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## *Hermeneutics of The Possible God*

RICHARD KEARNEY\*

**ABSTRACT:** *In this article, the author argues that the phenomenological revolution inaugurated by Husserl and Heidegger opens up new avenues for a radical rethinking of the God question. With Husserl's 'free variation of possibilities in imagination' and Heidegger's famous claim in Being and Time that 'for phenomenology possibility stands higher than actuality', the author discovers new resources for our understanding of both Being and God. In both cases, the article claims, we witness the surpassing of the traditional metaphysical priority of actuality over possibility. Then, in a second moment, the paper explores the notion of the 'God of possibility' from the perspective of three different hermeneutic circles: scriptural, testimonial and literary. The essay concludes with an analysis of the positive implications of the notion of the 'possible' (as posse and possest) for a new understanding of the God of eschatology.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Being; Cusa, Nicholas of; Dasein; Dionysius the Areopagite; Epoche; Eschatology; Eucharist; God; Gospel; Heidegger, Martin; Hermeneutics; Hildegard of Bingen; Hopkins, Gerard Manley; Husserl, Edmund; Jesus Christ; Kingdom of God; Love; Meaning; Phenomenology; Poetics; Posse; Possibility of Being; Parousia; Possibility; Possible; Reduction; Rilke, Rainer Maria; Sein und Zeit; Self; Temporality; Theology.*

**RESUMO:** *No presente artigo, o autor defende que a revolução fenomenológica inaugurada por E. Husserl e M. Heidegger abre novas possibilidades para um repensar radical da questão de Deus. A partir da 'livre variação de possibilidades na imaginação' de Husserl e a famosa pretensão de Heidegger em Ser e Tempo de que para a 'fenomenologia a possibilidade está acima da actualidade', o autor descobre novos recursos para a nossa compreensão quer do Ser quer de Deus. Tanto num caso como no outro, diz-nos o artigo, podemos testemunhar a superação da tradicional prioridade metafísica da actualidade sobre a possibilidade. Em seguida, num segundo momento, o artigo explora também a noção de um 'Deus da possibilidade' a partir da perspectiva de três círculos hermenêuticos diferentes: o escriturístico, o testimonial e o literário. O ensaio conclui com uma análise das implicações positivas da noção de 'possível' (como posse e possest) para uma nova compreensão do Deus da escatologia.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Amor; Cusa, Nicolau de; Deus; Dionísio o Areopagita; Epoché; Escatologia; Eu; Eucaristia; Evangelho; Fenomenologia; Heidegger, Martin; Hermenêutica; Hildegarda de Bingen; Hopkins, Gerard Manley; Husserl, Edmund; Jesus Cristo; Parousia; Poética; Posse; Possibilidade do Ser; Possibilidade; Possível;*

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*Redução; Reino de Deus; Rilke, Rainer Maria; Sein und Zeit; Sentido; Ser; Ser-aí; Temporalidade; Teologia.*

*'I come in the little things, saith the Lord'*  
(Evelyn Underhill)

God, if God exists, exists not just for God but for us. And the manner in which God comes to us, comes to mind, comes to be and to dwell as flesh amongst us, is deeply informed by the manner in which we think about God – in short, how we interpret, narrate, symbolize and imagine God. This, I suggest, calls for a philosophical hermeneutics instructed by the various and essential ways in which God ‘appears’ to us in and through ‘phenomena’ and ‘signals’ to us in and through ‘signs’. It is my wager in this essay that one of the most telling ways in which the infinite comes to be experienced and imagined by finite minds is as *possibility* – that is, as *the ability to be*. Even, and especially, when such possibility seems impossible to us. I am not saying this is the only way, or even the most primordial way, just that it is a very telling way, and one which has been largely neglected in the history of western metaphysics and theology in favor of categories like substance, cause, actuality, omnipotence, absolute spirit or sufficient reason. It is not that I am proposing *posse* as some newly discovered or recovered Master Word – some extraordinary Meta-Code which might unlock the ancient Secret of divine nature or naming. God forbid! Our proposal is far more modest than that: namely, a tentative exercise in poetic conjecture about a certain overlooked aspect of divinity, seeking guidance from phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation.

In the first part of this essay I propose to briefly explore ways in which phenomenology – as first developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger – helped to open up a new path for thinking about God in terms of the possible. In the second, I will chart a further itinerary through three hermeneutic circles of reading – *scriptural*, *testimonial* and *literary* – which, I believe, disclose rich textual resources for re-imagining God as *posse*.

## I. The Way of Phenomenology

### 1. Husserl

Edmund Husserl inaugurated the phenomenological method. One of the primary purposes of this method was to open our minds to the realm of ‘pure possibility’, thereby liberating us from our habitual attachments to mere facts and opinions. Husserl identified five basic steps in the method: 1) the *epoche* (bracketing or suspension) of the presuppositions and prejudices of our so-called natural attitude; 2) the ‘reduction’ of our attention back to ‘the things themselves’ as revealed in the intentional life of consciousness; 3) the ‘free variation in imagi-



nation' of any topic of inquiry across all its variants – actual and virtual, real or imaginary – until an invariant structure or essence (*eidos*) appears; 4) the 'intuition' of this essential meaning in the pure immanence of consciousness; and 5) the 'description' of essential meaning by transcendental subjectivities extending towards a *telos* of absolute reason.

Though most of Husserl's mainstream work appeared to bracket out the theological or confessional question of God, one finds a number of fascinating conjectures about a phenomenological approach to the divine in several of his later and posthumously published lectures, letters and manuscripts. In some texts Husserl's God approximates to a 'transcendental ideal' in Kant's sense, that is, an Idea situated at infinity which directs the various intentions of consciousness asymptotically. As such it operates regulatively as a sort of teleological idea of Reason.<sup>1</sup> In other passages, such as Par. 35 of *The Crisis*, Husserl compares the phenomenological method to a 'religious conversion' which triggers an 'existential metamorphosis of humanity'.<sup>2</sup> In short, the phenomenological *epoche* and reduction effect a change of attitude in the human subject which Husserl considers analogous to that brought about by a religious transformation of the 'natural' self. He even goes so far as to speak of the *Idea Christi* as 'the archetypal idea of the Man-God' which mobilizes human striving towards a universal humanity.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we have it on the testimony of Sister Adelgundis Jaegerschmidt, who nursed Husserl in his final years, that Husserl confessed that 'human life was nothing less than a journey towards God' even though the philosophical vocation was, strictly speaking, a 'path to God without God'.<sup>4</sup>

The basic postulate of a phenomenology of religion is this: religious consciousness is a distinct, *sui generis* mode of intentionality which aims at a transcendent meaning – called God – without being in a position (after the methodical bracketing of the question of transcendence) to verify or falsify its truth claims. While Husserl construes the religious mode intentionality as one of 'faith', he is also wont to link this same intentionality with an inherent tendency of 'phenomenological reason' directed towards an absolute goal of meaning.<sup>5</sup> On occasion, these two seemingly incompatible claims – for faith and for reason – lead to some

<sup>1</sup> Husserl, *Husserliana VII*, 274; 350. (This *Husserliana* series of volumes will be henceforth be referenced in the abbreviated form of *Hua*), ed. Samuel Ijsseling, Nijhoff, The Hague. For exact translation and publication details of each of these volumes see Jean Greisch's bibliography in *Le Buisson ardent et les Lumières de la raison*, Vol 2, Le Cerf, Paris, 2002, pp. 67-69. I am indebted to my long-time friend and colleague, Jean Greisch, for his wide-ranging scholarship and research on Husserl. Most of the quotes and remarks on Husserl which follow were brought to my attention by Greisch.

<sup>2</sup> Husserl, *Hua VI*, 140; 156; *Hua XXVII*, 125-126.

<sup>3</sup> Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Jean Greisch, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, 102.



conflict, as when Husserl argues that 'religious intuition presupposes the most universal intuition of absolute givens' and, as such, requires an approach transgressing the normal limits of transcendental subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> (Husserl might be said to anticipate here Jean-Luc Marion's disclosure of the 'saturated phenomenon' which, Marion argues, finds its apogee in the 'saturated phenomenon par excellence' – Christ).<sup>7</sup> By way of addressing this tension, Husserl sought to distinguish between two senses of the word 'religion'. On the one hand, writes Husserl, we have 'religion as a progressive myth, as an authentic and unilateral intuition of religious ideals, surrounded by an horizon of presentiments whose infinite dimensions remain impenetrable, compelling us to kneel before the unfathomable'. On the other hand, we have 'religion as a metaphysics of religion, as the ultimate fulfillment of a science of universal understanding, in the sense of the norm of all intuitive myths and symbols, regulating all the figures and transformations of its imaginary'.<sup>8</sup> The tension between these two approaches was, I believe, never fully resolved.

Husserl's own instinct, it seems, was to move in the direction of a generous phenomenology of comparative religion. This would acknowledge the valuable resources of both monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions (like Buddhism) as respective approximations to the 'teleological idea of reason', guided by a universal entelechy and striving towards ever more perfect freedom. But even as Husserl appeared to subordinate faith to reason in this universalist gesture, he was still prepared to speak of this entelechy as a kind of unconditional 'absolute obligation' ('*absolutes Soll*') whose quality was not only moral but 'mystical'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in a famous passage in *Ideas I*, Husserl makes the telling concession that when he speaks of the divine he is referring to an "Absolute" in a completely different sense than that of the absolute of consciousness' and to a 'Transcendent in a completely different sense than the transcendence of world'.<sup>10</sup> It is not, Husserl insists, a human subject that 'invents or produces this supreme transcendence'.<sup>11</sup> Little wonder then that Husserl could write in a letter to the young Roman Ingarden that there was no problem more important than that of God!<sup>12</sup> – adding that it was an essential task to rediscover 'the meaning of divine being and of the divine creation of the world'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See Jean-Luc Marion's *Being Given*, Stanford University Press, 2002, par. 24, pp 234 f.

<sup>8</sup> Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Gerda Walther, cited by Greisch, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Husserl, *Hua III/I*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> Husserl, *Hua XVII*, 335; 221.

<sup>12</sup> Cited by Greisch, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, 235.



In the light of all this evidence, Jean Greisch does not hesitate to affirm that we find in Husserl the 'lineaments of a theological philosophy associated with the teleological idea of reason'.<sup>14</sup> By all accounts, we are moving here from transcendental egology to transcendental theology. But that does not mean that we can ever fully disentangle the use of the terms *theology* and *teleology* in Husserl. From beginning to end, God appears as a term for 'absolute entelechy' – the progressive actualizing of divine potential as 'infinite life, infinite love, infinite will'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, I suspect that one of the reasons that Husserl's God is not just an Idea of Reason but a gift of life is that this Absolute 'entelechy of entelechies' constitutes itself for us in and through the 'free variation of possibles' which imagination provides both in a) the great texts of scripture and literature (see Part Two below) and in b) the third step of the phenomenological method – namely 'imaginative variation' – which seeks to formally revisit these texts in the eidetic realm of 'pure possibility'. Indeed it might be said that for Husserl it is this exploratory and intuitive use of imagination which seeks to bring together the otherwise opposed worlds of eidetic reason and experiential faith. As he confesses in *Ideas*: 'If anyone loves a paradox, he can readily say, and say with strict truth if he will allow for ambiguity, that the element which makes up the life of phenomenology, as of all eidetical sciences, is 'fiction', that fiction is the source whence the knowledge of eternal truths draws its sustenance'.<sup>16</sup>

The God of Husserl's phenomenology is neither an abstraction of rationalist deism nor a glorified Monad of Sufficient Reason – it is a God of an intuition so deep that it surpasses and overflows all our intentions. This is a God of testimony and empathy, of suffering and action, of passion and compassion. As Husserl himself concedes: 'God experiences in himself (*lebt in sich nach*) every suffering... and it is only by suffering-with in this manner that he can surmount his finitude, his not-having-to-be in infinite harmony in light of which he exists'.<sup>17</sup> That is also why for Husserl the self or spirit is one which not only 'receives itself from another but is also capable of losing itself for another'.<sup>18</sup> Here, arguably, we find the phenomenological roots of what Ricoeur calls the *sujet convoqué* and what Marion calls the *interloqué*. The phenomenologically purged self discovers its originary existence as one which is inextricably tied to others in a series of intersubjective transversals that lead ultimately to God. 'In myself', writes Husserl, 'passing through the other selves with whom I find myself tied, all the ways... lead to the same pole, God, who transcends both man and world'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Greisch, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Husserl, *Hua XV*, 378-386. See also *B II*, 2, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, Collier, New York, 1962, pp. 200-201.

<sup>17</sup> Husserl, *B II*, 2, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Cited by Greisch, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, 234.



It is this kind of thinking which enables Jean Greisch to conclude his highly illuminating investigation of Husserl's phenomenology of religion by declaring that since for Husserl 'every life only becomes conscious accompanied by love',<sup>20</sup> the acute awareness that Husserl has of the 'absolute vocation of the subject, places him on the road to a God whose true name is Love'.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the fact that Husserl approaches the question of God, after the reduction, in a manner that is radically open to every possible variation of meaning and manifestation, means that this is the most non-dogmatic divinity one could imagine. One might even say that for Husserl a certain methodical agnosticism or atheism is a necessary prelude to the disclosure of neglected aspects of divinity. It certainly keeps the doors open to inter-religious dialogue between the great religions of the world, resisting the temptation to impose the confessional presuppositions of any one faith. A phenomenology of religion in this sense is the contrary of apologetics. It's attentiveness to the realm of 'pure possibility' marks a refusal of exclusionary dogmatism and throws down a challenge to the old metaphysical notions of God as impassive actuality or *ens causa sui*.

An insurmountable tension remains however. Husserl's uncompromising adherence to a rigorous science of transcendental reason – with God representing the ultimate universal pole – cannot be easily squared with the mystical or personal God of confessional revelation. The God of Reason and the God of Faith remain, it seems, on separate if parallel tracks in Husserl's phenomenology. But both Gods hint, in their respective ways, towards a divinity fuelled by 'the passion of the possible' – a special passion accessible through the 'free variation of imagination'.

## 2. Heidegger

Martin Heidegger took the phenomenological inquiry about God and the Possible in new directions. His basic insight that for phenomenology 'possibility stands higher than actuality' (formulated in his Introduction to *Being and Time*) was to prove of crucial significance. It gave a new ontological meaning to Husserl's claim that it is the realm of possibility, opened up by the phenomenological method of reduction and free variation, that leads us to an essential intuition of truth. Heidegger gave Husserl's argument a more ontological articulation, however, when he showed how 'Dasein is its possibilities', from its everyday concerns and projects to its most ultimate and ownmost possibility of all – the possibility which is the impossibility of any further possibility: one's being towards death (*Sein-zum-Tode*).

Heidegger was also borrowing here from Kierkegaard's original suggestion in *Sickness unto Death* that divine existence should be conceived of in terms of the 'possible'. 'For prayer', writes Kierkegaard, 'there must be a God, a self – and

<sup>20</sup> Husserl, *F 1* 24, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Greisch, *op.cit.*, p. 57.



possibility – or a self and possibility in a pregnant sense, because the being of God means that everything is possible (*mulig*), or that everything is possible means the being of God; only he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is possible, only he has anything to do with God. That God's will is the possible makes me able to pray; if there is nothing but necessity, man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals'.<sup>22</sup> What exactly Kierkegaard means by 'possibility in a pregnant sense' is something which Heidegger sought to clarify when he identified the truth of Being with 'the quiet power of the loving possible' in his conclusion to *Being and Time*. The fact that Kierkegaard was described by Heidegger as neither a pure philosopher nor a pure theologian but a law unto himself,<sup>23</sup> is also of interest as we seek to identify the exact status of Heidegger's own contribution to a depth hermeneutics of the Possible.

Given Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of Dasein's different categories of possibility in *Being and Time* – as *Seinkönnen*, *Möglichkeit*, *ermöglichen* – one might be forgiven for supposing that the 'power of the possible' refers to an essentially human property.<sup>24</sup> However, in the *Letter on Humanism* (1947), Heidegger claims that such a humanist supposition is mistaken. In a pivotal if much neglected passage in this post-war letter to Jean Beaufret, Heidegger revisits this

<sup>22</sup> *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Hong and Hong, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 40. I am grateful to my Boston College colleague, Vanessa Rumble, for bringing this passage to my attention.

<sup>23</sup> M. Heidegger, GA 49, 19, cited Jean Greisch, *Le Buisson Ardent et les Lumières de la Raison*, vol. 2, Cerf, Paris, 2002, p. 371.

<sup>24</sup> In his Introduction to *Being and Time* (Blackwell, Oxford, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, 1962), Heidegger states that for phenomenology, 'possibility stands higher than actuality' (p. 63). Later in this text he refers to Dasein's pre-awareness of its own death in *Angst* as a specific mood in which it 'finds itself faced with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its own existence' (BT, H 266). This existential-human experience of 'possible impossibility' may be usefully contrasted with the deconstructive notion of 'impossible possibility' in Derrida's 'Comme si c'était possible...' (*Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 3, no. 205, 1998, and in John D. Caputo's 'The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God' in *Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell, 2001, pp. 469f; and 'The Experience of God and the Axiology of the Impossible' (Villanova University Conference Paper, Nov 8-10, 2001). A critical discussion of the differences between a) the deconstructive reading of the impossible advanced by Derrida and Caputo and b) our hermeneutic reading of the possible as *posse*, see my essay, 'The Kingdom: Possible and Impossible' in *A Postmodern Phenomenology of the Cross*, ed. David Goicoechea, Fordham University Press, forthcoming. For a detailed critical discussion of Heidegger's various concepts of possibility in *Being and Time* and subsequent texts, see our 'Heidegger's Poetics of the Possible' in *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* (Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1995), pp. 35-48 and our *Poétique du Possible* (Beauchesne, Paris, 1984). See also the rapport between Heidegger's notion of the possible and that of Husserl, Ernst Bloch and Jacques Derrida in chapter 5 of our *The God who May Be*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2002, entitled 'Possibilizing God', pp. 80f.



exact reference to the 'quiet power of the possible', redefining it this time as an unambiguous gift of Being itself. Theological connotations abound, albeit elusively. And we are tempted to ask: what, if anything, does this 'quiet power' of Being have to do with God?

The passage in question opens as follows: 'Being as the element is the 'quiet power' of the loving potency (*Vermögens*), i.e. of the possible (*des Möglichen*)'. Already the interpolation of the new term *Vermögen*, to qualify the standard term for the possible in *Being and Time* – namely, *das Mögliche* – signals a shift from an existential-transcendental perspective (easily confused with humanism) to a more unequivocally Being-centred one. This new assignation for Being's own power of possibilizing is more topological than anthropological. It marks a clear departure from the transcendental residues of 'possibility' still evident in the existential analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. Determined now to avoid any further humanist misreadings, Heidegger is emphatic on this point. 'Our words 'possible' and 'possibility' are', he explains, 'under the domination of 'logic' and 'metaphysics', taken only in contrast to 'actuality', i.e. they are conceived with reference to a determined – viz. the metaphysical – interpretation of Being as *actus* and *potentia*, the distinction of which is identified with that of *existentia* and *essentia*'. But Heidegger explains that when he speaks of the 'quiet power of the possible', he means neither 1) the 'possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*' (a Leibnizian-Kantian category of modal logic), nor 2) 'the *potentia* as *essentia* of an *actus* of the *existentia*' (an Aristotelian-scholastic category of metaphysics). He means, as he states here, 'Being itself, which in its loving potency (*das Mögend*) possibilizes (*vermag*) thought and thus also the essence of man, which means in turn his relationship to Being'. Heidegger concludes this decisive passage thus: 'To possibilise (*vermögen*) something is to sustain it in its essence, to retain it in its element'.<sup>25</sup>

The significance of this pronouncement on the 'possible' cannot be underestimated. It offers a unique insight into the famous 'Turn' in Heidegger's thought from 'phenomenology' (with its residual transcendental, existential, *Dasein*-centred idioms) to 'thought' (with its shift of emphasis to Being-as-Being, *Sein als Sein*).<sup>26</sup> Heidegger I's humanist sounding idioms of Being as temporality and historicity are now replaced with a more sacred-sounding language of love and grace, consistent with Heidegger II's rethinking of Being as Gift (*Es gibt*). Playing on the latent etymological affinities between the German verbs for loving (*mögen*) and making possible (*vermögen*), Heidegger invites us to rethink Being itself as the

<sup>25</sup> See *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 219, note 34 on Edgar Lohner's contentious translation of *Vermögen* in his version of the 'Letter on Humanism' in *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. R. Zaner and D. Ihde (Capricorn Books, New York, 1973), pp. 147-181.

<sup>26</sup> On the significance of this 'Turn', see W. J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, Nijhof, The Hague, 1963; revised edition, Fordham University Press, New York, 2003.



power that possibilizes the authentic being of things: 'It is on the strength of this loving potency or possibilisation of love (*das Vermögen des Mögens*) that something is possibilized (*vermag*) in its authentic (*eigentlich*) being. This possibilization (*Vermögen*) is the authentic 'possible' (*das eigentlich 'mögliche'*), that whose essence rests on loving'.<sup>27</sup>

The proper response of human beings to such loving-possibilizing is, Heidegger suggests, to love-possibilize Being in return by thinking things and selves in their authentic essence. 'Thought is...to concern oneself about the essence of a 'thing' or a 'person', that means to like or to love them'.<sup>28</sup> The possibilizing of Being may thus be understood in terms of a double genitive referring both to Being's loving-possibilizing of thought and thought's loving-possibilizing of Being. Thus we might translate Heidegger's phrase – *Aus diesem Mögen vermag das Sein das Denken* – as 'Being possibilizes thought which possibilizes Being'. A translation whose sense is confirmed, it seems, in Heidegger's immediately subsequent sentence: 'The one renders the other possible. Being as the loving-possibilizing is the 'posse-ible' (*Jenes ermöglichte dieses. Das Sein als Vermögend-Mögende ist das 'Mög-liche'*).<sup>29</sup>

By choosing to translate the operative term, 'mög-liche', as 'posse-ible', I am suggesting that the shared semantic sense of *mögen* (to love) and *vermögen* (to be able/to make possible) is perhaps best captured by the Latin term *posse* – a term which according to Nicholas of Cusa, lies at the very heart of divine being, qua God's power to love. Cusanus coined the term *Possest* to capture this double belonging of possibility and being which he identified with God. 'God alone', wrote Cusanus, 'is all that he is able to be'.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For a more elaborate commentary on this key passage see our 'Heidegger's Poetics of the Possible', pp. 44-48 and p. 220, note 36; and our 'Heidegger, Le Possible et Dieu' in *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu*, ed. J. O'Leary and R. Kearney, Grasset, Paris, 1980, pp. 125-167. On the various theological interpretations of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, especially by figures like Marion, Levinas and Henry in France, see Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, L'éclat, 1991. See also our 'Heidegger's Gods' in our *Poetics of Modernity*, pp. 50-64; J-F Courtine (ed.), *Phénoménologie et Théologie*, Criterion, Paris, 1992 and George Kovacs, *The Question of God in Heidegger's Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 220, note 37.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 45 f. Our translation.

<sup>30</sup> See Cusanus, *Triologus de Possest*, ed. R. Steiger, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1973; and P. J. Casarella, 'Nicholas of Cusa and the Power of the Possible' in *American Catholic Philosophical Journal*, 64, 1, 1990, pp. 7-35. Casarella makes some interesting comparisons between Cusanus' divine *possest* and Heidegger's power of the 'loving possible'. Another contemporary commentator to note the intriguing links between Heidegger and Cusanus on the notion on the possible – though from an ontological rather than eschatological perspective – is Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999, especially pp. 192-204.



Heidegger does not go so far. There is no mention of Cusanus. Yet much of his language is deeply resonant with the religious language of Christian eschatology. Indeed in a related passage in the 1947 letter to Beaufret, Heidegger actually equates the essence of Being with the 'sacred' and the 'divine'.<sup>31</sup> This, in conjunction with his *Der Spiegel* claim that 'only a god can save us now' and his *Beiträge* allusion to Schelling's equation of the God of Exodus 3:14 with the 'possibility of being' (*seyn wird/Seyn-könnende*), certainly solicits the surmise that *some* rapport might exist between the 'possibilizing' power of Being and the *Possest* of God.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Heidegger's liberal borrowings from Christian mystical theology – for example, Eckhart's *Gelassenheit*, Angelus Silesius' 'rose-that-blooms-without-why' or Paul's eschatological *Kairos* – all suggest a deep, residual affinity with the author's early fascination with Catholic and Lutheran theology. And even if it is probably more the 'god of the poets' (than of revelation) that the later Heidegger has in mind when he invokes a 'saving god', one cannot gainsay some kind of relation between ontological and theological readings of the 'loving possible'. Indeed, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger had already hinted that the ontology / theology relationship might take the form of an *analogy of proper proportionality*: namely, the believer is to God what Dasein is to Being.<sup>33</sup>

So, when Heidegger speaks of poetic dwelling as an invitation to abide in 'that which has a loving for man and therefore needs his presence' (*was selber den Menschen mag und darum sein Wesen braucht*), one has reason to suspect that some kind of deity is hovering in the vicinity.<sup>34</sup> And this surmise is substantiated when one observes how several of Heidegger's last writings recast the Husserlian notion of teleological possibility in terms of a quasi-eschatological drama. A typical example is *The End of Philosophy*, where Heidegger claims that the 'end of philosophy is the place in which the whole of philosophy's history is gathered in its most ultimate possibility' – a final possibility which is also the 'first possibility' from which all genuine thought originates.<sup>35</sup> Such a possibility is clearly beyond all human powers of determination, for 'its contours remain obscure and its coming

<sup>31</sup> M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, pp. 172-173.

<sup>32</sup> M. Heidegger, *Der Spiegel* interview (1976) and *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, GA 65, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1994; on this Heidegger-Schelling connection, see George Seidel, 'Heidegger's Last God and the Schelling Connection' in *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 55, I, pp. 91 f.

<sup>33</sup> M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim, Doubleday, New York, 1961, p. 6f. See also our analysis of this analogy of proper proportionality between ontology and theology in our *Poétique du possible*, Part 4 entitled, 'Le Chiasme herméneutique', pp. 211-256.

<sup>34</sup> M. Heidegger, '...Poetically Man Dwells...' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper and Row, New York, 1971, p. 215.

<sup>35</sup> This essay is published as a supplementary text in Heidegger's *On Time and Being*, trans. J. Staumbaugh, Harper and Row, New York, 1972, p. 54.



uncertain'.<sup>36</sup> So we are back once again, it seems, with that possibilizing-appropriating of human thinking by Being itself: a form of happening (*Ereignis*) and giving (*Es gibt*) which remains beyond our ken and control. Being is thus rendered as 'that which is capable of being', the *esti gar einai* of Parmenides now rethought by Heidegger as the 'possibility of Being'. From a human point of view this means, quite simply, letting things be what they *can be*.<sup>37</sup>

But whatever this 'possibility of Being' may be, it is certainly *not* the mere *potentia* of some metaphysical substance, nor the *possibilitas* of some representational logic (alongside reality and necessity).<sup>38</sup> The loving-possible is for Heidegger something that surpasses the understanding of both metaphysics and logic. It is nothing less than the giving of Being itself.

## II. The Eschatological Way

In this second part I will proceed by means of three concentric hermeneutic circles – *scriptural*, *testimonial* and *literary*. Traversing this threefold 'variation of imagination', I hope to identify some key characteristics of the God of the Possible. In what follows, I would like to address two main questions: 1) How might a hermeneutics of God as *posse* benefit from a mode of thinking which takes its cue from 'poetical' rather than 'metaphysical' thinking? 2) How might such a hermeneutics of *posse* enable us to avoid theodicy: the claim that if *all* things are possible to God, this must also include *evil* things – a position I will vigorously oppose.

### 1. The Scriptural Circle

My efforts to rethink God as *posse* rather than *esse* draw primarily from the biblical message that what is impossible for man is possible for God. This latter notion of

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, pp. 59-60.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 8. See also our *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 220-221, note 41 on the crucial link between 'possibility' and 'Being understood as time which absences as it presences'. See also the recent fascinating study by Hent de Vries, 'Heidegger's Possibilism' in *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 279-296.

<sup>38</sup> See here Heidegger's hermeneutical retrieval of Kant's critical project in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1962) as it pertains to his understanding of possibility, p. 252: 'Kant must have had an intimation of this collapse of the primacy of logic in metaphysics when, speaking of the fundamental characteristics of Being, 'possibility' (what-being) and 'reality' (which Kant termed 'existence'), he said: 'So long as the definition of possibility, existence and necessity is sought solely in pure understanding, they cannot be explained save through an obvious tautology'. But Heidegger does not ignore Kant's subsequent retreat to the logicist model: "And yet, in the second edition of the *Critique* did not Kant re-establish the supremacy of the understanding? And as a result did not metaphysics, with Hegel, come to be identified with 'logic' more radically than ever before?" (Ibid).



messianic possibility is evident in many Scriptural passages. In Mark 10, for example, we are told that while entry to the Kingdom seems impossible for humans, all things are made possible by God. The exact text reads: 'For humans it is impossible but not for God; because for God everything is possible' (*panta gar dunata para to theo*) (Mark 10. 27). In similar vein, we are told in St. John's Prologue that our ability to become sons of God in the Kingdom is something made possible by God: 'Light shone in darkness and to all who received it was given the possibility (*dunamis*) to become sons of God'. The term *dunamis* is crucial and can be translated either as power or possibility – a semantic ambivalence to which we shall return below. Further evocations of the possibilizing power (*dunamis pneumatos*) of the Spirit are evidenced in Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans; but perhaps most dramatically of all in the Annunciation scene where Mary is told by the angel that the '*dunamis*' of God will overshadow her and that she will bear the son of God – 'for nothing is impossible (*a-dunaton*) with God' (Luke 1).

In all these examples, divinity – as Father, Son or Spirit – is described as a possibilising of divine love and logos in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. In other words, the divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the kingdom – or if you prefer to cite a *via negativa*, as the *impossibility of impossibility*.

A hermeneutical poetics of the kingdom looks to some of the recurring *figures* – metaphors, parables, images, symbols – deployed in the Gospels to communicate the eschatological promise. The first thing one notes is that these figures almost invariably refer to a God of 'small things' – to borrow from the wonderful title of Arundhati Roy's novel. Not only do we have the association of the Kingdom with the vulnerable openness and trust of 'little children', as in the Matthew 10 passage cited above, but we also have the images of the yeast in the flour (Luke 13), the tiny pearl of invaluable price (Matt 13), and perhaps most suggestive and telling of all, the mustard seed (Mark 4) – a miniscule grain that blooms and flourishes into a capacious tree. The kingdom of God, this last text tells us, is 'like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade'.

One might be tempted to call this recurring motif of the kingdom as the last or least or littlest of things – a *micro-theology* to the extent that it resists the standard macro-theology of the Kingdom as emblem of sovereignty, omnipotence and ecclesiastical triumph. The frequent reference in the Gospel to the judgment of the Kingdom being related to how we respond in history, here and now, to the 'least of these' (*elachistos*) (e.g. Matt 25.40), is crucial. The loving renunciation of absolute power by Christ's emptying (*kenosis*) of the Godhead, so as to assume the most humble form of humanity (the last and least of beings), is echoed by the eschatological reminder that it is easier for the defenseless and powerless to enter the Kingdom than the rich and mighty. And I think it is telling – as Dostoyevsky



reminds us in the Grand Inquisitor episode of the *Brothers Karamazov* – that the greatest temptation that Christ must overcome, after his forty days in the desert, is the will to become master and possessor of the universe. This is a temptation he faces again and again right up to his transfiguration on Mt. Thabor when his disciples want to apotheosize and crown him by building a cult temple there on the mountain (Luke 9). Instead, Christ proceeds to a second kenotic act of giving, refusing the short route to immediate triumph and embracing the *via crucis* which demonstrates what it means for the seed to die before it is reborn as a flowering tree which hosts all living creatures. As ‘King’, he enters Jerusalem not with conquering armies but ‘seated upon an ass’s colt’ (John 12). He upturns the inherited hierarchies of power, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that he would bring justice to the world, not by ‘shouting aloud in the street’ but as a ‘bruised reed that shall not break, a smoldering wick that shall not quench’ (Isaiah 42:1-4).

But in addition to these *spatial* metaphors of the Kingdom exemplified by little things – yeast, a mustard seed, a pearl, a reed, an infant, the ‘least of these’ – a hermeneutic poetics of the Kingdom might also look to the *temporal* figures of eschatology. These invariably take the form of a certain *achronicity*. I am thinking here of the numerous references to the fact that even though the Kingdom has *already come* – and is incarnate *here and now* in the loving gestures of Christ and all those who give, or receive, a cup of water – it still always remains a possibility *yet to come*. This is what Emmanuel Levinas calls the ‘paradox of posterior anteriority’; and it is cogently illustrated in an aphorism of Walter Benjamin which combines the spatial figure of the portal with the eschatological figure of futurity: ‘This future does not correspond to homogenous empty time; because at the heart of every moment of the future is contained the little door through which the Messiah may enter’.<sup>39</sup>

As ‘eternal’, the kingdom transcends all chronologies of time. Christ indicates this when he affirms that ‘before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8, 58), and when he promises a Second Coming when he will return again. In short, the Kingdom is both a) *already* there as historical possibility and b) *not yet* there as historically realized kingdom ‘come on earth’. This is why we choose to translate the canonical theophany of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai (*esher ayeh esher*) not as ‘I am who am’ (*ego sum qui sum*) but as ‘I am who may be’. God is saying something like this: I will show up as promised but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call ‘where are you?’ with the response ‘Here I am’. (I explore this eschatological enigma of time in further detail in the conclusion below).

<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’(1921) in *One Way Street*, NLB, London, 1979, pp. 155 f.



## 2. The Testimonial Circle

Our second hermeneutic circle explores a poetics of the kingdom in light of a number of testimonies recorded by religious writers down through the ages. This we might call the *testimonial* or *confessional* genre. Unlike 'metaphysical' thinkers who presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility, these more 'poetical' minds reverse the traditional priority and point to a new category of possibility – divine possibility – *beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible.

Let me begin with the pregnant maxim of Angelus Silesius: 'God is possible as the more than impossible'. Here Silesius – a German mystical thinker often cited by Heidegger and Derrida – points towards an eschatological notion of possibility which might be said to transcend the three conventional concepts of the possible: 1) as an epistemological category of modal logic, along with necessity and actuality (Kant); 2) as a substantialist category of *potentia* lacking its fulfilment as *actus* (Aristotle and the scholastics); and 3) as a rationalist category of *possibilitas* conceived as a representation of the mind (Leibniz and the idealists). All such categories fall within the old metaphysical dualism of possibility versus impossibility. But Silesius intimates a new role for the possible as a ludic and liberal outpouring of divine play: 'God is possible as the more than impossible... God plays with Creation/All that is play that the deity gives itself/ It has imagined the creature for its pleasure'. Creation here is depicted as an endless giving of possibility which calls us toward the kingdom.

I think the early medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, also had something like this in mind when he interprets Isaiah's God calling to his creatures – 'I cannot be God unless you are my witnesses'. He takes this to mean: 'I am the God who will be whenever you bear witness to love and justice in the world'.<sup>40</sup> And I believe that the Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum was gesturing towards a similar notion when, just weeks before her death in a concentration camp, she wrote: 'You God cannot help us but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the

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<sup>40</sup> Rashi, *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*, Mesorah Publications, New York, 1997. It would be interesting to relate Rashi's rabbinical interpretation with the Isaac Luria's Kabbalist reading of God in terms of a generous withholding or 'withdrawal' (*zimzum*) which invites human creatures to subsequently retrieve and reanimate the fragments of the 'broken vessels' of divine love which lie scattered like tiny seeds throughout the created universe. This reading, which exerted a deep influence on Hassidic thinkers as well as on philosophers like Simone Weil, seems to confirm our own account of God's refusal to impose himself on creation – as some kind of omnipotent fulfilled being (*Ipsum Esse subsistens*), Sufficient Reason or Supreme Cause (*ens causa sui*) – preferring instead to relate to humans in the realm of the 'possible' rather than of the purely 'actual' or 'necessary'. I am grateful to my Boston College colleague, Marty Cohen, for bringing the insights of the Lurianic Kabbala to my attention. See in particular his article, 'Sarach's Harp' in *Parabola*, Fall 1997, vol 22, no 3.



last'<sup>41</sup>. Both Rashi and Hillesum were witnessing to the *dunamis* of God as *the power of the powerless*. This, clearly, is not the imperial power of a sovereign; it is a dynamic call to love which possibilizes and enables humans to transform their world – by giving itself to the ‘least of these’, by empathizing with the disinherited and the dispossessed, by refusing the path of might and violence, by transfiguring the mustard seed into the kingdom, each moment at a time, one act after another, each step of the way. This is the path heralded by the Pauline God of ‘nothings and nobodies’ (*ta me onta*) excluded from the triumphal pre-eminence of totality (*ta onta*) – a kenotic, self-emptying, crucified God whose ‘weakness is stronger than human strength’ (I Corinthians, 1:25). It signals the option for the poor, for non-violent resistance and revolution taken by peacemakers and dissenting ‘holy fools’ from ancient to modern times. It is the message of suffering rather than doing evil, of loving one’s adversaries, of ‘no enemies’, of ‘soul force’ (*satyagraha*). One thinks of a long heritage ranging from Isaiah, Jesus, Siddartha and Socrates to such contemporary figures as Gandhi, Havel, Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Ernesto Cardinal, Tich Nhat Hahn and Martin Luther King, amongst others. The God witnessed here goes beyond the will-to-power.

Nicholas of Cusa, as already mentioned, offers some interesting insights into this eschatological God when he declares that ‘God alone is all he is able to be’ (*Dialogus de Possest*).<sup>42</sup>(42). Unlike the God of metaphysical omnipotence, underlying the perverse logic of theodicy which seeks to justify evil as part of the divine Will, this notion of God as an ‘abling to be’ (*posse* or *possest*) points in a radically different direction. Let us pause for a moment to unpack the phrase, ‘God is all he is able to be’. Since God is all good God is not able to be non-good, that is non-God – defect or evil. In other words, God is *not* omnipotent in the traditional metaphysical sense understood by Leibniz and Hegel. He is not a being able to be all good *and* evil things. That is why God could not help Etty Hillseum and other victims of evil. God is not responsible for evil. And Hillesum understood this all too well when she turned the old hierarchies on their head and declared that it is *we* who must help God to be God. Was she not in fact subscribing here to a long – if often neglected – biblical heritage? After all, if Elijah had not heard the ‘still small voice’ of God in his cave, we would not have received the wisdom of his prophecy. If a young woman from Nazareth had said ‘no’ to the angel of the annunciation the Word would not have become Flesh. If certain fishermen, tax collectors and prostitutes had not heard the call to follow the Son of Man, there would have been no Son of God – and no Gospel witness. So too, if Hillesum and others like her had not let God be God by defending his dwelling place of *caritas*

<sup>41</sup> Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, Owl Books, New York, 1996, p. 176.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest* in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1980, p. 69. The original Latin reads: ‘Deus est omne id quod esse potest’.



within them, even in those hellish moments of holocaust horror, there would have been no measure of love – albeit it as tiny as the mustard seed – to defy the hate of the Gestapo. For if God's loving is indeed unconditional, the realisation of that loving *posse* in this world is conditional upon our response. If we are waiting for God, God is waiting for us. Waiting for us to say 'yes', to hear the call and to act, to bear witness, to answer the *posse* with *esse*, to make the word flesh – even in the darkest moments.

I think Dionysius the Areopagite could be said to add to our understanding of this great enigma when he speaks, in Book 7 of the *Divine Names*, of a 'possibility beyond being' (*hyperousias dunameos*) which engenders our desire to live more abundantly and seek the good. 'Being itself', he writes, 'only has the possibility to be from the possibility beyond being'. And he adds that it is 'from the infinitely good posse (*dunamis*) of what it sends to them (that) they have received their power (*dunamis*)'.<sup>43</sup> I am tempted to relate this notion of an infinitely good possibilising of God to another extraordinary passage in the *Divine Names* – this time Book 9, section 3 – where Dionysius writes of the God of little things: 'God is said to be small as leaving every mass and distance behind and proceeding unhindered through all. Indeed the small is the cause of all the elements, for you will find none of these that have not participated in the form of smallness. Thus, smallness is to be interpreted with respect to God as its wandering and operating in all and through all without hindrance 'penetrating down to the division of the soul, spirit, joint and marrow', and discerning thoughts and 'intentions of the heart', and indeed of all beings. 'For there is no creation which is invisible to its face' (Heb 4, 12). This smallness is without quantity, without quality, without restraint, unlimited, undefined, and all embracing although it is unembraced'.<sup>44</sup> Is this extraordinary passage by Dionysius not a passionate invitation to embrace a micro-theology of the kingdom? Is it not a solicitation to embrace an eschatology of little things – mustard seeds, grains of yeast, tiny pearls, cups of water, infinitesimal everyday acts of love and witness? It appears so.

<sup>43</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. J. D. Jones, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1980, p. 182.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188. For a further exploration of the link between negative theology and our micro-eschatology see Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2002, pp. 8-11, 49-50, 60-70, 80-91, 112-114. See in particular Breton's radical claim that we must give to God the being he has not, qua thirsting, kenotic, crucified stranger (pp. 121-122). The *dunamis* of God is here identified with the *germen nihili* or 'power of nothing' which reveals itself as a 'double nothingness' and powerless which liberates those oppressed by the power of *ta onta*, sowing the seed of non-being epitomized by the Beatitudes so that the eschatological tree of love and justice may flower and flourish (pp. 80-84 and xxiv-xxvi). For it is in and as a 'seed of non-being' that, in Eckhart's resonant phrase, 'God becomes verdant in all the honor of his being' (cited p. 80).



Moreover, I think it is just this kind of micro-theology that Gerard Manley Hopkins had in mind when he records God's grace in small and scattered epiphanies of the quotidian – when he speaks, for example, of God's 'pied beauty' being manifest in various 'dappled things', from 'finches wings' and 'rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim' to 'all things counter, original, spare, strange;/ Whatever is fickle, freckled – who knows how?' (*Pied Beauty*). For Hopkins, it is not the mighty and triumphant Monarch that epitomizes the pearl of the kingdom ('immortal diamond') but, contrariwise, the court fool, the joker in the pack, the least and last of these. Here is Hopkins' take on the eschatological kingdom:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am,  
And  
This Jack, Joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,  
Immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.

Hopkins deity is one of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things.<sup>45</sup> An echo perhaps of Dante's deity in the *Paradiso* who is described as a tiny, indivisible point of light in contrast to the towering figure of Lucifer in the final Canto of the *Inferno*. But in our shift of registers from theology to poetry we are already embarking on our next circle of readings.

### 3. The Literary Circle

In our third and final hermeneutic circle – the *literary* – I include a number of passages which offer more explicitly poetic epiphanies of the possible. This amplification of our investigation to embrace a literary poetics extends the range of reference to take in soundings of *posse* which transcend the confessional limits of theism or atheism, enjoying as they do a special liberty of imagination – a 'poetic license' to entertain an unlimited variation of experience. As Emily Dickenson rightly observed, 'possibility is a fuse lit by imagination', a belief which informs her imaging of the eschatological possible:

I dwell in possibility –  
A fairer house than prose –  
More numerous of windows –

<sup>45</sup> See the illuminating reading of Hopkins in Mark Patrick Hederman, *Anchoring the Altar: Christianity and the work of art*, Veritas, Dublin, 2002, pp. 131 f. It is important to note that this micro-theological emphasis on God as less rather than more is not confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is also to be found in much of the Buddhist and Hindu wisdom literature, see for instance the following passage from Krishnamurti: 'The silence which is not the silence of the ending of noise is only a small beginning. It is like going through a small hole to an enormous, wide, expansive ocean, to an immeasurable, timeless state' (*Freedom from the Known*, Harper, San Francisco, 1969, p. 109).



Superior – for doors.....  
 Of visitors – the fairest –  
 For Occupation – This –  
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
 To gather Paradise –

The French author, Rabelais, had his eye on a similar paradise when he affirmed the possibility of life through death, yea-saying to his last moments as he jubilantly declared: 'J'avance vers le grand possible!' In his remarkable novel, *Man without Qualities*, the Austrian writer Robert Musil offers a further perspective on the eschatological *posse* when he claims that 'possibility is the dormant design of God in man' – a design waiting to be awakened by our poetic dwelling in the world. Our true vocation in history, for Musil, is one of utopian invention. It involves an audacious surpassing of given reality towards imagined possibility. Here is the passage in full: 'One might define the meaning of the possible as the faculty of thinking all that *might be* just as much as what is...The implications of such a creative disposition are huge...The possible consists of much more than the dreams of neurasthenics; it also involves the still dormant plans of God. A possible event or truth is not just the real event or truth minus the 'reality'; rather it signals something very divine, a flame, a burning, a will to construct a utopia which, far from fearing reality, treats it simply as a perpetual task and invention. The earth is not so spent, after all, and never has it seemed so fascinating'.<sup>46</sup>

The metaphor of fire – with its allusions to both the burning bush (Exod 3:14) and the Pentecostal flame of speaking tongues – is also explored by Wallace Stevens in a poem addressed to the philosopher, George Santayana, entitled 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome'. Here again the correspondence between the simple (indigent, small, inconsequential) and the eschatological (the kingdom) is conveyed by the figure of a candle flame which illumines the real in the light of the 'celestial possible'. The pneumatological call to speak in tongues commits itself here to a poetics of the poor and unremembered. Stevens writes:

A light on the candle tearing against the wick  
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape  
 From fire and be part of that of which  
 Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible (...)  
 Be orator but with an accurate tongue  
 And without eloquence, O, half-asleep,  
 Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,  
 So that we feel, in this illumined large,  
 The veritable small (...)  
 Impatient for the grandeur that you need  
 In so much misery, and yet finding it  
 Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,

<sup>46</sup> Robert Musil, *Man without Qualities*, cited in our *Poétique du Possible*, p. 3.



Profound poetry of the poor...

It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.

But it is doubtless the Prague poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who composes one of the most inspiring invocations of the gracious power of *posse* in the conclusion to his *Letters to a Young Poet*. Here the eschatological promise of a coming God is combined with the erotic expectancy of a waiting lover. 'Why don't you think of him (God) as the one who is coming', he asks his youthful correspondent, as 'one who has been approaching from all eternity, the one who will someday arrive, the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? What keeps you from projecting his birth into the ages that are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy? Don't you see how everything that happens is again and again a beginning, and couldn't it be *His* (God's) beginning, since, in itself, starting is always so beautiful?' Then Rilke poses this crucial question: 'If he is the most perfect one, must not what is less perfect *precede* him, so that he can choose himself out of fullness and superabundance? – Must not *he* be the last one, so that he can include everything in himself, and what meaning would we have if he whom we are longing for has already existed? As bees gather honey, so we collect what is sweetest out of all things and build Him'. Rilke ends this remarkable passage with a call to vigilant attention and expectancy. Messianism at its best. The metaphor of the flowering, flourishing mustard seed is brought to a new poetic intensity. 'Be patient', Rilke counsels the young poet, 'and realize that the least we can do is to make coming into existence no more difficult for Him (God) than the earth does for spring when it wants to come' (*Letters to a Young Poet*).<sup>47</sup>

Here we return, as it were, to the 'pregnant sense of the possible' noted in our citation from Kierkegaard above – the interweaving of the divine and the human in patient prayer and longing. And this eschatological desire, as Rilke vividly reminds us, is not confined to human existence but involves, by extension, the entire expanse of the terrestrial universe as it awaits, yearns and prepares itself for the coming *prima vera*.

<sup>47</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchel, Vintage Books, 1986, pp. 61-63. The emphasis here on the earth as correspondent for divine eros highlights, once again, the incarnational tendency of theoeroticism. The earth is full of the seeds of the divine (what Augustine, borrowing from the Stoics, called *logoi spermatικοί*), incubating within the finite historical world like latent potencies waiting to be animated and actualized by the infinitely incoming grace of God as transcendent *posse*. If one removes transcendent *posse* from this equation, one relapses into a purely immanentist dialectic (evolutionary materialism or, at best, process theology). On the other hand, if one ignores the immanence of terrestrial and human potencies, one is left with an inordinately inaccessible and abstract deity – a sort of acosmic alterity without face or voice (e.g. deism or deconstruction). A hermeneutical poetics of divine *posse* tries to preserve a delicate balance between these opposite extremes.



My daughter, who brought this passage to my attention, told me this was a God she could believe in! Could I disagree?

### Conclusion

So much depends, then, on what we mean by the *possible*. If one defines possibility according to established convention as a category of modal logic or metaphysical calculus – then God is closer to the impossible than the possible. But if one seeks, as I do, to reinterpret the possible as eschatological *posse*, from a post-metaphysical poetical perspective, the stakes are very different. For now we are talking of a *second* possible (analogous to Ricoeur's 'second naiveté') *beyond* the impossible, *otherwise* than impossible, *more* than impossible, at the *other side* of the old modal opposition between the possible and the impossible. And here we find ourselves closer to Kierkegaard's 'passion for the possible' as portal to faith.

I think it is crucial to recall here the telling distinction between two competing translations of the Greek term *dunamis*. On the one hand, we have the metaphysical rendering of the term as *potestas/potentia*, that is, as a potency understood in terms of an economy of power, causality, substance – what Levinas calls the economy of the Same (or Totality). On the other hand, we have an eschatological rendering of *dunamis* as *posse/possest*, that is, as a gracious and gratuitous giving which possibilizes love and justice in this world. It is this later interpretation of *dunamis* that I have been seeking to promote in my three hermeneutic detours through the poetics of the possible (and, in more depth and detail in *The God who May Be*).

In triumphalist accounts of the kingdom, the advent of the Messiah on the last day is often described in militaristic terms – as sublimely apocalyptic rather than lovingly vulnerable, as 'almighty' rather than solicitous, as coercive rather than caring. By contrast, the divine *posse* I am sponsoring here is more healing than judgmental, more disposed to accept the 'least of these' than to meet out punishment and glory. If God can prevent evil from happening by re-creating the historical past, as a theologian like Peter Damian once suggested, He is by implication a God of theodicy: namely, a God who has the power to decide whether history unfolds as good or evil. To me, this sounds like *potestas* rather than *posse*. A far cry from the divine power of the powerless which Etty Hillesum invokes when she summons us to help God to be God in the face of violence and war. A world away from the God of little things.

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Sometimes I have been asked what would happen to the God of the Possible if we were to destroy the earth? How can God's promise of a kingdom on earth be fulfilled if there is no earth to come back to? What might be said of the existence of God in such a scenario? There are a few observations I would like to make here



by way of conclusion, surmises which claim the poetic license of a 'free imaginative variation'!

First, I would say that as eternally perduring and constant (that is, as faithful and attentive to us in each *present moment*), God would live on as an endless *promise* of love and justice. This would be so even if we fail or frustrate this covenant by denying its potential for historical fulfillment *on earth*. In this case, God would be like a spouse abandoned by a spouse – to take up the bride/bridegroom analogy from the *Song of Songs*. A lover forsaken. Or to borrow a metaphor from Hildegard of Bingen, the *posse* would be like a tree deprived of its greening (*viriditas*).<sup>48</sup> If denied its ultimate incarnation in the last days, the possible God would be like a flowering seed arrested before it could come to its full flourishing and fruition on the earth. It would still be *adventurus*, but no longer *futurus*. The divine advent would be deprived of an historical, human future but would remain, in each moment, enduringly faithful in spite of all. It would still be a 'yes' in the face of our 'no'.

Second, as eternal *memory* (past), the divine *posse* would preserve all those eschatological 'moments' from the past where the divine was incarnated in the flesh of the world every time (as Christ and Isaiah taught) someone gave a cup of cold water to someone else. In kairological as opposed to merely chronological time, these instants would be eternally 'repeated' in divine remembrance. This would mark a re-jigging of the old adage: 'The good that men do lives after them, the evil is interred with their bones' (to juggle with a line from Shakespeare's *Julius*

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<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to my wise friend and teacher, Peggy McLoughlin, for this reference and the quotes below. Here is one verse in which the term *viriditas* appears:

O most nobel greening power (*O nobilissima viriditas*)  
 Rooted in the sun,  
 Who shine in dazzling serenity  
 In a sphere  
 That no earthly excellence  
 Can comprehend.  
 You are enclosed  
 In the embrace of divine mysteries,  
 You blush like the damn  
 And burn like a flame of the sun.

'For her, the energy that drives the universe – which she calls *viriditas*, or the greening force – is also the power of the Living Light, which is Love-caritas. The expression of this in the creation is music. The original creation was a miracle of equilibrium, of perfect harmony, which the Fall disturbed; the incarnation restores a new harmony – indeed the Word of God is music itself, and the soul of mankind is symphonic: *symphonialis est anima*... Here she finds the dynamic expression of the love of God and his promise to bring mankind back to him the expression in the body of the green-growing grace of *viriditas*' (*Great Spirits 1000-2000: The Fifty-Two Christians who Most Influenced their Millennium*, ed by Selina O'Grady and John Wilkins, Paulist Press, New York, 2002).



*Caesar*). It would be in keeping with the repeated assurances of the biblical deity to remember the faithful who lived and died in history: e.g. Isaiah 49: 14-15: 'Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you'. And it would also be consonant with the contrary commitment to erase the memory of evil: 'The Lord is close to the broken hearted/ The Lord confronts the evildoers/ To destroy remembrance of them from the earth' (Psalm 34). There is then a deeply eschatological character to the biblical injunction to 'remember' (*zakhor*). And this character is what translates God's mindfulness of creatures into a form of 'anticipatory memory' (the term is Herbert Marcuse's) which preserves a future for the past. As Psalm 105 tells us, 'He remembers forever his covenant which he made binding for a thousand generations – which he entered into with Abraham....'. In other words, the promise made at the beginning of time is kept by the divine *posse* as an 'eternal' remembrance of both the historical past and present right up to the *parousia*.

Thirdly and finally then, qua eternal *advent* (future), we might say that even though we would have deprived the divine *posse* of its future realization as a kingdom *come on earth*, we could not, by such an act of self-destruction, deprive God of the possibility of starting over again. Nothing *good* is impossible to God. And rebirth in the face of death is good. As in any nuptial promise or pledge, each partner can speak for him/herself only: God can only promise for God, not for us. We are entirely free to break off *our* part of the promise at any time. And if we do, if we engage in collective self-destruction (God forbid!), why should God not have a 'second chance'? Is not *posse*, after all, the possibility of endless beginning?

Of course, the *posse* of the kingdom is not just a promise for humanity as a universal community (to be reassembled as the mystical body of Christ on the last day, according to the Patristic notion of *anakephalaoisis*/Recapitulation). *Posse* is also and equally a promise for each unique self whose singular good – but not evil – will be preserved eternally in the recollection of the *deus adventurus*: like each glistening speck of dust in a comet's tail or each glint of plankton in the nocturnal wake of a ship. But if we destroy the earth we also refuse the possibility of each of these recollected and resurrected selves returning to a 'new heaven as new earth' on the last day. Such selves would return as *posse* – as eternal promise – but without the *esse* of a Second Coming.

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Several of the above remarks and conjectures find textual support, I believe, in the 'Palestinian formula' of eschatological memory (*eis anamnesin*) prevalent in late Jewish and early Christian literature. The formula finds one of its earliest inscriptions in Psalm 111, 'the righteous will be for eternal remembrance'; and again in Psalms 37 and 69, where the memory of God refers not just to creatures remembering their Creator in rituals and liturgies but also to the Creator recalling creatures, making the past present before God in a sort of eternal re-presentation



which endures into the future and beyond. Likewise in Ecclesiasticus we find the repeated prayer that God might mercifully remember his children. As the biblical commentator, Joachim Jeremias, observes, such remembrance is an 'effecting and creating event which is constantly fulfilling the eschatological covenant promise... When the sinner 'is not to be remembered' at the resurrection, this means that he will have no part in it (Ps. Sol. 3.11). And when God no longer remembers sin, he forgets it (Jer. 31.34; Heb. 8.12; 10.17), this means that he forgives it. God's remembrance is always an action in mercy or judgment'.<sup>49</sup>

The notion of eschatological memory is, as noted, also frequently witnessed in New Testament literature where it takes the form of a double 'repetition' – looking to past and future simultaneously. In the Eucharistic formula – 'do this in remembrance of me' (*eis ten emen anamneisin*) (Luke 22.19; I Cor 11.24) – the proper translation of the repetition injunction, in keeping with the Palestinian memorial formula, is this: 'Do this so that God may remember me'.<sup>50</sup> The appeal to divine memory during the Eucharistic sharing of bread and wine may be seen accordingly as an echo of the third benediction of the grace after Passover meal which asks *God to remember the Messiah* – a benediction which is followed in turn with a petition for 'the remembrance of all thy people': 'may their remembrance come before thee, for rescue, goodness...'.<sup>51</sup> The remembrance of past suffering is thus tied to the hope for the advent of the *parousia* – for Jews the entry of the Messiah to Jerusalem, for Christians the return of Christ on the last day. The petition for repetition – in the *kairological* rather than *chronological* sense – may be translated as: 'God remembers the Messiah in that he causes the kingdom to break in by the *parousia*'.<sup>52</sup>

This allusion to a bi-lateral temporality whereby divine memory recalls the *past as future* is further evidenced in Paul's gloss on the Eucharistic remembrance formula: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*' (*achri ou elthei*. See I Cor. 11.23-25). Indeed the use of the subjunctive term *achri* refers often in the New Testament to the arrival of the *eschaton* (Rom. 11.25; I Cor. 15.25; Luke 21.24). The crucial phrase here – 'until he comes' – may thus be read in light of the liturgical *maranatha* (come lord!)

<sup>49</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 249. I am indebted to two of my colleagues at Boston College, Gary Gurtler and John Manoussakis, for bringing these comments and references by Dionysius and Jeremias to my attention.

<sup>50</sup> Jeremias, p. 252.

<sup>51</sup> *The Passover Haggadah*, Schocken Books, New York, 1953, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> Jeremias, p. 252. One might see a repetition of the eschatological forgetting and remembering from the finite human perspective in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Purgatory Canto 28) where the Pilgrim encounters the two inexhaustible streams of the garden, *Lethe* and *Eunoe*, of which the former washes away all memory of sin while the latter retrieves the memory of good deeds and life-giving moments.



invoked by the faithful in their prayers for the coming of God. So rather than remembering the death of God as no more than a historical event of the past, the remembrance formula can be said to celebrate it as an eschatological advent – that is, as the inauguration of a New Covenant. ‘This proclamation expresses the vicarious death of Jesus as the beginning of the salvation time and prays for the coming of the consummation. As often as the death of the Lord is proclaimed at the Lord’s supper, and the *maranatha* rises upwards, God is reminded of the unfulfilled climax of the work of salvation until (the goal is reached, that) he comes. Paul has therefore understood the *anamnesis* as the eschatological remembrance of God that is to be realized in the *parousia*’.<sup>53</sup> It is with this in mind that Luke speaks of the eschatological jubilation and ‘gladness’ (*agalliasis*) which characterizes the mealtimes of the earliest Christian communities (Acts 2.46).

In sum, the close rapport between the Eucharistic request for repetition and the Passover ritual suggest that for both Judaism and Christianity the Kingdom advent is construed as a *retrieval-forward of the past as future*. The remembrance formula might be interpreted accordingly as something like this: ‘Keep gathering together in remembrance of me so that I will remember you by keeping my promise to bring about the consummation of love, justice and joy in the *parousia*. Help me to be God!’ Or as the Coptic version of the formula goes: ‘May the Lord come...If any man is holy, let him come. *Marathana*. Amen’.

The above conjectures operate, for the most part, in the realm of hermeneutical poetics which enjoys a certain imaginative liberty vis-à-vis the strictures of theological dogma, speculative metaphysics or empirical physics. Though, I hasten to add, a fruitful dialogue remains open with all three disciplines.

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Let me end with a final eschatological image from the poetics of the kingdom – the invitation to the feast. ‘I stand at the door and knock, says the Lord. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper with him, and he with me’. The great thing about this promise of an eschatological banquet is that no one is excluded. The Post-God of *posse* knocks not just twice but a thousand times, nay, infinitely, ceaselessly, until there is no door unopened, no creature, however small or inconsequential, left out in the cold, hungry, thirsty, uncared for, unloved, unredeemed. The Post-God keeps knocking and calling and delivering the word until we open ourselves to the message and the letter becomes spirit, the word flesh. And what is this message? An invitation to the kingdom. And what is the kingdom? The kingdom is a cup of cold water given to the least of these, it is bread and fish and wine given to the famished and un-housed, a good meal and (we are promised) one hell of a good time lasting into the early hours of the morning. A morning that never ends.

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<sup>53</sup> Jeremias, p. 253.