ll be with child; just as Mary, in the quiet of her boudoir, says ‘Amen’ - meaning: let the inconceivable be conceived, let the uncontainable be contained in the fruit of the womb (*chora achoraton*). The comic, as Bergson reminds us, is a creative response to enigma, contradiction and paradox. It makes of our relationship to the ungraspable Other a continuous divine comedy.

To focus first on the Christian scriptures, we might recall Jesus’s playful exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well (as he teases her about her five husbands and lying about the fifth); his conversion of water into wine to celebrate the marriage feast of Cana; his frequent riddling to his disciples about his identity - ‘Who do you say that I am?’ echoing Exodus 3: 15 – or his posthumous visitation to his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee as an unrecognisable cook! ‘Come and have breakfast’ are not the first words the apostles expected to hear from their risen Messiah! Not to mention the multiple comic reversals, puns and conundrums that recur throughout the Gospels: the
last as first, the mountain moving, the kingdom as mustard seed, the rich man and the
eye of a needle etc.

The story of Jesus’s own life is itself divinely comic, moreover, to the extent
that it was largely lived, as Kierkegaard observed, ‘incognito’. It is the drama of a Holy
Fool disappearing in presence and appearing in absence, at once there and not there
(‘Noli me tangere’). Jesus pre-exists his historical existence (‘Before Abraham was I
am’) at the same time as he outlives it (‘I must go so that the Paraclete can come’). And
this comic sense of the Stranger, as one who comes in the disguise of the least of these,
masked and incognito, is also one brilliantly evoked by the great Sufi poets of Islam.
Divine visitation as a game of hide and seek. Indeed one of Hafiz’s most renowned
ghazals is entitled ‘I Heard God Laughing’; and his dazzling Divans are replete with
incidents where the poet banters and jokes with his divine lover. One might also note
here the amusing Hasidic and rabbinical tales regarding messianic reversals and comic
surprises – for example, the famous story of the beggar who approaches the Messiah at
the gates of Rome and, tapping him on the shoulder, asks: ‘When will you come?’
Messianic time, disrupting the familiar continuum of history and turning past and future
on their heads, is divinely comic.

Humor, in this special sense, is at root humility before the excess of meaning
which the divine stranger carries like a halo round its head. The stranger surpasses the
limits of accredited cognitions, calling us back to our earthly share as mortals in search of
something ‘more’. The highest as lowest, the master as servant; everything is upside
down in the logic of sacred alterity. You either laugh or cry. Humor and humility remind
us that we are humans because we are creatures of the earth (humus). Finite, temporal,
mortal, natal. We laugh, like Sarah, when we see God because we are terrestrial beings
facing divine surplus. True mystics and saints were, it is often said, noted for their
humor. Recall Eckhart: ‘God told me a joke and seeing him laugh taught me more than
all the Scriptures’. But Chief High Executioners and Grand Inquisitors are incapable of
laughing at the divine comedy of existence.

We laugh or cry when we do not know. This is the modesty of nescience illustrated
by the 4th century Egyptian monk who wrote in the Apophthegmata of the Desert
Fathers: ‘Truly, Abbot Joseph has found the way, because he has said: ‘I do not know’’
(iii a).

c) Commitment: The third movement of the wager is commitment. Our response to the
stranger is already a decision. We choose, we commit, we say: Here I stand or do not
stand. The openness of imagination and humor to contrary options is simultaneously
accompanied by a moment of choice. (Even if that choice is to have no choice – to
remain in indecision – it is still a choice: namely, the choice not to choose). This is
the moment of ‘Here I am’ (Hinenee) famously witnessed by Abraham, Moses and
the prophets in the conversion moments of their lives. It is the moment where Jesus,
after the anxious equivocations of Gethsemane (“Let this chalice pass’) and the loss
of faith on the cross (‘Why have You forsaken me’?), returns to the wager of second
faith: ‘Unto Thee I commend my spirit’. It is the instant when Mohammad, in the
cave at Mecca, says yes to the voice of Islam that is bidding him open his lips and
respond. We are speaking here, in sum, of a moment of truth - as troth - where we do
not know the truth but do the truth. *Facere veritatem*, as Augustine put it.


Commitment, in this sense of betrothal, is the movement of the wager which makes truth primarily – though not exclusively - a matter of existential transformation (*metanoia*). Such performative truth-as-trust is inscribed in tactile and testimonial promise. (Though it is no less hermeneutic for that). If God had truth in his right hand, as Lessing noted, and the striving for truth in the left, we should choose the left. In the anatheist wager, truth becomes possible as a commitment of betrothal.

d) The fourth aspect of the wager is *discernment*. Again, this does not come after the other aspects but is simultaneous with them. There can be no commitment, for example, without discernment, and vice versa. Though this wager of discernment may occur, I repeat, at the most basic affective and preconceptual levels. This is where we distinguish between a blind leap of faith and a wise one. The wager of response is not irrational. It is, as Ricoeur reminds us, hermeneutically vigilant and alert. And this means that every seeing is a *seeing as*, a reading of the Stranger as this or that other, as love or hate, life or death. Of course this is no easy matter; which is why Kierkegaard was right to say that faith is an experience of ‘fear and trembling’ (if over-hasty to add that it is absurd). Reading the face of the other is difficult, often disorienting and puzzling; but it is never completely impossible. If it were, every meeting with the divine would be a blind date. But an anatheist perspective suggests that even if the stranger shows up in the dark we receive him/her with eyes wide open. When we see or sense the holy we humbly open
ourselves to the enigma of the Other and commit. That is why we are always already ‘discerning between spirits’. We do not, as Ignatius knew, consent to just any kind of Other, simply because they are other. And this is where we take issue not only with Kierkegaard and the fideists, but also with Derrida and the deconstructionists for whom ‘every other is every other’ (tout autre est tout autre).

Not every stranger is divine. There is the other who kills and the other who brings life. The other who loves and the other who lies. The knock on the door may be the Lord (qua host) inviting us to a feast or (qua guest) seeking entry to our home; but it may also be a psychotic murderer, a torturer come to inflict pain on innocents, a rapist bent on violating loved ones. (Derrida admits as much but says we have no way of knowing the difference between one kind of other and another.iv). While some others bring peace, other others bring crusades, pogroms and genocides, claiming to have God on their side. The examples are too legion to ignore. One cannot be naïve in assuming that we, humans, are capable of unconditional or indiscriminate welcome to any and every other who approaches. (Perhaps that is the prerogative of God? And we are not gods).

If Abraham, Jesus and Mohammad listened to an Other who brought life, there are countless instances in history of people who did the opposite, namely, listened to voices that bade innocents be murdered in the Name of God. And even the most holy, as we saw, were not always exempt. Already with Abraham there was a voice that him kill his son and a voice that bad him save him. He discerned and chose wisely, love over death; he received Isaac back as gift. Jesus heard a voice that bad him offer his life in service to Others and another voice (in the desert) which tempted him
to become a Master God of spectacle (turning stone to bread) and triumph (possessing the cities of the world). He discerned and chose wisely, love over power; he healed the sick, washed his friends’ feet and broke bread. And even when Jesus seemed tempted to compare the alien Phoenician woman to a dog waiting for crumbs from the table, he, the Holy Stranger of Israel, learned from this most estranged of beings to recognize true faith in the humble foreigner become him: Jesus and the Phoenician outsider exchanged the roles of host and guest. Jesus was ready to learn from the ‘least of these’.

And so on, down through the lives of other holy ones, prophets and saints. There is always a discernment to be made - often in the middle of the night, in the depth of a cave, in an instant of holy not-knowing - when the ‘thin small voice’ whispers. And such discernments are often made in a moment, by the body, by the ear and eye, as in the Botticelli portrait of Mary which shows her move from withdrawal to consent. Discernment is a matter of prereflective carnal response to the advent of the Other before it becomes a matter of reflective cognitive evaluation. Hermeneutics goes all the way down. It begins in our nerve endings, organs and sensations. Our most basic existential moods – fear and love, anxiety and wonder – are, as Heidegger and the phenomenologists noted, already modes of prepredicative interpretation: they follow the basic structure of understanding-as. Sartre recognized as much when he defined emotions as ‘structured means towards an end’, as did Scheler when he characterized feelings as intentional responses to deep values. And Merleau-Ponty goes futher still when he claims that ‘perception already stylizes’ and that every bodily function has its own distinct symbolique. Even our unconscious dreams – unfolding in the darkest hours
of night – are already ways of responding to our enigmatic world, as Freud demonstrated in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. To respond to the Other is always already to have chosen, to have interpreted, even if we are not yet cognitively aware of doing so. Which is why cognition of the stranger is always a matter of re-cognition.

But, I repeat: the matter is complex. As acknowledged above, history tells of many who did *not* choose wisely or well, invoking the voice of God to prosecute the most heinous atrocities. Even in our own so-called civilized time horrific acts have been carried out by crazed people who claim to hear a voice from God: Jim Jones, David Koresh, Charles Manson, Osama Bin Laden...the list goes on. And Schneider’s famous psychotic accounts to Freud of how God penetrated his very being are not that different, at first blush, from countless popular descriptions of ‘alien abductions’ or indeed, more disturbingly, from Teresa of Avila’s personal testimony to mystical ‘transverberation’.

This is why so many of the great saints and mystics, who claimed to hear divine voices or receive holy visitations of divine eros, scrupulously insisted upon disciplined criteria of discernment, chief amongst them being the distinction between the divine visitor who brings peace and compassion and counterfeits who bring confusion and division. The drama of discernment involves an intense act of attention starting at the most basic carnal level and accompanying the movements of imagination, commitment and humility (which includes the wisdom to learn from initial mistakes and misreadings). This multi-layered hermeneutic drama - extending from embodied pre-reflection to critical reflection - is indispensable to the anatheist wager.
5) The final moment of the anatheist wager is *hospitality* proper. This last moment is in fact there from the beginning and co-terminous with the other four. If discernment is integral to the anatheist wager, as argued, this does not mean that knowledge trumps love. Far from it. At best, love of the stranger is a form of ‘faith seeking knowledge’ (*fides quaerens intellectus*), knowing all the while that we never have absolute knowledge of the absolute. (To think otherwise, like Hegel or certain hyper-rationalists is to risk totalizing knowledge and politics). The love of the host for the guest always precedes and exceeds knowledge. Indeed, as Scheler notes in *Love and Knowledge*, a frequent error of Western metaphysics has been to see love and eros as a means to knowledge rather than as the end of all knowledge⁶. Of course, the role of knowledge in hospitality is complex. When we discern - as we wager before the face of the stranger - we always run the risk of being mistaken, of getting it wrong. But such risk is not groundless. Love – as compassion and justice – is the watermark. There is a discernible difference between one who gives water to the thirsty and one who does not, between one who heals and one who maims, between one who hosts and one who shuts the door. Even if sometimes it is hard to fully understand the difference hospitality and hostility.

The ability to serve as gracious host is not, however, only a matter of discerning between strangers; it is also a matter of discerning between selves. We might say, to borrow from Ricoeur, that the self that wagers is one ‘refigured’ by opening itself to other possibilities of being. So doing it passes through a certain ‘nothingness’, an act of self-dispossession from the familiar, habituated ego. This dying unto the ego, this caesura or rupture of ascesis, is not in itself *nothing* but the self ‘deprived of sameness’⁷. It is the self defamiliarized, exposed to difference, alert to alternatives of alterity. It is the self
become a stranger to itself as it encounters the stranger beyond itself. Creative and chiasmic estrangment. *Moi* become *soi.* Ricoeur surmises that it is likely that ‘the most dramatic transformations of personal identity pass through the crucible of this nothingness of identity’, without which selfhood would be doomed to brute repetition\(^\text{viii}\). And one might compare this motion of disowning oneself as ego (so as to become oneself-as-another) to the empty square of Levi-Strauss’ transformations. It is certainly integral to the movement of hospitality for only in forgetting oneself as ego can one become host to the radically incoming Stranger.

The refiguration of ego into host is not limitless however. There are limits to hospitality, at least for finite beings. Only God, as Origen observed with his notion of ‘universal redemption’, can love all beings indiscriminately, unconditionally, without why. Or the Buddha, for whom there are ‘no enemies’. Even Christ had to ask his Father to forgive his enemies, the man in him appealing to the divine in him: ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do’. Unconditional hospitality is divine, not human. Which does not mean that we should not try to emulate the divine, while acknowledging our limits. But the divine is always a surplus, an excess beyond and beneath us, more than we can humanely manage: hence forever a stranger who beckons us towards the other always other than ourselves.

This hospitality applies not just within religions but between religions. And also, I would add, beyond religions (one cannot exclude the atheist as host and guest). To be truly hospitable one must be prepared to host not just those within our faith culture, but those alien to it. Love of self and love of neighbor ineluctably lead to love of strangers: which is no doubt why the commandment says: ‘Love God (the Stranger) and love your
neighbour as yourself’. Here we touch on the important question of inter-religious hospitality as a task of radical translation.
Inter-religious translation is, I suggest, at the heart of anatheism. It is a summons of imagination to transmigrate between one religion and another. Ricoeur calls this ‘interconfessional hospitality’ and he relates it, in turn, to the notions of i) *linguistic hospitality* as an exchange between host and guest languages, and ii) *eucharistic hospitality* as an exchange between selves and strangers (human and divine). Starting with the basic hermeneutic paradigm of translation, he writes: ‘Bringing the reader to the author, bringing the author to the reader, at the risk of serving and of betraying two masters: this is to practice what I like to call linguistic hospitality. It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resemble it: confessions, religions, are they not like languages that are foreign to one another, with their lexicon, their grammar, their rhetoric, their stylistics which we must learn in order to make our way into them. And is Eucharistic hospitality not to be taken up with the same risks of translation-betrayal, but also with the same renunciation of the perfect translation?’

I will return to a discussion of these ‘risks’ in my conclusion. For now let us recall how the power of trans-religious hospitality is evinced in certain breakthrough events of the wisdom traditions: Moses taking an African spouse; Solomon embracing the Shulammit woman; Jesus greeting the Samaritan woman at the well; or, to extend our range of reference, the Buddha welcoming those from alien and alienated castes; Sufi poets responding to the ‘uninvited guest’; or the famous instance of Baucis and Philomen receiving Zeus and Hermes as disguised ‘strangers’. Indeed, in classical texts, there is a common epithet attributed to Zeus - *Zeus Xenios* - meaning Zeus the
protector of strangers. An offence against him, that is, against one’s responsibilities for the stranger, was considered the worst sin. This ethic of hospitality is powerfully manifest in Homer’s code of filoxenia in the Odyssey (think of how the Phaiaikians welcome Odysseus) and in his code of xenia in the Iliad (Glaucus and Domedes refuse to kill each other in the sixth book when they acknowledge how they are bound by hospitality: ‘You are for me a guest (xeinos),’ says Diomedes, ‘I am your host in the heart of Argolid and you are mine in Lycia...let us avoid each other’s javelin and instead exchange our weapons so that everyone may know we are hereditary guests’). The ethic of hospitality is also witnessed in the Socratic welcome of the Eleatic Stranger and the outsider Gorgias.

But such examples are not confined to ancient epochs. In contemporary times, we might invoke here the momentous impact of inter-religious exchanges such as the Assisi gathering of world religions in 1986; the pilgrimages of Pope John Paul II to India and to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem in the 1990s; the meeting between the Grand Mufti and the Greek Patriarch in Sarajevo in the midst of sectarian slaughter; the revolutionary addresses by Eastern spiritual leaders like Vivekananda, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama to western religious gatherings such as the World Parliament of Religions or the World Council of Churches. Not to mention the ordinary healing encounters across sectarian divides witnessed in recent decades in places like Sarajevo, Hanoi, Warsaw and Northern Ireland.

Regarding the famous Belfast Agreement, I am reminded especially of the historic handshake between the Catholic (one-time seminarian) leader, John Hume, and the arch-
Protestant leaders, David Trimble and Ian Paisley, which led to the final peace settlement of 1998. The key to the breakthrough, as noted in our Preface, was a simple act of reciprocal translation captured in the formula: ‘Citizens of Northern Ireland may be British or Irish or both’. The exclusivist claims of a United Kingdom and a United Ireland (based on mutually incompatible sovereignty principles) were thus renounced in favour of a trans-national compact of different peoples and faiths. And as is well known, this involved not just a translation of ideologies but a ‘translation of hearts’.

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Cross-reading is a core principle of inter-religious hermeneutics. It involves an endless and reversible process of translation between one religion and the next: a process whose aim is not some unitary fusion but mutual disclosure and enhancement. Interconfessional dialogue does not eliminate differences but welcomes them, as the etymological root, *dia-legein* suggests. Here hospitality can only be an opening of self to stranger if the self is a self and the stranger a stranger. As already observed, we welcome the other as *other* not simply as the *same* as myself. Or as Edith Stein put it, genuine empathy with another is always a ‘primordial encounter with the non-primordial’ (that is, with what escapes our immediate grasp or projection). Only through the shock of affinity through alterity does something new emerge.

Let me take some examples from transcriptual reading. What happens, for instance, if we read the text about Shiva’s pillars of fire alongside biblical passages on the Burning Bush or the Christian account of Pentecostal flame? What new sparks of understanding and compassion fly up if we read Hindu texts on the *guha* alongside Buddhist invocations of the ‘void’ (in the Heart Sutra) or biblical references to Elijah or Mohammad in his
cave, Jonah in the whale, Jesus in the tomb? What novel possibilities of semantic resonance are generated by juxtaposing the sacred bird (*hamsa*) of Vedanta alongside the dove of Noah’s ark or of Christ’s baptism in the Jordan? Not to mention the way in which the Islamic invocation of the Lote Tree (in Mohommet’s *mi’raj* of ascent) may inter-animate with such motifs as the tree of Paradise, the thorn bush of Exodus 3.15, Jesus’s crown of thorns or the famous *axis mundi* tree of Vedantin cosmokgonies and Buddhist mandalas? We might wonder, finally, how sculpted images of the Hindu Trimurti (three faced deity) might powerfully reinvigorate an understanding of Abraham’s three strangers or the three persons of the Christian Trinity?

An initial hypothesis arising from such symbolic crossovers between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions, is that semantic exchange is at the heart of religious dialogue. Something new arises from multi-lateral transcriptions between the ancient imaginaries of diverse wisdom traditions. Out of the silent dark of the heart-cave – from which many religions originate and to which they often return - emerges a chorus of sounds, images and gestures soliciting endless translation into different liturgies. This very translatability fosters the transversality of religions. It makes inter-spiritual conversation into a fertile crossroads where distinct paths traverse and intersect. And it lies, I submit, at the very heart of anatheism as a return to God after God, that is, as an invitation to rediscover forgotten truths of one’s own faith by traversing alien faiths. Just think, for instance, of how the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh bring out new meanings in their reading of Christian scriptures? Or how Christian translators like Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths or Henri Le Saux bring fresh perspectives to bear on certain holy Eastern texts? Not to mention the great Islamic translations of Vendantin classics by the likes of Buruni, Akbar
and Zafar. Certainly Indian figures like Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and Gandhi all acknowledged that their exposure to Western religions enabled them to better reclaim the precious emancipatory potentials of their own Hindu traditions. For if Western religions can, for instance, learn from their Eastern counterparts how to recover a renewed sense of breath, body, and the holiness of all sentient beings, Eastern religions may learn from this dialogue a greater sense of personal selfhood, creative agency and active commitment to historical transformation. If religions were the same rather than different, there would be no stranger to learn from, no alien to welcome to one’s home. Genuine dialogue – as a welcoming of difference – would be impossible.

We will return to the question of interreligious hospitality in our concluding chapters below. For now let me state my conviction that the mutual crossing of religions does not lead to some spiritual Super Highway but to a confluence of multiple roads. The traversals proliferate in spiritual and semantic diversity just as fish flourish where sea-tides meet fresh waters. The hermeneutics of hospitality finds rich hatching grounds in the cross-currents between different spiritual rivers. The wager here is that it is precisely at the edges of imagination – before and after theory, ideology or dogma – that the aboriginal signs of the heart-well are first sounded and received. This is called darshan in Sanskrit, meaning sacred manifestation: the becoming visible and audible of the divine in image, sound or liturgy. The wager of imagination invites one to attend to the primary scenes and stages of embodying the ultimate, so finely celebrated by Mahayana Buddhism, Hindu puja or the great religious art works of Jewish, Christian and Islamic cultures. These embodiments of the sacred I call ‘epiphanies’; and I will argue in chapters
four and five that such epiphanies are not confined to official religions but are found in both literary and everyday lived experiences of sacramental imagination.

In sum, I am wagering here on the possibility of a spiritual acoustics capable of re-interpreting the oldest cries of the religious heart in both our sacred and secular worlds. But to open oneself to such radical attention one must, I suggest, abandon the old God of sovereignty and theodicy. That Master-God must die so that the God of interconfessional hospitality can be born. And in so far as religious dogma has often served as vehicle of infantile fear and dependency, the interreligious God may be described as a post-dogmatic God. That is why anatheism advocates a rigorous a-theistic critique of the theistic perversions of religion, as salutary estrangement prior to a return to the genuinely sacred.

iii: From Sovereign to Servant: the Power of the Powerless

Another aspect of the fivefold wager worth emphasizing at this point is the powerlessness of the divine. Here I take up again the idea of micro-eschatology as a rediscovery of God in epiphanies of the everyday. Revisiting my previous analyses in After God and The God who May Be, I wish to focus especially on the notion of Incarnation as kenosis. By this I understand the self-emptying of the omnipotent God, the surpassing of metaphysical categories of divinity as First Cause or Highest Being, the realization that God is a promise, a call, a desire to love and be loved which can not be at all, unless we allow God to be God. ‘You God cannot be God unless we create a dwelling place for you in our hearts’, Etty Hillesum wrote in a concentration camp shortly before her death. The greatest danger for religion is to assume sovereign power. And this can
mean both sacred sovereignty and political sovereignty (as in the infamous conflation of spiritual and temporal powers in the hands of a territorial regent: *cuius regio eius religio*). The refusal of triumphal sovereignty is, I believe, firmly inscribed, if be no means always observed, in the Abrahamic faiths: in the Hebraic command to love the ‘widow the orphan and the stranger’, in the Christian welcoming of Samaritan outcasts and in the Islamic message to accommodate the uninvited Guest.

I shall offer a more extensive discussion of divine kenosis and non-sovereignty in chapters 6 and 7 below, so suffice it now to note that the concept of God as absolute Monarch of the Universe stems from a literalist reading of the Bible along with unfortunate misapplications of a metaphysics of causal omnipotence and self-sufficiency. This has led to the ruinously influential notion of theodicy, namely, the belief that God as Sovereign *causa sui*, as immutable Emperor of the world, exercises arbitrary and unlimited powers over his creatures. Everything – even the worst horrors – could thus be justified as part of some divine Will (the ultimate Will To Power). The philosopher, Max Scheler, has a spirited riposte to the God of theodicy in his essay on ‘The Meaning of Suffering’, written during the terrors of the First World War. Vehemently resisting any form of ‘teleological theism’ which seeks to legitimate events of human suffering in light of an overall Divine Cause, he writes: ‘If I had wanted to come to the idea of the existence of God by means of a cause-effect connection starting from nature and the existence of the world as known to me empirically, and not from an original, personal and experiential contact of the core of my personality with a divine goodness and wisdom as found in a religious act, then even if the rest of the world shines in peace, bliss, and harmony, the existence of a single sensation of pain in a worm would completely suffice
to destroy my belief in an ‘infinitely’ good and almighty creator of the worldxiv.

Theodicy and theocracy, as I will argue, are miscreant offspring of theistic Sovereignty. The alternative, I suggest, is ana athleticism of the stranger. Not as some final dialectical synthesis at the end of history but as a timely repetition forwards of the oldest story in the book. At least as old as the theism of sovereignty or the atheism of its negation.

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The preferential option for hospitality over sovereignty affects our understanding of both being (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology). At the level of being, it privileges the may-be of the eschaton over the has-been of accomplished history. This calls for a ‘weak messianism’ (Benjamin) which bids us redeem the forgotten voices of history by retrieving their ‘impeded possibilities’, thereby emancipating the past into a futurexv.  

This eschatological giving of a future to the past is witnessed for example in Gen 3.15 when Yahweh tells Moses he is not just a prerogative of ancestral memory but the promise that he ‘will be’ with his people in their struggle for emancipation. ‘I am who will be with you’. I am the God who may be, can be, shall be, if you listen to my summons and choose liberty over slavery, life over death, eros over thanatos. And this same eschatological paradox of past-as-future is at work in the Palestinian formula of the Passover which instructs us to remember the feast of the Passover ‘until he comes’. It is reprised in the Christian invocation of ‘anticipatory memory ‘ at the Last Supper (I Corinthians 11: 25-26: ‘’for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes’). And it finds additional echoes in John the Baptist’s famous avowal of Jesus ‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me’ (John : 1.15).
The Messianic exists before us (‘before Abraham was I am’) as the possibility which lies ahead of us. It heralds the one who comes before and after every ‘god’ we presume to possess, the sacred stranger who is always in front of us, always to come. Which is surely why Jesus refuses the allure of self-possessed power, priority and privilege, insisting that he be baptized by John rather than the contrary. ‘I need to be baptized by you’, says John bemusedly, ‘and yet you are coming to me?’ (Matthew 3.15). The washing of the apostles’ feet (John 13) and subsequent enduring of death for others signals the conversion of sovereignty into hospitality. It epitomizes the anatheistic option for self-emptying service to strangers. Refusal of imperial power.

This reversal of Sovereign Being is echoed in the overturning of Sovereign Knowledge. Jesus does not tell his disciples who he is; he asks them who he is! ‘Who do they say that I am?’ (Mark 8: 27). And just as the voice in the burning bush refuses to impart some sacred name of magical power, replying instead with a riddling pun: ‘I am who I shall be’ – so too Jesus resists all attempts to apprehend him in a definite or categorical way. In fact it is only the ‘demons’ who claim to know Jesus, as in the exchange with the unclean spirit at Capernaum who called out ‘I know who you are – the Holy One of God!’ To which Jesus responds: ‘Be quiet! Come out of him’ (Matthew 1.24). Even when Peter announces ‘You are the Christ’, Jesus warns him to tell no one and actually denounces him as ‘Satan’ for trying to dissuade him from going to his death (not a thing an omnipotent God would do!) (Mark 8: 30-33).

Is it not significant, moreover, that whenever Jesus is pressed to reveal himself ‘as he is’, he constantly refers to the Father, or the Pentecost or the ‘least of these’? Is it not highly telling that he defers to others in a process of kenotic self-emptying? So that if he
indeed admits he is the ‘Way the truth and the life’, it is always a way that leads to others, a way that opens onto other ways. ‘You cannot reach the Father except through me’, he boldly announces, calling for the radical exclusion of exclusion itself. For who cannot be counted among the ‘least of these’? Or among the ‘strangers’ who hunger and thirst? (Though how often has this term ‘except’ been invoked to support the opposite!). The messianic way leads from Sovereign Self to excluded stranger, breaching the highest in the name of the lowest, the first in the name of the last. Which is why I keep repeating that interconfessional hospitality towards other faiths and cultures is not just an option for Christians but an imperative. Christian caritas, as a refusal of exclusivist power, is a summons to endless kensosis\textsuperscript{xvi}.

It is in a similar spirit, I suggest finally, that we may choose to read the frequent injunctions against idols and graven images in both Judaism and Islam. Namely, as a refusal to possess the sacredness of the wholly Other in anthropomorphic projections and illusions. In all three Abrahamic traditions we find evidence of a via negativa which safeguards the ‘strangeness’ of the divine. This is why it is so important to constantly recall the anatheist moment of not-knowing at the very heart of spiritual experience: not as a threat to faith but as an integral part of the journey towards the Other. The anatheist wager is not some postmodern gloss on Descartes’s doubt but a movement of decision recognized as essential to genuine spiritual quest (viz Anthony Steinbock’s analysis of great mystics such as Ruzbiahn Baqli, Rabbi Dov Baer and Teresa of Avila)\textsuperscript{xvii}. And one find powerful instances of this wager in numerous other mystical texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of an unbridgeable gap(diastema) between human understanding and the irreducible strangeness of God to Bonaventure’s famous definition...
of faith as a never-ending ‘pilgrim’s progress’ of many winding paths (itinerarium mentis in Deum). These all testify to an anatheist gesture of detachment from assumed faith which prizes open a possible return to second faith. That is why Teresa of Calcutta’s diary confession of loss of belief should not have provoked world-wide scandal but been seen as a salutary maturation towards a deeper belief.

Perhaps there can be no anatheist wager without this moment of atheism? And if this be so I am tempted to compare such a cycle of faith to the ancient Patristic figure of ‘circumcession’ (perichoresis) where different persons move endlessly around an empty centre (chora), always deferring one to the other, the familiar to the foreign, the resident to the alien, the self to the stranger. Without the gap in the middle there could be no leap, no love, no faith.

Anatheism cherishes the Siamese twins of theism and atheism and celebrates the fertile tension between them. The bracing oscillation between doubt and faith, withdrawal and consent, is the aperture which precedes and follows each wager. It is the guarantee of human freedom before the summons of the other. The choice to believe or not believe is indispensable to the anatheist wager. And it is a choice made over and over, never once and for all.
NOTES


While sympathetic to the Levinasian critique of the Western ontology of egoistic totality and sameness, I have some difficulty with his notion of ‘ipseity as hostage’ to the other, a radical passivity and persecution which cannot ‘evade the neighbor’s call’ and does not, I believe, sufficiently allow for human freedom and choice in one’s response to this call. See my critical objections to Levinas’ and Derrida’s ethics of unconditional alterity in my chapter, ‘Aliens and Others’ in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, pp 63f.


Iiia. Cited Michel de Certeau, ‘Mysticism’, *Diacritics* 22, 2, 1992, p 21. The author also cites other mystics whose love of comic paradox was legendary. Meister Eckhart, for example, observed the following mystical paradox: ‘God is neither being nor reason; nor does He know this or that. That is why God is empty of all things and why He is all things’. And the Sfi mystics, Al-Halladj, calling into question the clerical dogmas of the *umma*: ‘The intent of this letter is that you explain nothing by God, that you extract not a single argumentation from him, that you do not confess his existence and that you are not inclined to deny it’ (cited p 19).

iv See Jacques Derrida in our critical exchange on this subject at University College Dublin, ‘Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida’ in *Questioning Ethics*, ed R. Kearney and M. Dooley (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp 65-83. See also my critique of the lack of hermeneutic discernment in the Derridean and Levinasian accounts of the messianic Other in ‘Aliens and Others’ (op.cit) and in my other interviews with Derrida, notably ‘Terror, Religion and the New Politics’
and ‘Deconstruction and The Other’ in R. Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp 3-15 and pp 139-156 and my critical exchange with Jacques Derrida and Jack Caputo, entitled ‘Desire of God,’ in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp 301-309. Michel de Certeau recognizes that a ‘mystical life is begun when it recovers its roots and experiences its strangeness in ordinary life – when it continues to discover in other ways what has occurred that first time.’ De Certeau describes this discovery in the form of a hermeneutic ‘itinerary’ of ongoing discernment. The divine that opens out into a precise epiphnic time and place in their lives, cannot be confined to that moment. ‘One cannot arrest him (God) there’ (‘Mysticism’, p 19). And it is this gap or surplus which forbids fixation and prompts wise discrimination: ‘This internal exigency and the objective situation of the experience already allow one to distinguish a spiritual sense of the experience from its pathological forms. A process is ‘spiritual’ when it is not confined to a single moment, no matter how intense or exceptional that moment may be, when it does not dedicate everything to its revival as if it were a paradise to recover or preserve, when it does not lose its way in imaginary fixations. It is realist, engaged, as the Sufis say, in the *ihlas* - on the track of an authenticity that begins with the relationship with oneself and others. It is therefore discriminating’ (p 19). For de Certeau, the gift of God is always given in a culturally defined language, that goes all the way down from the conceptual to the carnal – namely, from official doctrinal and theological references to more basic ‘codes of recognition, the organization of the imaginary, the sensory hierarchisations in which smell or sight predominate’ (p 21). As he puts it, ‘mystics speak only a received
language’, however creatively and poetically they rewrite it. And this reception involves a ‘redirecting of the personal life to the social life’ which speaks of the ‘divine depths’ in terms of historical, linguistic and geographical hermeneutic contexts (p. 21). That is why if mystical experience begins with what seems like a ‘foreign language’ of the unfathomable, surprising and unexpected, this ‘irruption of strange symptoms only signals moments to thresholds that are in fact quite specific’ (meaning hermeneutically grounded) (p 17). The epiphaic moments are ‘like throwing open a window into one’s dwelling….the spoken word that pierces the heart, the vision that turns one’s life upside down – these are decisive experiences, indissociable from a place, a meeting, a reading, but not reducible to the means that convey them’ (p 17). So that while the mystic can always say ‘it happened there and then’, s/he also knows that the mystical experience extends beyond any ‘certain knowledge’ of this particular time and space. ‘The surprise produces strangeness’, as de Certeau says, ‘but it also liberates. It draws to the surface a secret of life and death….the unsuspected, that has the violence of the unforeseen, gathers together all the days of existence, as the whistle of the shepherd gathers his flock, and reunites them in the continuity of a disquieting relationship with the other’ (p 17-18)…The very term ‘God’ (or ‘Absolute’), rather than providing a guidepost for the experience, receives its meaning from this dimension (of unforeseeable ‘gift’) (p 18). Mystical experience is thus a mediation of the inside and the outside, the transcendent and the immanent, the absolute and incarnate: ‘In dissociable from the assent that is its criterion, such a ‘birth’ draws from man a truth that is his without coming from him or belonging to him. Thus, he is ‘outside himself’ at the very moment ath a Self is asserted. A
necessity is aroused in him, but under the sign of a melody, a spoken word, or a vision coming from elsewhere’ (p 18).

See Anthony Steinbock’s insightful analysis of key criteria for genuine revelations and epiphanies of verticality in his Phenomenology and Mysticism (op. cit, pp 100-104, 115-125, 132-135). Steinbock is fully aware of the problem regarding the ostensibly isomorphic character of genuinely spiritual and counterfeit experiences of the vertical. He notes, for example, the similarities between the psychotic claims for mystical union with God in Freud’s famous case of Schreber and the mystical claims for such union (often of a parallel erotic nature) by celebrated mystics. Which raises the crucial dilemma of telling the difference between Schneider’s psychotic fantasies about being invaded by God (pp 140-142) and the mystical testaments by the likes of John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila (pp 45-66) to feeling similarly overcome and traversed by a divine visitor (see in particular Teresa’s famous experience of ‘transverberation’ in The Interior Castle). See also our critical discussion with Jean-Luc Marion on how we can discriminate hermeneutically between different appearances of the divine Other, ‘Hermeneutics and Revelation’ in R. Kearney, Debates in Continental Philosophy pp 15-33. On this critical question of hermeneutically discerning the ‘saturated phenomenon’ of divine revelation in Marion, see also Shane MacKinlay, ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ in Modern Theology, 20:3, 2004, pp 117-118; and Tamsin Farmer Jones, Apparent Darkness: Jean-Luc Marion’s Retrieval of the Greek Apophatic Tradition, chapter 4, ‘Interpreting Saturated Phenomenality: Marion’s Hermeneutical Turn?’, Harvard University Doctoral Thesis, 2008. The main difficulty with Marion’s account, it seems, is that it is indiscriminate when it comes to an ontological or eschatological encounter with the divine other qua
'saturated phenomenon’. At best, for Marion, the human recipient of such revelation – what he terms in French l’adonné – can merely respond to the event of saturation as one responds to a devastating trauma: not with any discerning interpretation but, at best, by blocking or being bedazzled by this ineluctable force of incoming saturation. The adonné is the one who receives the gift whether he/she likes it or not. (Indeed when Marion speaks of the Annunciation it is analogous to a divine violation or invasion where Mary accepts the gift willy-nilly: Marion speaks, for example of ‘when’ Mary receives the Word, never ‘if’ she agrees to receive it). At best, we have an ‘endless hermeneutics’ after the event, but never during the event of saturation itself. Discernment, for Marion, is always derivative not instantaneous. As he puts it, ‘I undergo the obscure obligation of letting myself conform to (and by) the excess of intuition over every intention that my gaze could oppose to it’ (‘Evidence and Bedazzlement’ in Prolegomena to Charity, trans. S. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp 53-70). Responding to the other for Marion – as in somewhat different ways for Levinas and Derrida – is a fundamental traumatism of uncritical subjugation and subjection (analogous to Levinas’ ‘traumatisme originel’ in meeting l’autrui). It is telling, moreover, that one of the meanings of l’adonné in French is ‘addict’, someone who has no control over the substance that is traumatizing and saturating its being. What Marion fails to fully appreciate, in my view, is that one can have both a passive and active response to the divine Stranger: a ‘pathos’ of receptivity to the incoming Other and a ‘poiesis’ of hermeneutic agency (choice, imagination, reading, commitment and humorous/humble consent). Once again, I return to the famous ‘Yes’ of Mary and Sarah when they believed the impossible possible. But such a ‘yes’ to the Stranger also implies the freedom to say
'no’. Consent is a choice not servile conformity. Marion’s problem with hermeneutically discerning between different kinds of saturated phenomenon (divine revelation or holocaust trauma, for example, banal evil experiences or exemplary holy ones) is well commented on by Tamsin Farmer Jones, op.cit, pp 244-246, 230-234, 186-191. She suggests supplementing Marion’s hermeneutic deficiencies with an apophatic hermeneutics based on the scriptural commentaries and writings of Gregory of Nyssa, pp. 193-194, 227. In sum, while Marion is correct to talk of a derivative hermeneutics of commentary and extrapolation after the event of saturation he fails to appreciate how hermeneutic interpretation – as a pre-predicative carnal response – occurs already in the moment of saturation itself. When one speaks of the three famous modes of response to trauma, for example – as flight, fight or freeze; or in Attachment Theory as hysterical over-reaction or constrictive under-reaction – one is already recognizing that humans are choosing different modes of response at the most basic corporeal and affective level, long before reflective consciousness of any kind. And, as noted in chapter one, the phenomenology of mood, emotion and feeling, carried out by the likes of Husserl, Scheler and Sartre, give an additional depth and rigor to such analysis of a primary hermeneutic pre-understanding which antecedes our derivative hermeneutic understanding.


vii Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, trans Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 166
Ibid. Jacques Derrida is even more radical in his deconstructive reading of the role of self as ‘host’ and ‘hostage’ in relations of hospitality towards the stranger, see On Hospitality. See also my commentary in ‘Aliens and Others’, op.cit, and our more detailed discussion of the subject in our previous chapter, especially notes 27-30.

Ricoeur, On Translation, trans Eileen Brennan (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp 23-24. See also in this connection L-M Chauvet, Sign and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Experience (Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1995): for example, p 503, where Chauvet describes how the self is only rediscovered through deconstructive exposure to the other: ‘It is ‘I’ which is possible only in its relationship with what is most different, the YOU (the reverse of ‘I’); and it is precisely from this tear of otherness, impossible to mend, that the likeness and the reciprocity permitting communication are born’. See also Ricoeur’s important exchange with Hans Küng on the subject of interreligious exchange in our Conclusion below; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the dialogical character of language as chiasmic reversibility of self and other as discussed in chapter four below.

See R. Kearney, Postnationalist Ireland (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). In the Northern Ireland peace settlement, it is noteworthy that John Hume, leader of the Catholic community, and David Trimble, leader of the Protestant community, served as hosts for their respective enemies and extremists, bringing the terrorists and paramilitaries in from the cold and away from their guns, though this meant that the hosts ultimately sacrificed themselves for the guests, who then went on to become hosts in their turn (e.g. Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley) of a further stage of the peace process. One finds similar examples of this phenomenon, I would suggest, in historic figures like

\textsuperscript{xix} Joseph O’Leary, ‘Knowing the Heart Sutra by Heart’, in \textit{Interreligious Imagination,} ed R. Kearney, pp 356 f. O’Leary suggests, for example, that the Buddhist teaching of emptiness invites Christians to recover their own apophatic and mystical traditions of divine nothingness, just as the \textit{neti/neti} of detachment in the Heart Sutra, opening us to universal compassion, may recall Christians to the radical implications of the Sermon on the Mount or Saint Francis’ love of all living beings. On the question of interreligious translation and exchange, O’Leary writes: ‘It used to be said that a good Catholic needs to be a Protestant, while a good Protestant needs to be a Catholic; today we might add, a sane Christian needs to be a Buddhist’ (in order to remain a good Christian!). See O’Leary, ‘Towards a Buddhist Interpretation of Christian Truth’ in Catherine Cornille (ed), \textit{Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity} (New York: Orbis Books, 2002). O’Leary suggest that the Heart Sutra, recited in Mantras by the community (\textit{Sangha}) as a ‘skillful means’ of compassionate wisdom and practice, reminds Christians of the need to combine teachings with service, thereby opening a practical meeting place between Eastern and Western spiritualities as means of concrete living engagement.


For a very illuminating discussion of comparative mystical experience in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions see Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*. 