20, 27 February, 6 March 2006
ID 2974

Richard Kearney

IDEAS

The God Who May Be

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Paul Kennedy
m Paul Kennedy, and this is *Ideas* on the nterpretation of religion.

Richard Kearney
n the beginning is *hermeneuein*, interpretation. In the eginning is the word, not a stone, not a certitude, not god you can put in a bottle and bring out every so ften on festive occasions to prove you've got the bsolute truth and nobody else does. In the beginning s the word, and as we know, words are dialogical, nd you've got to listen, and then you respond.

Paul Kennedy
That's Richard Kearney. He's a poet, a novelist, a prolific essayist, and a professor of philosophy at University College, Dublin, where he began his areer, and at Boston College, where he currently eaches. His great subjects as a philosopher have been magination and religion. For it is religion, he elieves, that holds the key to peace in the world.

Richard Kearney
The origin of most of the wars in the world today is eligion. Most wars are caused in great part, and very ften unconsciously, for religious reasons, but for me, hat is largely a perversion of religion. And I think he antidote and the response to that, if we want to ring about world peace, is religion. It's the hair of ne dog that bit you. We will find a solution to the rong interpretation of religion in the right nterpretation of religion.

aul Kennedy
he "right interpretation of religion," in Richard earney's view, depends on getting past either/or proaches to the question of God. God is either a al being, pulling our strings from the sky, or God is ure fantasy. He speaks of a God who may be. What means is our subject in this program. It's the first three *Ideas* hours on Richard Kearney's philosophy imagination. The series is presented by David ayley.

David Cayley
The question usually asked about God is whether God exists. Children ask each other, "Do you believe in God?" But what does the question mean? Is God a fact whose existence we can prove or disprove? Richard Kearney thinks it's the wrong question. In 2001, he published a book called The God Who May Be, in which he says that God is revealed to us, not as a positive fact, but as a possibility, something remembered and reached for but never entirely present. The positive God is the God of the philosophers, the God whom Nietzsche says has died. The possible God is the God of the Bible, the God who calls Samuel in the night, and speaks to Moses from a burning bush, the pillar of cloud and fire that leads the Israelites out of Egypt. Imagination, Richard Kearney says, is our only way to the Divine, and this means that we can have no guaranteed knowledge but only what we can sift from our experience by patient interpretation.

I was very taken by Richard Kearney's argument when a friend introduced me to The God Who May Be, and so I asked Kearney if could visit him at his home in Boston. There, we recorded several long conversations, the first about his interpretation of religion and the Bible. He began by telling me a little about his religious formation.

Richard Kearney
My relationship to God and the God question began pretty early in Ireland as a certain kind of ambivalence. On the one hand, I had a very positive experience of religion growing up, perhaps uncharacteristic and unusual, growing up in southern, Catholic-majority Ireland. Both my parents and family were very spiritual, and there was a strong sense of liturgy. We even said the rosary. There was a strong sense of ritual and the Eucharist. But when it came to issues of morality, there was a huge sense of trust in what we — there were seven children — chose responsibly to do and to think and so on, and I never felt religion, therefore, never experienced it as something punitive or judgmental or self-righteous or dogmatic. And we were sent to boarding school in County Limerick, which was north of where we lived

in Cork, and there we were fortunate enough, the brothers at any rate in the family, to be taught by the Benedictines, many of whom had just come back from Paris and were full of the ideas of the '60s and the Second Vatican Council and the new movements in theology and phenomenology and so on with regard to the God question. So in that respect, I had a very positive experience.

When I then went to college, it was somewhat different because I had at the time a head of department called Desmond Connell, who was later to become Cardinal of Ireland — a very fine man, very honest, but extremely conservative. And there, I learned St. Thomas Aquinas but not even by reading the texts of St. Thomas. We read Thomism, and Thomism was a system. It was called "realism," and I had an instinctive reaction against that. So, I had two attitudes towards religion growing up. One was, at a liturgical and spiritual, even mystical, level, a relationship of great affection and great admiration indeed for what the Church represents. And yet when I went to university and witnessed the more clerical, institutional side of things and then also saw many clerical abuses in society, where the Church was much too dominant on certain issues — on contraception, on divorce, on homosexuality, pre-marital sex — a lot of those issues and others — even the marginalized role of women in the Catholic Church — all of that was something to which I found myself very opposed. So, it was always this ambidextrous sort of approach to religion.

David Cayley
This ambidextrous approach, open yet critical, would characterize all of Kearney's later work. It grew first out of the contrast between the spiritual atmosphere of his home and the dogmatic and authoritarian spirit he encountered at university. But it was also fostered, he says, by the teachers at his boarding school at Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick.

Richard Kearney
We had a class called...Religious Doctrine, I think it was called. And it was, first of all, Catechism, and that became Religious Doctrine. And the normal approach would have been, you get your book, and you have your questions, and you have your answers that you learn by rote, but, fortunately, my Benedictine mentors didn't believe in that. They threw that out the window, and they said, "No. You should begin by learning the good arguments against the existence of God and the good arguments for God's existence, but we'll start with the arguments against." And, they started with a number of philosophers —Nietzsche, Freud, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, Marx — and we had a great time, saying, "Sure, that must be right. This old God, who's terrorized us and oppressed us and punished us and judged us and taken away our responsibility and our autonomy and our freedom and our choice — yeah, let's get rid of that." And then this particular teacher, Father Andrew Nugent, he said, "Okay. Now, we've gone through the arguments against God. Here are some reasons why maybe God might exist or could exist or should exist." And so, we got the arguments of Dostoyevsky, and we got the arguments of Augustine, and we got the arguments of Gabriel Marcel and the Christian existentialists. And it made religion a very intellectually robust and challenging practice and enterprise.

David Cayley
For Richard Kearney's teachers, atheism was a necessary preparation for faith. And a similar preparation has been taking place, he thinks, in modern Western culture more generally. Widespread atheism, he says, has cleared the ground for a more tentative and less aggressive form of belief.

Richard Kearney
The atheistic turn — it started really with the Enlightenment — was, I think, not a bad thing. I think one needed to get rid of the idols, what Jean-Luc Marion calls the "conceptual idolatry of Western thinking," that God was the first cause, the final cause, the supreme unmoved mover, the answer to all our questions. And so, God became a being, a thing, the omni-God, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, who was the solution to everybody's problem. There was a place for everything, and everything was in its right place. And, of course, once it's translated into

politics and society, it led from the Holy Roman Empire right up to the Enlightenment to huge abuses in terms of Church and state. I think that probably did need to come crumbling down.

And then after that 100, 200 year hiatus, where religion was kept strictly out of philosophy and out of politics – and I'm very much in favour of the separation of Church and state – there came a question which is, if we're doing phenomenology and we're studying all phenomena, can we actually exclude as one phenomenon, amongst many others, the religious phenomenon? So, the question of God, the question of the sacred, the question of religion came back again but in a much more humble, modest guise, and instead of invoking the great Church Fathers or the scholastic 'supremos,' like Aquinas, Bonaventure and so on — not that they're not wonderful thinkers, of course they are — but instead of starting there and working down, there was a tendency to look to certain neglected texts in the tradition, to texts like The Song of Songs, the mystics — very important — the retrieval of the mystics, Angelus Silesius, Hildegard von Bingen, Meister Eckhardt, John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila — this huge interest, even shown by a lot of the atheistic thinkers, like Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan in France. But the God that was now appearing was not a God of pure fact, 'thingness,' power, status, institutional hegemony but rather a God of possibility, a God of "the least of these," as the Gospel says, whether it's Christ's openness to the Samaritan woman, his openness to Mary Magdalene, the sinner, his openness towards sinners and tax collectors and prodigal sons and, of course, the least of these: the meek and the humble and the thirsty and the hungry. And this new approach to the Divine, coming after the, I would say, probably necessary ascesis and purgation from the Enlightenment through to existentialism, that necessary atheism led to a retrieval of this aspect of the Divine, as a God who may be, not as a God who *is* in terms of some kind of certain logical proof or certain institutional power.

David Cayley
The expression "the least of these," which Richard Kearney used a moment ago, is drawn from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is describing the Day of Judgment, when he will receive the righteous into his kingdom and will say to them, "I was hungry, and you gave me food…a stranger and you welcomed me…in prison and you visited me." But the righteous, Jesus predicts, will ask, Lord, when did we do any of these things for you? And the Lord will reply, "Whatever you did for the least of these, my brothers, you did for me." It's a passage that recurs in Richard Kearney's work and in our interview. He likes it because it says so clearly that God does not confront us as power and glory but as whatever is least in our estimation. And because it is the God of power and glory that atheism has denied, Richard Kearney argues, a way has been opened to a new account of God after atheism. For this new account, he writes in The God Who May Be, God neither is nor is not, but may be.

Richard Kearney
What I'm trying to present there is an alternative to dogmatic theism — God is…we know what God is…God is this thing…God is this being that can be defined A to Z in this way. Therefore, we can possess God, appropriate God, conceptually compute and classify God, and that's our property. What we have we hold, and it's our duty to kind of convince everybody else. Now, that to me leads to war and, in a lesser mode, intolerance, and I wanted to get away from that dogmatic sense of theism towards a non-dogmatic sense of theism basically. And I wanted to get away from the dogmatic atheism of many of the philosophers and thinkers and students that I frequented in Canada and Ireland and Paris in the '70s and '80s who said, "What! You're interested in the question of God, have you gone soft in the brain or something? Did you not hear of the Enlightenment? Have you not heard of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche? Where have you been?

So, I was looking for a middle way which would be a form of theism that learns from atheism and keeps in dialogue with atheism. So, the God that I was

suggesting modestly and metaphorically in the book The God Who May Be is a God who *is not* in a dogmatic sense, and yet *is* in another sense that I'm trying to retrieve from certain passages in scripture.

David Cayley
We'll come to these specific passages in a moment, but a few words first on Richard Kearney's general approach to the Bible. He reads it as a work of imagination, but not, therefore, as untrue. For him, the imaginary does not oppose the real, it unfolds it. Imagination is our most crucial and fundamental faculty, the way we make the world we end up living in. And the Bible itself agrees with him, he says, from its very first pages.

Richard Kearney
From the word 'go,' there's a good and evil imagination. It's called the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer hatov* in Hebrew. And interestingly, from the word 'go,' we're dealing with this *yetzer* because God created the human being, Adam and Eve, with the *yetzer*, and he called it "good." But Cain went and killed his brother, because he imagined what it would be like to be the better one, the chosen one — he wanted to be his brother, he had covetousness, he had envy, he had mimetic rivalry, he wanted to be Abel — and so he killed him to become him, in a way, and to replace him. And God said, "Why did you do that?" and Cain replied, "Well, it's not my fault. It's the evil *yetzer*, the evil imagination, the evil drive that you created in me, so it's your fault, not mine." And, of course, the rabbinical interpretation of that is that God created Cain with the good *yetzer*, but Cain had the ability to turn it to evil, so we can turn imagination to evil. But in its initial instantiation in the human, according to the book of Genesis, it is good. And, of course, the Hebrew word for the Creator is *Yotzer*. It's the same root: yzr. So, imagination is the creative power in us to complete the seventh day of Creation, which God left empty so that we would be free to co-create the kingdom with God.

Now, as we know, we can use our *yetzer*, our creative, imaginative power to open up all kinds of possibilities and to enable us to choose between possibilities, because that's what imagination does. We can use that either as an evil fantasy through propaganda, hatred, pornography, caricaturing of the enemy as the monster and so on and so forth, hatred — we can use it in that way, and it's used every day in that way, and we can kill as Cain killed his brother Abel, because of his evil *yetzer*, his evil imagination — or we can turn it to the good, and that's freedom, that's human freedom, because, otherwise, Adam and Eve would have just been ventriloquist dummies, marionettes, doing the will of God, but never having the possibility of doing otherwise. And it's because we can do good or evil and choose good or evil that we are free beings, and, therefore, if we do good, we are so pleasing to God. According to another Midrashic account, God, *Yahweh*, preferred the songs of humans over the songs of the angels because humans had a choice in terms of directing their *yetzer* towards God whereas angels didn't. They just had to sing from the same hymn sheet, whether they liked it or not. And that sense of the freedom of humanity is integral to imagination, which is always the realm of the possible, opening the actual to the possible, opening reality to horizons of hope and of fulfillment that are contained as promissory notes within the real. But that opening up of the real towards the future and towards the past, because the past is absent too, that ability to make the absent present, be it a futural absence or a past absence, that's the power of imagination. It's also the source of our self-division, of course, as human beings, because, as Sartre put it — it's an old existentialist maxim — the human being is one who is what he is not and is not what he is, because we're always haunted by that 'not-ness,' of the 'no longer' and the 'not yet,' by time. And imagination brings the 'not yet' of the future, which is pure absence now, and the 'no longer' of the past, which is now absent, it brings it, it represents it and brings it into this narrative plot that connects it with me now and makes me responsible for the past and the future.

David Cayley
For Richard Kearney, imagination and possibility are linked because imagination alone can reveal what is

ossible. But imagination must always be subject to ıterpretation. Because the God of the Bible doesn't ıst call for justice, he also calls on occasion for enocide. The Bible is what René Girard once called "text in travail." As a human transcription of the)ivine, it presents contradictory and competing isions. There is the God who addresses Job from the /hirlwind and the thin, small voice that whispers to lijah from a cave, the God who tells Abraham to kill is son Isaac, and the God who tells him not to and upplies a ram in the boy's place. Only interpretation an sort the voices out. And it's the same for the haracters within the story, Richard Kearney says, as is for the reader.

ichard Kearney

/hen Abraham listened to the strangers who came to is door, and he invited them in, and they sat under is tree, and he gave them food to eat, the three ngels who then announced that Sarah, his barren, 0-year-old wife, was going to have a baby, he was stening to the voice of the stranger. But when later ı Exodus, he banishes Hagar and her son, Ishmael, ut into the desert, he's not listening to the voices of ıe strangers anymore. He's saying, "Now I have a ue son, and I'm going to get rid of the bastard, ntrue son." And when the rabbis say every line of ıe Bible has at least ten meanings, and this is an ıvitation to endless hermeneutics, to endless ıbbinical discussion, interpretation, exegesis, that's hat's so wonderful about it. There is no one way of ading it. We're invited to interpret these difficult assages and see where even Abraham, even Isaac, ven Jacob and Joseph, they all got some things rong, and they all presumably got a helluva lot ght, but that's hermeneutic — it happens within the xt itself — and it's an invitation to us. And in a ay, Joseph is a kind of a master hermeneut, ıterpreter, because that's what he does. He interprets nages and signs. Pharaoh gets the dream about the ven cattle, but he doesn't know what it means. ıcob is the rabbinical interpreter within the biblical xt who teaches us how to interpret the dreams and say, "This is what it means." And that's an vitation within the text itself to engage in rmeneutic listening and vigilance and so on. And the prophets, what do they do? They listen to sounds and words and invitations and summonses, and they get it, when very often other people who are getting the same summonses don't get it. That's a way of saying that the meanings are there, the call is there, the summons to love and justice is there and to the kingdom is there, but some people listen — the prophets — some people don't. It's always about discriminating and discerning between spirits and voices and sounds and signs and signals. In the beginning is hermeneutics. In the beginning is the word. And that's true for imagination because, without imagination, we couldn't do the interpreting, we couldn't see the different possibilities, we couldn't imagine the senses, the hidden senses, the ulterior senses that are behind the words. We couldn't imagine God, and if we can't imagine God or that there could be something other than us out there, that there could be other possibilities apart from what we have in the world today, we couldn't hope for a kingdom. We couldn't have a utopian sense of always seeking the city on the hill or indeed of remembering the past, the good promises made in the past, the promissory notes that still haven't been fulfilled or signed off which is what — I'm staying with the story of the Bible now — the Bible is all about: promissory, prophetic notes about a messianic kingdom. We couldn't remember all that. *Zachar* is one of the great commands of the Bible — "remember" — but we can't remember Zion if we don't have imagination that can recall the past and make it present through parables, images, stories. It doesn't make sense otherwise. Nobody has a hotline to God, and thanks be to God that we don't because if we did, we'd be in trouble, saying, "I've got a voice. I've heard a voice from God. It says, 'Go out and kill the evil ones,'" and so on. Because everything is mediated through stories and parables and signs and metaphors and myths, that's the graciousness of the Bible. If it was a hotline to be read literally, we'd be in trouble. And we know certain sects or certain religions who sometimes claim that there's no need for hermeneutics or interpretation. "Sorry. There's just one meaning here and this is it..." We know the damage that can be caused by that belief that the interpreter is God, and in fact is not an interpreter at

all, because there's nothing to interpret. The message is absolute and is absolutely possessed by that claimant. That's terribly dangerous.

David Cayley
In his book The God Who May Be, Richard Kearney founds his account of God as possibility, as he said earlier, on a close reading of selected biblical texts. The first is the story in the book of Exodus of Moses and the burning bush. Moses has fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian and is tending his father-in-law's sheep in the land of Midian. In the wilderness, he comes across a bush that is burning without being consumed. A voice addresses Moses from the flames and identifies itself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It tells Moses that he is to lead the captive Israelites out of Egypt. "By what authority?" Moses asks, "who shall I say sent me?" But he does not get the answer he hopes for.

Richard Kearney
Moses asks the burning bush for a name. Now, the burning bush refuses to give a name, and this is a very tawdry thing. It's just a thorn bush in the middle of nowhere that's burning, and yet it's the Divine, and it's revealing itself as the Divine but is refusing to give itself a name, one of the reasons being, as it's been argued, because if Moses was given a name, then he'd go back to the Egyptians, and he'd say, "Look. My God is more powerful than your god. Because I've got the name, and I can invoke this name, and I'll have more power and more authority than you do." But, no, he was going to get no name. What he gets is a refusal of a name and a conundrum. In other words, I am not a name that you can possess, not an idol that you can revere, not a thing that you can have. I am a promise basically. I am who may be. I am who will be, shall be, can be, may be in history, incarnate in history if you respond to my command to be free, to be just and to be loving. And that's the message that Moses goes back to his people with, and then the people go from bondage into freedom.

David Cayley
The most familiar translation of the voice's response to Moses' request for a name is, "I am who I am. Say to the people of Israel, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" But Jewish scholars Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, in making their modern German translation of the Bible, suggested that the Hebrew phrase could be just as correctly rendered as, "I shall be who I shall be." Other modern scholars have concurred, and it is on this translation that Richard Kearney bases his interpretation. But most modern translations still retain "I am who I am," and that is the expression that has resounded through the history of theology and metaphysics.

Richard Kearney
Unfortunately, what happened there all too often was it became the centrepiece of a doctrinal, and sometimes even dogmatic, scholasticism. It became equivalent to the first cause, the being that is identical with itself, that has no possibility within itself because it is pure actuality. And this was coming, of course, from Aristotle, the God that is self-subsistent and self-identical, the unmoved mover. So, God, as interpreted by some of the main Christian scholastic thinkers was the *ego sum qui sum*, the "I am that am." And so, that idea of an enclosed God who is self-loving, self-causing, self-thinking, self-being removes from God any idea of vulnerability, fragility, risk or promise. God ceases to be that wonderful promissory note and becomes a fact and a datum, a datum of revelation rather than a provocation to move towards love and justice. And I think in that mistranslation, there was a great loss of this possibilizing God, who was basically saying to you, "I cannot be God unless you help me to be God." And this is something that Etty Hillesum in Westerbork Concentration Camp in 1943, on the borders of Germany and Holland, wrote about in her last days before she was exterminated. Young Jewish thinker, wonderful woman, Etty Hillesum, in her book An Interrupted Life, she writes, Here I am, and I see horror all around me, I see evil, so where are you, God? It's the old question asked by so many Jewish survivors and non-survivors, Etty Hillesum and others. How can God be, given this evil? And her response was, You, God, cannot be God unless I enable you to be God by bringing love into even this inferno of hatred, violence and suffering. So, that's a very different concept of God.

The God who can be, may be, is constantly calling to us to be made incarnate, but cannot actually be in the world unless we respond to the call, just as Mary of Nazareth could not ever have enabled Jesus to become incarnate if she hadn't said yes to the call. Now, did she or did she not have the freedom to say yes? This is the big issue. If God is "I am, who am," I'm going to be anyway, regardless of what you human beings think or do or decide, then the fact of the matter is that she had no freedom, she was violated, and God was going to be God, no matter what Mary or anybody else thought. But that's very different from the idea of Mary as existentially free to say yes or no.

David Cayley
For Richard Kearney, God is only possibility until Mary says her answering, "Let it be." Moses too must answer. Had he not, the fire which burned the bush without consuming it would have left no trace. "I shall be what I shall be" says, in effect, what I can be depends entirely on you. Divinity acts in and through us, and it is only by recognizing its embodiments that we can know anything about it.

Richard Kearney
What divinity is cannot be possessed in itself. It emains inevitable, unnamable, unsayable, nthinkable. All we can know and experience of the ivine is through the widow, the orphan and the tranger, is through the Crucified One and esurrected One, is through the Shulamite bride andering the streets of her city, looking for her vine bridegroom in The Song of Songs, is through e shepherd wandering aimlessly on Mt. Horeb. All these revelations come to people who are the least werful in the world, the least situated, the least thoritative, if you like. Joseph down at the bottom the well rises up, but the revelation always comes the darkest moments, at the moments of greatest mility and loss. The great mystics have all perienced the moment of radical atheism, the ment in the desert when they feel abandoned, and let go.

David Cayley
Among Richard Kearney's examples of revelation occurring in situations of loss and displacement are Moses, who is the shepherd wandering aimlessly on Mount Horeb, and the Shulamite bride who is the central figure of the Song of Songs. The Song is one of the shortest and most unusual books of the Bible, and it provides the second of Richard Kearney's proof texts in The God Who May Be. A sensual love poem, profuse in its images of nature and desire, it calls itself in its opening line The Song of Solomon. But the one who then speaks is not the king, but a bride longing for her lover.

Richard Kearney
She's dark, she's black, and she's beautiful, and she's having this *liaison dangereuse* with the bridegroom, who's coming from we know not where. We don't even know who he is. Is he the shepherd? Is he Solomon? Is he the king? And there's this kind of radical subversiveness about the song, because she is breaking free from her brothers and her family and the guardians and the society that wants to rein her in. She's even mocked by her fellow women competitors, who say, You're a nothing, you don't even belong here, you're a Shulamite, a Shulamite woman. Nonetheless, the cry of Divine desire is reciprocated. And during the song, the bride and the bridegroom...there's a kind of a reversibility and a transversibility where they exchange roles, and the Divine becomes the human, and the human becomes the Divine, and it's not sure who's actually speaking and to whom they are speaking or where they are speaking. And there's a radical explosion of the Divine into multiple identities, and the Divine is in the landscapes and the fawns and the gazelles and the doves and in the pomegranates and the vineyards and in the bees and honey and everything. It's throughout the landscape, in all kinds of vegetable, animal, mineral and, of course, human incarnations. To me, it's a song of radical incarnation and, of course, also of radical interpretation because it invites a proliferation and a multiplication of readings.

David Cayley
The commentaries inspired by The Song of Songs, in both Jewish and Christian tradition, have been multiplying for centuries. One of the reasons is that the song is such an anomaly, a poem of sweet sexual longing planted right in the middle of the moral urgencies of the Hebrew Bible. Many Christian commentators have tried to explain the sex away. The song, they say, is an allegory for the love between Christ and his Church. In the King James Bible, each chapter has a prefatory note to this effect so that in the passage in which the king compares his beloved's breasts to two fawns feeding among lilies, the note tells us that this is Christ setting forth the graces of his Church. Richard Kearney admires the poem's erotic charge, just as he admires its unusual form.

Richard Kearney
It brings together a Jewish canticle in the form and in the genre of an Egyptian/Babylonian wedding song. So, I like to think of The Song of Songs as the opening up of the Jewish revelation to the non-Jew, if you like, to the Egyptian, to the enemy, that it's a song of love with the enemy already even in terms of its linguistic mixing of genres. And one of the great duties and tasks, I think, of contemporary rereading of the God question is to retrieve the body in Christianity. Judaism has been much better about retaining the body, and indeed the Jewish readings, right through the Kabbalah, the Midrashic and Talmudic readings, were much more respectful of the body and sexuality and carnal union and carnal contact as a way to the Divine than, curiously, Christianity, which believes in the incarnation, but then thinks it stops with Jesus and doesn't in fact issue in a solicitation to a celebration of erotic desire. Rather we get this splintering of love as Agapé, the Father for the Son and the Divine Creator for creatures, and then Eros as this kind of marginalized, suspect mode of love or desire which really should be just kept for reproduction at worst or at best, but never allowed into a Divine-human relationship proper.

David Cayley
The next of Richard Kearney's key texts in The God Who May Be is the New Testament scene of the Transfiguration, which appears with small variations in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus takes three of his disciples up a mountain, where he is suddenly clothed in a dazzling white light. The disciples observe Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, and then a white cloud envelops him.

Richard Kearney
The whiteness of Jesus is like the whiteness of Moby Dick. You can't get it, you can't capture it. In fact, Melville in Moby Dick has the most beautiful passage called "The Whiteness of The Whale," where he compares it to the whiteness and the radiance and the transcendence of divinity, and he calls it at one point, I think, the "colourless all-colour." And in a way, there is a moment of atheism here, because you don't know who or what God is anymore. It's a wonderful moment of atheistic modesty, where God becomes white, and we can't grasp him.

And then after that — and there's a comedown, of course — Jesus comes back, and they descend to the bottom of the mountain, and interestingly Jesus says to his disciples, "Don't tell anybody about this, and don't build a temple, a tent, a memorial place," because their first instinct is to say, "Look. We've seen you transfigured here into a divine entity. We must immediately have some kind of a testimonial, memorial building." And Jesus refuses that and says, "Don't tell anybody," which, of course, they did, because we wouldn't know about it otherwise. But it's interesting that the instinct was again *Noli me tangere*, "Do not try to touch me, hang on to me," as Jesus says to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. But Christ doesn't disappear in transfiguration. Christ comes back again, just as Moses doesn't disappear into the burning bush. Moses comes back again to his people. You've got to come down from the mountain and go back to the people, and the message of love and justice is unending in that regard.

Curiously enough when I visited, with my wife and children, Jerusalem maybe about eight years ago now,

we were on our way to the Sea of Galilee, and we saw Mount Tabor as we were passing. Sure enough on top of the mountain, there's this massive basilica, and you just say, "What a shame!" It's human nature, and we all need our mementoes and our rituals, and we can't just do this on our own, but there's something ironic about that.

David Cayley
Jesus' effacement by the cloud during his transfiguration is just one of several Gospel scenes in which he is temporarily unknowable. The others occur after the Resurrection. Mary Magdalene, at the empty tomb, mistakes him for the gardener. And two of his disciples talk with him on the road from Jerusalem to the neighboring village of Emmaus without ever recognizing their travelling companion. It's only when the seeming stranger joins them for dinner that they see who it is.

Richard Kearney
I was very struck by the fact that it's only when he sits down and breaks bread with them that they recognize him. It's in the sharing of the bread, it's in the action of love and giving that then they remember everything he told them, as he instructed them on the readings of the scriptures and the Torah and so on. Then they remember it. The word comes retrospectively to life through the flesh, through the eating of the bread. And that eucharistic message, I think, is an extraordinary one because, of course, then Jesus disappears. As soon as they see that, Jesus is gone. And, of course, Jesus is gone temporally as well in terms of ascending to heaven, as the metaphor goes, so that the Paraclete can come, and the Paraclete to me is the constant return of Jesus through the eucharistic moments.

David Cayley
The word "Paraclete," just to interject here, is the New Testament Greek word for what is also called the Holy Spirit. Literally, "comforter" or "advocate," it's the spirit that Jesus says he will send when he goes to the Father and that can only come when he goes. The Eucharist is the communion meal of bread and wine by which Jesus asked his disciples to remember him at the Last Supper.

Richard Kearney
"Remember me." We do this in remembrance of Jesus until he comes, so there's always this postponement, which you find in the Transfiguration, in the burning bush, in the Eucharist, the breaking of the bread, until he comes. So, God has already passed, and God is still to come, just as in The Song of Songs, God has already traversed the bride in love and desire, and God is still to come. It's what I call "eschatological time" because it's not a time that could be reduced to our beginning, middle and end, which we tend to try to do and reduce God to our own temporal notions. This turns the past into the future and the future into the past and keeps God open, of course, to a futurity, which is the futurity of possibility, the God who may be, the God who is still to come. And the return to God in each act of the Eucharist, I don't see just as the ritual and sacramental Eucharist, or, for Jews, the Passover, the reminder of the Messiah still to come. I see it actually in every moment of breaking bread and giving the cup of cold water to the person who's thirsty. The Eucharist is in that. The Eucharist is also in the eating of the madeleine in Proust. It's in the passing of the seed cake from Leopold Bloom to Molly Bloom and the famous kiss on Howth Head at the end of Ulysses. That's eucharistic too, and Joyce knew it. Joyce and Proust knew this, that the Eucharist can be secularized in the good sense of bringing the divine into the secular and opening up the secular to the divine. I think one of the great crimes of Christianity has been this division between the sacred and the profane, the transcendent and the immanent. And in The God Who May Be, in my own small philosophical way, I'm trying to bring this notion of a transcendent divinity back into epiphanies of the everyday, everyday eucharistic moments of giving to the least of these, sharing with the least of these.

David Cayley
The least of these, as I mentioned earlier, refers to Jesus saying that whatever is given to those in need, to the least of these, my brothers, is given to him. It's

a passage which Richard Kearney thinks should have prevented the followers of Christ from ever enclosing themselves as an exclusive religion.

Richard Kearney
If you give it to the least of these, you give it to me. Now, that's really saying, "You can only come to the Father through me." But who am I? I am the one who is now telling you not to possess me, either on Mount Tabor, when I'm transfigured, or after the resurrection when you see me. Don't try and possess me. *Noli me tangere*, don't touch me, don't hang onto me, even you, Mary Magdalene, who know me probably better than anybody along with St. John, don't touch me. Let me go so that the Paraclete can come. And the Paraclete is incarnate potentially in everybody, the least of these. If you give it to the least of these, you give it to me. Fundamentalists often argue that Christianity really is the only religion because Christ says, "Only through me can you get to the Father. There's no salvation except through me. I'm the way, the truth and the life." But in fact what Christ says, if you analyze it closely, is, "You can only come to the Father through me." You can only get to the Divine through me. Okay, now, who am I? Am I one kind of idol amongst others? Am I one god to be invoked against and amongst others? Or am I a way that leads to all ways? It's only through the way that leads to all ways that you can find the divine. So, the excluder of the "only" in fact is the exclusion of exclusiveness. The only thing that's excluded is exclusiveness. In the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the person who's thirsty, the person who's hungry, the person who's seeking God, the divine is present.

So, when Stephen Dedalus says at the beginning of Ulysses, "What's God? A cry in the street," he's right. God is present in the cry in the street. That, it seems to me, is the radical nature of Christ's message. I think it's already there, by the way, in the burning bush, in Exodus 3:15, in The Song of Songs and in certain other texts. But Christianity to me is a very important narrative and story and testimony by Jesus Christ to this fundamental message that the divine cannot be locked up as a thing. And if it is, it leads to war, and then atheism is not only desirable, it's necessary to rid the world of that religious triumphalism and fundamentalism and self-righteousness, which to this day is still the cause, I believe, of most of our wars.

David Cayley
Richard Kearney's account of religion as the unending interpretation of imaginative vision obviously puts him at odds with more dogmatic and more authoritarian versions of Christianity. But he has remained a Roman Catholic, he says, despite his differences with the Church hierarchy.

Richard Kearney
What I love about the Church and what I'll always hopefully retain access to is the sense of the impossible becoming possible, is the sense of epiphany, the sense of wonder, the sense of sacredness about certain places and times of the year. The liturgical calendar is wonderful: Advent and Easter and Christmas and Little Christmas and the feast days of saints. They're wonderful. Even the Immaculate Conception, the 8th of December — it's my birthday, I used to get a holiday for that — but it had a special kind of flavour and excitement. And this way of having sacred days and sacred places — I grew up in Ireland, where there are many sacred places — this is important. But one must always *faire la part des choses*, as you say up in Montreal, make a distinction between that which is enabling and liberating and that which is disabling and incarcerating, and the Church has both visages. It's a Janus face. It looks in both directions, and we've go to try and work that one out.

David Cayley
Richard Kearney's idea of the divine as possibility presents a formidable challenge to those religious believers for whom God is a secure possession. But it also has implications that reach beyond the institutional confines of religion. For many, the stronghold that once was called God is now called "society" or "economy" or "government" or "media" or whatever else confronts us as overbearing and unquestionable actuality. But with a greater sense of

the possible, Richard Kearney says finally, the grip of these great powers might begin to relax.

Richard Kearney
What the possible does is it reintroduces a sense of adventure to history and of contingency, because nothing is necessary anymore, but it's a contingency that liberates us in terms of responsibility ideally. That's where it is very energizing and enabling. If everything is pure act, then the system runs everything, and we're all governed by this kind of conspiracy of world markets called "postmodern, late capitalism" and the big powers and multinationals. And why bother voting? Why bother doing anything? Because it's all *joué d'avance*. It's all pre-arranged and pre-established, anyway. Just the old God who used to do that as a pure act has been replaced by capitalism that does it.

David Cayley
...meet the new God, same as the old God...

Richard Kearney
That's right. It's just got a different name. But it's just as invisible, it's just as elusive, it's just as omnipresent everywhere you go, so let's just be paralyzed and powerless and helpless and cynical, and, at best, just enjoy the few remaining days before these guys pull triggers, because we have no control over it anyway. And that's another narrative. That's another translation of what's going on. So, whether we see things as possibility or actuality actually does have an impact on how we live our lives.

Paul Kennedy
I'm Paul Kennedy, and this is *Ideas* about religion, philosophy and imagination.

Richard Kearney
I love going back to those texts in the Bible and in Christianity, in mysticism where you come to these images where the divine is described as a flame, as honey, as a spring that comes up from the darkness, as a mustard seed, as a banyan seed because I think and believe that in this religious imaginary of seed images, very often of seeds, the smallest of things, we find the ciphers to the kingdom, the signposts to the kingdom. Not up there in capital letters, but in the closest, most minute of singular events, we find the epiphany of the divine.

Paul Kennedy
Richard Kearney is a philosopher who celebrates and studies the power of imagination. He's a writer, a poet and novelist and a teacher at University College, Dublin, in his native Ireland, and at Boston College in the United States. Within philosophy, he's been closely associated with what some have called the "religious turn" or the "return of religion." In this program, he talks about the currents within contemporary thinking that have put religion back on philosophy's agenda. And he remembers a beloved teacher, Paul Ricoeur, whose philosophy of dialogue was one of his crucial starting points.

Richard Kearney
When Ricoeur says, "What's the best way to know yourself?" he says, "The shortest route from self to self is through the other." In dialogue with the other person, you come home to yourself eventually. In conversation with another writer, be it a literary writer, an artist, an historian, you travel through another world. You are de-worlded as you take this detour through the imagination of the other person, the world of the other person, and you come back to yourself, in some sense, amplified and enriched by that journey through otherness.

Paul Kennedy
One of the forms of otherness through which Paul Ricoeur journeyed was religion, and Richard Kearney has followed in his teacher's footsteps. In today's program, the second of a series of three on his thought, he reconstructs his journey, remembering his encounters with some of the great thinkers of the age, from Paul Ricoeur to Jacques Derrida, and reflecting on the place of imagination in religion and of religion within philosophy. The series is presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley
Richard Kearney grew up in a world of imagination. Born in the city of Cork in southern Ireland, he fed on stories: the stories his family told, the stories of the Bible, the stories of Irish and world literature. He revelled in the ancient feasts and festivals of the Christian liturgical year and in a landscape and cityscape themselves imbued with stories. At the Benedictine Abbey school where he boarded in County Limerick, he was introduced to philosophy and theology. By the time he got to university, an intention to study philosophy seriously had ripened. But what he wanted to philosophize about was imagination.

Richard Kearney
I studied philosophy in University College, Dublin, for three years, and I actually did it with English, and I was always very interested in the relationship between philosophy and literature, with imagination being at the centre of it because I believed that imagination is actually prior to reason. I have a bit of a quarrel with Plato on that, who, going back to The Republic 2,500 years ago, said, No, no, no, reason is at the top, what he called *nous*. Then you have understanding underneath it. Then you have *pistis* or what he called opinion, faith, belief. And then lowest of the low, bottom of the ladder, *eikasia* — hence our word "icon" — imagination, or he also called it *phantasia*, and so our word "fantasy." So, I was challenged by Plato and Western metaphysics, which carried that prejudice through for the next 2,000 years. I was provoked to say, well, what about the lowest of the low here? What about the least of these,

phantasia? Is it just wayward fancy and fantasy and reverie? Or is it more than that, i.e., the very source of our culture, our religion, our politics, our society, our way of being, our self-identity?

And I think I got a little bit of support, as I studied philosophy in Dublin and then later in Paris when I came across Immanuel Kant. There was Kant in 1781, I think, The Critique of Pure Reason, saying, I'm now going to set up for modernity, for modern times, the true architectonic, as he called it, the true blueprint of how we do philosophy and how we do science and how we can know what we know and know it clearly and know it for sure and know it logically and know it rationally and so on. And he set up to analyze this in The Critique of Pure Reason at the end of the 18th century, and he said, well, we've got two ways of knowing. We can go through the intelligible experience and the sensible experience, and the intelligible experience comes through the categories of understanding, of our rational understanding, and then our sensible experience comes through our senses and space and time. Then he said, well, we've got a problem. How do we put the two together? How do we put all that work of our rational, logical categories together with what we intuit and receive from the world through our senses? And the only faculty that he could locate that would do this work of being passive to what we receive empirically and sensibly from the world and then active in the sense of productively imposing on that experience, our categories and ideas and concepts, was imagination. There's only one faculty, he said, that can be both passive and active, both intelligible and sensible, both part of the mind and part of the body, part of the conscious and part of the unconscious, and that's imagination. So, he talked about this art hidden in the depths of nature, this blind faculty, of which we are scarcely ever aware, but without which we would do nothing at all, and that was what he called the "transcendental imagination." That was a huge breakthrough for me.

And then I realized that he wrote a second edition of the Critique six years later, where he took most of that back, and he said, "Sorry. I made a mistake," because he realized that if he said that, he was challenging the whole Western dualist perspective that you've got the mind and the body, you've got reason and the senses, and suddenly here was Kant saying, no, there's a common root to those different stems, and that common root is this blind art: imagination. That was too radical a discovery, so he pulled back, and he kind of modified his revolutionary findings in the second edition of The Critique. But the genie was out of the bottle, the cat was out of the bag — use whatever metaphor you want — Pandora's box was opened, and imagination was leashed upon the world; hence, romanticism, German idealism, existentialism. And a basic dialogue between literature and philosophy took place so that when you come to Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy or Sartre or Camus or Gide or Thomas Mann, you've got to ask the question, Are these philosophers or writers or both? And, of course, for me, they were both.

David Cayley

In Immanuel Kant, Richard Kearney found an understanding of imagination which is quite different from the common definition of the word, even today. Imagination usually means our capacity to alter or improve on a given reality. Kant was suggesting that without imagination to coordinate our perceptions, we would never be able to form an image of reality in the first place. Imagination, in this sense, is the very foundation of a recognizable reality. Kant's great discovery, and his embarrassed retreat from it, made Richard Kearney aware of the depth of the split between reason and imagination in modern Western culture. Reconciling the two became his great aim. He wanted to construct a philosophy that could recognize the primacy of imagination without falling into irrationalism or some other form of romantic excess. He first stop was McGill University in Montreal, where he was attracted by Charles Taylor, a thinker who was also trying to build a bridge between rationalism and romanticism. Charles Taylor supervised Richard Kearney's M.A. studies, but then Taylor recommended that Kearney do his doctorate in Paris with Taylor's friend Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur, who was a Christian, was unusual at the time in

recognizing religion as an acceptable topic within philosophy, and Taylor had a high regard for Ricoeur's studies of the symbolic imagination in myth, metaphor, and narrative. So Richard Kearney found himself in Paul Ricoeur's seminar at the University of Paris.

Richard Kearney
It was a very lively seminar, and Ricoeur was a wonderful practitioner and mentor of dialogue. His idea was, all philosophy is interpretation or what he called hermeneutics, coming from the Greek *hermeneuein*, to interpret a message or a meaning, and all words and language have an attachment to metaphor and symbol, so we need to interpret all the time. We don't necessarily do this consciously. We do it unconsciously too, as our dreams show and our slips of the tongue and whatnot. But basically, everything was interpretation and, therefore, dialogue because no one person had the truth. Philosophy was a conflict of interpretations and a community of interpretations, and that's the way he operated his seminars, by inviting these people, and so we worked actually in a kind of community of interpreters, and it was a trust that nobody has absolute truth here, but we all come with something to the table. The idea was when you went to the table, "*D'ou parlez vous?*" "Where do you speak from? Where do you come from? What's your interpretation?" And then you listen, and you respond, and you learn. And very often, there would be kind of an overlapping of different horizons as the conversation took place. You'd learn from somebody else, and they'd learn from you in this process of multiple and mutual convertibility and exchangeability of views.

David Cayley
Paul Ricoeur was to become Richard Kearney's great teacher. The match, as Charles Taylor had anticipated, was perfect. Ricoeur recognized the primacy of the imagination. He taught that all meaning is conveyed to us through story and symbol. But he also gave reason its place by his insistence on careful and deliberate interpretation. The symbols by which the imagination speaks in word, image and story have multiple meanings, and none comes pre-certified as the one, true and only meaning. This does not mean that all interpretations are equal — a point on which Ricoeur was emphatic — but it does argue that only a community of interpreters can find a way to reconcile rival gods, competing mythologies and warring stories. "The symbol," Ricoeur famously said, "sets us talking."

Richard Kearney
The way we relate to other people in time and space is through all kinds of hidden codes, the way our bodies relate, all kinds of hidden codes. The way people dress and walk and talk and are silent or move the coffee cup, step closer or step away from you — all of that is symbolically mediated. It all means something, and we're constantly interpreting, we're constantly engaged in the decipherment of signs. Even if those signs are the signs of body language, you may not utter one word, but you're still involved in interpretation, and your imagination is already at work. And one of the extraordinary things here, of course, too — and Ricoeur touches on this in his book on Freud — is that psychoanalysis showed us that there isn't one part of the body that isn't symbolized. We've got the obvious ones in the phallic and the omphallic and the genital and the anal and the oral and all those phases that Freud talked about that are almost stereotypical now and cliché. But somebody in an analysis learns that in dream and in free association and indeed in personal life, feet, arms, stomach — everything has its own *symbolique*, it's own social and symbolic imaginary. Some of these are shared in communities and nations collectively, and some of them are individual. But everything is there to be interpreted so that the catch phrase of hermeneutics is, "In the beginning was the word," and that doesn't mean literally or only the theological commencement of everything with the word and the word in the flesh, but everything around us — whether you're an atheist or a theist is irrelevant on this issue — is already symbolically mediated. Everything in the flesh is mediated through *logos* of some kind, through meaning of some kind.

David Cayley
Paul Ricoeur held that everything we encounter, whether mental or physical, natural or social, is already endowed with its particular symbolic charge, its dense weave of association — its meaning. In French, one can say that it has its imaginary — a useful word which is just beginning to be used in English. Charles Taylor, for example, called his most recent book Modern Social Imaginaries. The word implies that imagination is found not just in our heads but in the world. Because the world that confronts us at any given moment is a world that has always already been imagined and shaped accordingly...

Richard Kearney
The imagination is the imaginary in that it is out there. It is everywhere. Our Platonic notion, our metaphysical notion that we have in the West is that the imaginary is confined to this little box called "imagination" that comes up with little pictures and attaches images to words or images to ideas or images to sensations, and that's what imagination does. And that's a very servile and representational notion of this little faculty that does work in the little box in our minds. But in fact, what the term "imaginary" does is to expand beyond that faculty notion of imagination to suggest that, no, there is an imaginary of the body, there's an imaginary of society, of politics, of biology, of sexuality, of dream — that everything in a way has its imaginary component. And if we don't understand that, we're only understanding the half of things.

David Cayley
When Ricoeur set out to analyze myth and symbol, what was he writing against?

Richard Kearney
I think he was writing against the claim that there is one way of thinking. Now, that can be a scientific claim that science is *the* way of thinking, so anything coming from religion, myth, literature — all of that is an interference. Whatever can be said can be said clearly. You have clear and distinct ideas and that's it. So you can trace a line running from Descartes through the rationalists up to the early Wittgenstein. So, I think he was trying to modify that particular claim of a certain scientific rationalism that says there's only one way of thinking, all thinking is transparent and objective and neutral.

David Cayley
Scientific rationalism was just one of the thought styles that Paul Ricoeur was trying to modify. A second important engagement was with what was called "structuralism," the reigning philosophy when Richard Kearney arrived in Paris at the end of the 1970s. To understand structuralism, one has to draw back a little to the years after the Second World War, when Paris became the capital of Western philosophy and existentialism was the dominant school.

Richard Kearney
Out of that triumph of existentialism in the immediate post-war years, with Sartre and Camus and de Beauvoir and so on, came this other philosophy called "structuralism," and that gave rise to a whole series of very popular theories: Foucault announcing the death of man, the death of the subject; Levi-Strauss talking about this timeless *pensée sauvage* or universal logic that preconditions us all as individual subjects and is basically an anonymous structure; Althusser applying that to Marxism; Roland Barthes applying it to literature — it's not the author that speaks, it's the text that speaks through the author, the death of the author, the birth of the reader, all this – Jacques Lacan, the split subject, because it's really the unconscious that speaks through us, and the unconscious is structured like language so that I do not say what I mean, and I do not mean what I say. And all of that was a response to existentialism, which seemed to place the primacy of meaning and value on the individual. Now the structuralists were coming along and attacking the existentialists for that primacy of the human subject and subverting and undermining it with this idea of a non-human, non-humanist system of meaning that was basically part of some kind of linguistic, unconscious network of signifiers, as they put it, or signs, that deployed itself irrespective of our individual human volition and will and intervention. And out of that came this search for meaning, because, in a way, the structuralists had

taken meaning out of the world and given it over to some kind of anonymous machine. And so, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, when I arrived in Paris, there was a great sense of fervour. I remember going to the lectures of Lacan and Foucault and Levi-Strauss, Deleuze and all these people, and there would be thousands and thousands of people going to these lectures. But in the midst of this, there was a hunger and a hankering for a return of some kind of meaning, and out of that, it seems to me, emerged a number of voices that talked about ethics and the return of the religious and the possibility of finding the divine in the human again and through the human again. And that was the importance for me of people like Ricoeur and Levinas, who were prepared to reintroduce some aspect of meaning between human beings or between human beings and something called "the other," and very often the name given to that "other" was God.

David Cayley
The use of the term "the other," I think, will be mysterious to those who don't think in abstract, philosophical ways. Can you make sense of the use of the term "the other"?

Richard Kearney
I think one has to situate it in the debate of the time, which was that humanism and existentialism had so glorified the human self that everything was reducible to the human self. So the question then was, how do we get out of this radical subjectivism, where everything in the world is a production or a construction of our cognitive processes, of our consciousness, of our volition? And one response to this was, as mentioned, structuralism, which said there's no self at all, and it's not at the level of human relations that we should look for this. It's simply in some anonymous, impersonal mechanical system of linguistic signs. And I think people felt that that wasn't enough. It didn't explain a need and a sense and a sentiment and an instinct that there's something else out there beyond the self and beyond the system, and that came to be called "the other." It could manifest itself in different ways. It could be the other as nature that we'd forgotten in our Industrial Revolution and in our consumerist society. Or it could be a human other, that there's something about a human being that is not me, that is radically other, and that I will never be able to reduce to my own set of perceptions and expectations and presuppositions. There will always be a mystery, an enigma or whatever, something that transcends me. And then thirdly, that also opened up the possibility that there could be something divine and transcendent about that otherness of the other person that could open up some sense of the infinite. So I think it was out of that desire to go beyond the self and the post-self or anti-self that emerged in post-modernity that this fascination with the other came about.

David Cayley
The term "the other" has most often been used in contemporary talk to refer to other races whom we oppress by exaggerating their difference, by picturing them as both exotic and menacing. So one speaks of the subject of colonialism as the other. The usage that Richard Kearney has been describing is a little different. In philosophy, the other might still refer to a dreaded stranger, but it could also evoke a saving power, the otherness that overcomes our solitude and opens us to nature, community and perhaps the divine. It was in this way that Paul Ricoeur spoke of the otherness that was smothered by structuralism's emphasis on system. Ricoeur had some affinities with structuralism. He certainly recognized that symbols and stories can take us over if we fail to acknowledge and temper their power. But he also believed that existence has, for each one of us, a personal meaning, and the way to this meaning, he said, was through the other.

Richard Kearney
When Ricoeur says, "What's the best way to know yourself?" he says, "Well, the shortest route from self to self is through the other." In dialogue with the other person, you come home to yourself eventually. In conversation with another writer, be it a literary writer, an artist, an historian, you travel through another world. You are de-worlded as you take this detour through the imagination of the other person, the world of the other person, and you come back to

yourself in some sense amplified and enriched by that journey through otherness, not as an ego, not as a *moi*, as he put it in French, but as a *soi*, that you move from myself to oneself, and that movement through the other, from myself through the other to oneself, as you return to yourself, is an enrichment. That's why interpretation and imagination are important and why reason left to itself becomes tyranny if it thinks it already has the truth before it ever goes out on a journey.

David Cayley

One of Paul Ricoeur's books – his 1992 Gifford Lectures – is called Oneself As Another. And the hospitality to the other that he preached he also practiced. Richard Kearney grew from a student to a friend, and says that he was often impressed by Ricoeur's humility, generosity and openness. Just before Ricoeur died in May of 2005, at the age of 92, Richard Kearney was able to return a little of what his old teacher had given him.

Richard Kearney

I met him a month before he died, and I was able to give him a copy of my last book, or most recent book which is about him, The Owl of Minerva. And he sat there in his office — he was only lucid for about one hour a day — he sat there on the couch in his office, and he was able to see the cover and read the title, The Owl of Minerva, and I'd taken that from the fact that whenever I used to visit him at his home, in his office and study, we were surrounded by owls. He used to collect them, and they were, I think, originally references to the owl of Minerva in Hegel's famous saying that philosophy, like the owl of Minerva, always takes flight at dusk, when the day has run its course. And I think Ricoeur took this to mean you can only philosophize when you've lived. You've got to have lived during the day before you philosophize at night. Philosophy comes after life. In that sense, he always remained a philosopher of existence, which I very much appreciated. But in any case, I gave him a copy of the book, and he looked at the owl, and he read the blurb at the back which said that Ricoeur is one of the most enduring European philosophers, and he looked at me, and he said, "Not for very much longer." And he had a great sense of humour like that and that huge sense of humility and ability to learn from anybody. When I came to him first, I must have been 21, and as far as I was concerned, I had nothing to offer and everything to learn, but immediately he would talk to me and say, "Where did you get these ideas on imagination?" I'd say this and that, and "I'm interested in the philosophy of film." He said, "Film...I really know very little about film. Tell me about film." So I'd just seen, about two days before, *Saturday Night Fever*, John Travolta movie. For some reason, I had this theory — I generally did... whatever movie I saw, I'd have a theory about it — the embodied imagination of John Travolta dancing, or I don't know what the hell I said to him. But anyway, the next thing is I meet some fuddy-duddy professors at some international conference. And they say, "Paul Ricoeur, he's so strange. I met him last week, and all he was talking about during dinner was John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever," which, of course, he'd gone straight out to see and had his own theory on it. But whatever I would come up with, he would be incredibly open to it.

When he visited Ireland – and he was one of the world's greatest philosophers even then, in the late '80s, early '90s – we had him to the Irish Philosophical Society. Now, I hadn't warned him that this was a very casual, informal group of philosophy professors who get together. There's only about 30 of us in Ireland anyway. I was back teaching in Dublin in those days, in the late '80s. His paper was on "History and Fiction." And at one point at the end of this plenary address, which was really a question and answer over a pint of Guinness or over 100 pints of Guinness, one of the professors from Limerick came up, and he said, "This year now, I've been teaching your book on Freud, and the girls are having great difficulty with it. Would you come up and say a word about it?" "Of course, of course, of course." I said, "Don't say yes. You've done your bit now. I'm taking you to the Aran Islands with your wife, Simone, and don't agree to give other talks." But Ricoeur was so generous. He'd never say no. So, the next thing is we were in a car up to this convent where this guy was teaching called the Mary

Immaculata Convent in Limerick, and sure enough, Ricoeur gives this little spiel on what he meant about his Freud book and so on, and he stops, and he says, "Are there any questions?" So, a girl stands up, and she says, "Professor Ricoeur, a very difficult concept that I can't get me head around at all is the Oedipal complex. Could you explain the Oedipal complex?" He says, "Very good question, yes." He says, "The Oedipal complex is when the little boy, for example, wants to kill his father and *coucher avec sa mere*." So he turns to me, and he says, "Richard, how do you say *coucher avec sa mere* in English?" So, I translate it into English, but Ricoeur didn't speak very colloquial English, and I translated it into extremely colloquial English, at which point the nuns gathered up all the schoolgirls and vacated the hall, so Ricoeur says to me, "How did you translate cou*cher avec sa mere*?" So I said, "Well, it was a variation on 'sleep with his mother.'" In any case, he was fascinated by that too, that an entire auditorium could be vacated in a matter of minutes. But that was Ricoeur. He was generous to a fault.

David Cayley
It was Ricoeur's generosity and his humility, Richard Kearney thinks, that kept him from ever achieving the celebrity enjoyed by some of his more flamboyant and combative contemporaries. Ricoeur had little taste for polemics and intellectual posturing, and his thought is not easily reduced to a catch-phrase or a label. But in recent years, Richard Kearney says, Ricoeur is beginning to estimated at his true worth...

Richard Kearney
There's been a huge renewal of interest in Ricoeur in the last ten years. One of the reasons that he was slightly ostracized or marginalized before that is because he was open to dialogue with the psychoanalysts, the structuralists, the analytic philosophers, the theologians, the literary critics. And that inter-disciplinary generosity and hospitality meant for some that he was not, as it were, occupying his own terrain. He was in too much conversation and dialogue. That was one reason.

I would say another reason was his openness to religion. There was an intellectual prejudice that if you talked about God or religion or spirituality, you were already off the rigorous track of serious philosophy. So, Ricoeur's openness to a conversation with religion and his willingness to acknowledge his own Christian confessional commitment and conviction was such that it made him very unfaddish and unpopular during a 50-year period, I would say. Very respected as a scholar. But the originality of his thought was not fully appreciated. But already, in the last few years of his life, things were changing, I would say. He gave a talk, I think, six years ago in Paris. There was room for 2,000 people. It was on forgiveness. And I think something like 20,000 people turned up. In other words, the kind of fuss made for people like Foucault and Althusser and Barthes and so on in the '60s and '70s was made eventually about people like Ricoeur and Levinas. At the end, people did admit that there can be some kind of philosophy of religion or even religious philosophy of sorts, so I think there was a religious turn and return in continental thought, and I think Ricoeur was very much part of that. He never gave up on that connection between philosophy and religion. He never reduced religion to philosophy or never reduced philosophy to religion, but there was a very robust and fecund creative relationship between the two, and that, as I say, put him out of the loop for 40, 50 years, but at the end brought him very much back into the loop and indeed at the head of the loop.

David Cayley
When Richard Kearney first arrived in Paris, as he recalled earlier, he was welcomed into the lively and ecumenical atmosphere of Paul Ricoeur's seminar. It was a gathering that brought together many of the thinkers who would later be associated with what Kearney calls the "religious turn" in European philosophy. One who would become particularly important to Richard Kearney was Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas, who died in 1995, was a Lithuanian-born Jew, steeped in his youth in the German philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, but also shaped fundamentally by the Holocaust, in which much of his extended family

died. He was a professor at the Sorbonne when Richard Kearney met him, and he soon became one of Kearney's thesis advisers.

Richard Kearney
Levinas became important for me primarily because I was very interested in philosophy, very interested in religion, the God question, but didn't know how to bring the two together. And at the time that I came to France, Levinas has published this book called Totality and Infinity, where he talked about the face of the other and the ethical summons in the face of the other which says, "Do not kill. Come to my help. Give me food to eat. Give me water to drink. Come to my aid." Levinas says, that is God. That's the trace of God in the face of the other. And this to me was very liberating because what basically Levinas was saying is that you can have a political commitment to the poor and the destitute and recognize, in and through those commitments, the divine. You do not serve or love or search the divine in competition with the human but in and through the human. And that to me is a very incarnational message, and I was getting it not from a Christian at this point but from a Jew and a Jew who told me, when I asked him, "What do you think of when you think of the face of the other?" he said "Christ." And I said, "But you're a Jew," and he said, "Yes. But Christ is the suffering Jew *par excellence*, for us Jews too." "He's one of us" kind of thing. And he said it in a wonderfully ecumenical way obviously. But I found that very liberating because at that time it was not really kosher or legitimate for Christian philosophers to talk about God, but it was possible for Jewish philosophers. I'm talking now about the European, French, continental scene. Maybe because of the Second World War, they had a right to talk about God if they wanted to in philosophy and issues of forgiveness and issues of justice and spirituality and so on. So, whether it was Levinas or Rosenzweig or Martin Buber, there you were allowed to, as it were, discover or rediscover the religious within a philosophical discussion. Not yet within Christianity. That would take another 20 years or so.

David Cayley
Through his dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Kearney learned to think more clearly about the messianic element in Christianity. The belief that Jesus is the Messiah can easily lead Christians to think that they have already heard God's last word and already taken full possession of the kingdom. But in conversation with Levinas and Judaism, Richard Kearney began to understand how to recover some of Christianity's lost modesty and restore the sense of a kingdom always still to come.

Richard Kearney
I was talking to him, and I asked him about the kingdom, because I was very interested in the idea of eschatology and the kingdom and so on. I said, "Given your philosophy of endless deferring of God into this messianic future — God is always the one still to come — what about the kingdom? Does the kingdom ever come?" And he said, "The kingdom can only ever come when we renounce the kingdom," and I found that very intriguing and thought about it for a long time – that it's only when we renounce the kingdom that the kingdom can come. As long as we're imposing our projection of what the kingdom is on others, we're not listening to the other. We're not receiving the gift and the grace of the other. So the kingdom can only come when we renounce it. And it leads on to his theory of salvation. When you pray for salvation, you pray for the salvation of the other person. You never pray for your own salvation because the salvation of the other comes at the expense of your salvation. Put the other first. And, of course, I like to add, "But then of course, the other will pray for you," so you can't save yourself, but the other can save you. The other cannot save himself or herself, but you can save the other.

David Cayley
In his conversation with Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Kearney found a sense of the divine as always out of reach, always on the side of the other, always still to come — a sense he thought Christians needed to recover.

He found a similar emphasis on the messianic in the work of another Jewish thinker, with whom he was also to have a sustained conversation, Jacques Derrida. Derrida, who died in 2005, had also been a student, years before, of Paul Ricoeur's, and it was through Ricoeur that he and Kearney met. Derrida, in his late writings, meditated extensively on religious questions. What Kearney found striking, but also frustrating, in Derrida's work was Derrida's emphasis on the impossibility of God.

Richard Kearney
By the "impossible," Derrida means that the divine is always messianic. It's always to come but it never comes. It is always without a name, without an image, without an instantiation, if you like, so it's always deferred, it always withheld. And I go along with that up to a point, but I see it as only one part of the story that God is impossible. God will always be impossible. And we will always desire the divine because we can only desire the impossible. If it's possible, then, in his view, we can realize it, and, therefore, we have it. So what we desire is the insatiability of our desire, which is for the impossible. Now, my view about that is, that's too hard. That's like wandering in the desert. We need every so often to drink water. We need the impossible to become possible. And my argument was that's what we find not only in Judaism but also, looking at Western religion, in Christianity. When the angel appears to Mary and says, "You're going to have a child," and she says "No, it's impossible," the angel says, "Do not be afraid. What is impossible for humans is possible to God." Now, that conversion of the impossible into the possible is something for me that's a divine gift and a divine grace, but it happens, and, therefore, we can have epiphanies, and we can have actions where the divine traverses the flesh and takes on a name, albeit a provisional one, and takes on a place and takes on a human face and takes on a habitation and takes on a narrative. And that conversion and reversibility of impossibility into possibility is crucial for me.

David Cayley
Richard Kearney's dialogue with Jacques Derrida, as with Emmanuel Levinas, helped him to find a balance in his own thought. He appreciated the delicacy with which both thinkers approached the question of God, and their courage in denying themselves, as post-Holocaust Jews, any easy or premature consolation. He welcomed the corrective they offered to the Jesus-has-bought-me-a-home-in-heaven style of Christian complacency. But, in the end, Kearney concluded that both Levinas and Derrida, in their admittedly very different ways, took an approach that was, as he just said, too hard, too arid, too one-sided. The unknown other might offer a respite from the tyrannies of the self and the system, but, in the end, otherness had to be something more than a luminous and awe-inspiring blank in which God was always about to appear but never did. It's a point that Richard Kearney argued with Jacques Derrida at a conference they both attended.

Richard Kearney
On one occasion, I was delivering a critique where I said, Sometimes, when I read Jacques Derrida, and encounter his "other," who so other you don't even know who or what it is, I ask, how do we know, when there's a knock at the door and we open it and are asked to be hospitable towards the other, whether this other is the Messiah, bringing justice and peace, or a psychopathic serial killer, come to kill one's family? So, that was my critique. And then I think in mentioning psychopathic serial killers, I may have said something about Charlie Manson to put a face on the other. But, anyway, at this point, the organizer of the conference, who shall remain nameless, jumps to the podium, takes the microphone and says, "I am so annoyed with Richard Kearney for coming here and criticizing Jacques Derrida and comparing Jacques Derrida's other to Charlie Manson, the killer from California." And I was there feeling extremely rebuked and corrected and chastened and chastised when Derrida came along and asked, could he borrow the microphone? He says, "No, no, no, no" – this was when half the audience were about to lynch me for blasphemy and irreverence – and he took the microphone, and he said, "No, no, no, Richard

Kearney's problems with my thought are my own problems with my thought." So, not only did he save me my life, he saved me my face. He was always generous like that, I found, very, very open to criticism.

I just think sometimes he didn't give himself enough creature comfort, as Gerard Manley Hopkins calls it. We all need creature comfort, and we need a name to pray to and a story to tell and to fit into when we talk about our relationship to the divine. And Derrida deprived himself of that. And I just wonder if it had to be that hard for him and that inconsolable and that impossible. Even at his funeral, five months ago in Paris, there was no music played, no poetry. It was very chaste.

We did a little service for him here — and I don't think he would have minded, I think he'd have smiled — in Andover. This wonderful theologian – Valerie Dixon is her name – rang me up and said, "I know you knew Derrida. Come and tell us a few stories about him, and I'd like to do a service." And I arrived there, and she's a southern Baptist deconstructionist, so, of course, she's got to have them all singing. There was a Baptist choir singing to Derrida, and I think part of Derrida would have loved that, but he deprived himself of that messianism because, as he put it, "I rightly pass for an atheist, and my atheism is a way of keeping my desire for God alive." He made very interesting remarks along those lines in a little book called Save The Name, that you save the name by not naming the name, and he said the mystics very often were accused of being atheists — Silesius and Meister Eckhardt — because they talked about a God beyond God and a religion beyond religion. And he definitely had an openness to that, what theologians would call the apophatic way, the way of not speaking about God, not naming God, not imagining God.

But, to me, that's too impossible. It's too hard for human beings. We need the icons and the stories and the parables, even though they are only signs. As St. John says at the end of his Gospel, These are just signs and stories, and if I was to tell everything that could be told and give all the stories about Jesus, there's not enough paper to contain all the books that could be written — which is a wonderful way of saying it's an invitation to an endless hermeneutics, an endless series of retellings and testimonies and interpretations and songs and liturgies and readings and rereadings and imaginings. That's where I part company with Derrida, travelling with him along parallel lines a lot of the time.

David Cayley
What Richard Kearney finally rejected in Jacques Derrida's thought was its asceticism, its lack, as he says, of creature comfort. Religion, for Kearney, requires embodiment, in places and names, songs and stories. It cannot be only waiting, withholding, deferral. We never have God. The metaphors with which we reach for God must remain provisional and never harden into fact. But still, he says, we need pictures. He thinks, for example, that the idea of otherness is beautifully pictured in old images of the Trinity. The Trinity is the Christian concept of God as three persons: Father, Son and Spirit. It was sometimes imagined in the first centuries of Christianity as a dance, a *perichoresis*.

Richard Kearney
Perichoresis in Greek uses the prefix *peri*, "around," as in "periscope" or "periphery." So, this is a picture of the three persons of the Trinity — Father, Son and Spirit — moving around. And then you've got the empty space in the middle, which was called the *chora*, and the three persons circulate around this empty space, out of which they also emerge, as the impossible becomes possible. But, of course, it can only become possible by giving space to the other, and in the perichoresis, each person of the Trinity cedes their place to the other. They say, "No, no, you sit there. After you," and they move forward. And then the second person of the Trinity says, "No, no, I won't sit here. I'm giving it to the third person," and the third person is in fact the first. So, it's always giving up your place and moving forward into the place left for you by the other.

So, perichoresis was translated as this "dance around," and I also like the idea of the dance because there's something joyous in the dance, there's something rhythmic and something lyrical. There's music in a dance. There's the body in a dance. "Dance around" has all those positive connotations. Translated into Latin, it becomes *circum- in- cessio*, and *circum* is "around," as in "circumference," and cessio is from *cedo*, "to cede," as in "concede," to give to the other. So, you're wandering around in this concessionary or circumcessionary movement where you always give the space to the other. So, you move into your space because the other has allowed you their space. You leave your own space and find another space which the other has gifted to you, so everything is a gift, and everything is a grace. And I always see this space in the middle as the space for the *chora*, the womb, which is the womb of Mary, which is the womb of Sarah, which is the womb of the Shulamite woman in The Song of Songs, which receives the divine into itself. It's like the Sabbath, the empty day, the empty day of Creation that hasn't yet been filled, fulfilled, created. And that's our task: to turn the *chora,* the empty space, the womb — that's what it means in Greek — the *chora*, the receptacle, the heart — into the kingdom. And that's where the divine and the human... This is all metaphor, this is all imagination, but that's what the Church Fathers were doing. That's what theology and metaphysics is. It's all metaphor. It's only when we think of it as a concept and then kill people if they don't get it right...

And, of course, the idea of the perichoresis has been lost to us, but it needs to be retrieved because, in that idea, there is still movement, there is still dynamism, there is still a dance — the dance never comes to an end — and there is still desire, because the divine still desires the human, and the human still desires the divine. The Song of Songs is still being sung in the perichoresis in the kingdom when it comes. You have a new heaven and a new earth, but that doesn't mean that God and humanity become one. It means that they conjoin in a dance, and I find these images very beautiful and very liberating.

David Cayley

In his respect for the liberating power of images, Richard Kearney aligns himself finally with his old teacher, Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur believed that poetic images can open new worlds. The symbols of the imagination should not be taken literally, as in fundamentalism, or followed recklessly, as in the more credulous manifestations of the New Age. But the creative imagination properly interpreted can give the divine a local habitation and a name. We encounter God, Richard Kearney says in conclusion, not just as an endlessly deferred hope, but as a living presence.

Richard Kearney

I think what we need to do is not just see the divine in an ethics of suffering but also in a poetics of the beautiful. And that's sometimes where I become a bit impatient with Levinas or Derrida, where it's all the impossible, the dark that becomes a privileged way to the divine. That's a very privileged way, but it's not the only way. There is also the celebration of the epiphany, of the beautiful in the everyday moment. And Joyce and Hopkins, they knew that. "Glory be to God for dappled things." "What's God? A cry in the street," says Joyce, and then he gives it to Molly Bloom. As she's wandering through her erotic fantasies at night, she speaks the divine and sings this kiss of divine human love, which would be the end of hatred, which would mean that her husband, Leopold Bloom, will no longer be spat upon as a Jew in Dublin, which means that the despised of the world that Molly remembers will find a place again at the banquet. But that's through a work of epiphany, which sees the beautiful in the everyday, and I think that the divine works both through the ugly and the beautiful, through the least of these and the greatest forms of suffering and extremity of misery and abjection and dispossession, but also in the wine cellar and the honey and the mustard seed and the sharing of bread and wine. That's what we're invited to. It's not going to be a cheerless, breadless, wineless symposium or banquet — the kingdom. It's a place where people dance while not forgetting the gap left by the memory of suffering.

Paul Kennedy
I'm Paul Kennedy, and this is *Ideas* about the world of stories.

Richard Kearney
Most people, when they're asked, "Who are you?" unless they're asked by a police officer or a customs official, will not give an ID. They will tell their story, and their story will begin in the past and will move through the present into the future, or jump from future to past to present: These are my desires, these are my experiences, these are my memories, this is where I am now, this is where I'm going to, these are my hopes, these are my disappointments — it will be a story.

Paul Kennedy
There's an old joke about a computer scientist who's wondering whether computers will ever be able to think like people. After years of fruitless pondering, he finally decides to ask his computer. So, he types, "Do you think you will ever be able to think like a human being?" There's a long pause, and then the computer answers, "That reminds me of a story..."

Richard Kearney knows what that computer means. He's an Irish poet, novelist and philosopher, and among his many books is one called On Stories. There, he argues that humanity is immersed in stories. Step out of one, and you inevitably step into another. But, though we can't stop telling stories, he says, we can take responsibility for the stories we tell. The power of stories and our power to change them is what today's *Ideas* program is about. It's the last of three programs about Richard Kearney's philosophy of imagination. The series is presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley
In the final scene of Shakespeare's A Winter's Tale, when the statue of Queen Hermione comes to life, Leontes, the penitent king who has wronged her, cries out, "If this be magic, let it be an art lawful as eating." Richard Kearney uses this quotation as an epigraph to the first chapter of his book On Stories. He then comments that telling stories might be a magic even more lawful than eating. For while food makes us live, he says, stories are what make our lives worth living. It is only when the jumbled chances of our lives become meaningful and memorable stories, he says, that we become capable of recognizing and changing our circumstances.

Richard Kearney spoke with me about stories during a longer conversation that we recorded at his home in Boston last year. I began with the obvious question. What is a story?

Richard Kearney
It's the attempt to put together into some kind of pattern, form or shape different, disparate, diverse elements. This goes back to Aristotle in The Poetics, when he says there's two basic components to a story, what he calls *mythos* and *mimesis*, and mythos (hence, our word "myth") is that patterning, that emplotment, that putting into a plot, of different items, facts and so on. You can have just a chronicle of facts A, B, C, D, E, F, G, like a telephone directory, but as soon as you make sense of the facts, which, of course, we're always doing already, because there's no such thing as a pure fact — as Nietzsche rightly said, there are only interpretations of facts — as soon as we enter into a world and make a world, we're already stitching and weaving a tapestry, a text, which is a narrative text, which is a plot, and we're putting together all kinds of different bits and pieces of our lives — our experiences, our memories — into some kind of sequence: beginning, middle and end. When somebody asks you who you are, you tell your story. You don't just give them the facts about your last medical report or the size of your fingerprint or whatever. You tell them a story because that's how you make sense of your life. The German hermeneutic theorists — Dilthey and Schleiermacher and others — used the phrase "*Zusammenhang des Lebens*," a story is the hanging together of a life, it's the piecing together of a life. And that's what we do. Very often of course, we don't know that we're doing that, or we don't allow ourselves to know that we're doing that because we like to say, No, that's a fact. My identity is a substance. It's not a narrative construct. But by declaring that one's identity, be it

personal or national or religious, is a fact or is an absolute truth rather than a narrative construction that needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed and co-constructed with others, we deny our responsibility for how our nation develops and how we develop and how we come to some kind of understanding of ourselves.

Somebody once said that a story, *mythos*, myth, is a way in which a people explains itself to itself and to others, and I think that's true at an individual level and at a collective level. At an individual level, we often understand that, because when we enter into crisis, we go to a confessor or a counsellor or a therapist or a friend or someone. Maybe we talk directly to God, like St. Augustine, in his confessions. But we talk to someone about who we are, what we are and why we are. And I think very often when we go to a counsellor, a therapist, a friend to tell the story of our lives and say, "This is where I am. I don't know how I got here. I don't know how I'm going to get out of it. I don't know where I'm going to go to," we realize that we've been living in a certain kind of a story that we took to be literal. We forgot that it was figural, and maybe it suited us better not to think of it as figural. And that may be a story that other people have imposed on us, or we've imbibed from our community or family or inherited. Very often, we are a patchwork or patch-quilt of stories woven for us and stories that we reweave for ourselves, and I think very often a good therapy or a good counselling or a good chat with a friend will be an opportunity to unweave and unwind a certain story that was fixed and fixated, and will give us the ability to say, "No, I'm not determined by that particular set of plots and patterns. I can actually change my life," which is what the great stories of art encourage us to do. As Rilke says, "The work of art says to you" — three words — "change your life." Dostoyevsky wrote about this very possibility of narrative conversion, existential and spiritual conversion in Crime and Punishment. Raskolnikov does not have to be a criminal for the rest of his life. He can be forgiven by Sonya, by God and remake his life. So, that's all about a narrative, retelling, remembering of our lives and opening it up to a future, giving a future to the past.

David Cayley
Stories, as Richard Kearney has already said, are told by collectivities as much as by individuals. Nations too give a future to the past by means of a story. In his book On Stories, Richard Kearney examines three national narratives — ancient Rome, Britain and America — and shows how these three great empires have defined themselves, justified themselves, and sometimes imprisoned themselves in stories. Here, he's going to talk about Britain's story in relation to Ireland. He calls it a "tale of Siamese twins." One of its essential elements, he says, was the racialized myth of the Anglo-Saxon and the Celt.

Richard Kearney
There was a time when there was a belief that there were the Celts on the one hand and the Anglo-Saxons on the other, and it was largely foisted upon us by the English, who said the Anglo-Saxons have reason and logic and cold blood, and they are destined to rule the world, whereas the Irish are the music-makers, the dreamers of dreams. And, of course, the Irish stepped up to the plate and started singing and dancing and writing plays and putting them on the British stage. Oscar Wilde and Sheridan and Goldsmith and Congreve and Shaw and Beckett — it went on and on. And, of course, they were good at it too. They would sing for their supper, and they'd get it and, in the process, probably subvert British stereotypes of self-identity and so on as in The Importance of Being Earnest and so many other plays, John Bull's Other Island. But that was the myth that culturally speaking, the Irish were the imaginative, feckless Celts, and the English were the austere and disciplined Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and they were destined to rule the world. The Irish were destined to entertain the world, and when it came to the Home Rule for Ireland Bill in the 1880s, Matthew Arnold, who culturally thought that the Irish and the Celts were just the greatest geniuses when it came to literature, said, That's all very well, but when it comes to governing themselves, of course, we can't let them do that, and he opposed the Home Rule for Ireland Bill with the

equivalent of, the Celts can stay quaint and stay put. He didn't put it exactly like that, but that's way of translating the general cultural stereotype.

David Cayley
The idea that the Anglo-Saxons and the Celts constituted distinct peoples has now been exposed by modern genetic studies as pure fancy. Invasion and migration had long since turned the people of the British Isles into a race of indistinguishable mongrels. But the story was powerful, and it had strong institutional support, going all the way back to the Middle Ages, to the year 1366. It was then that English settlers in Ireland convened a parliament and enacted the now infamous Statutes of Kilkenny.

Richard Kearney
The Irish were considered beyond the pale. That was the phrase "beyond the pale." The pale was the palisade or wooden fence around Dublin and environs, and anybody within the pale was *gens*, part of the race — that's what it means — the people, the race, the nation, the *gens*, which gave rise to gentry, gentlemen and so on. Anybody outside was *de-gens*, and to marry outside of the pale was to become degenerate, to marry the non-people, the non-race, the non-nation. And that was purely cultural because in fact every time the English tried to invade Ireland, they became, as the old phrase went, more Irish than the Irish themselves because they would intermarry. So, the plantations failed again and again until these statutes were set up that created this false division. It was a first instance of cultural apartheid, you could say, where those inside the pale, and kept inside the pale, would be told to speak in a certain way, dress in a certain way, have certain kinds of manners and customs, and those outside would be totally distinguished by having other features of speech and dress and behaviour. And this was a legal separation, but in order to reinforce it, you had to pretend that this legal separation had a real cultural standing, that they were culturally separate as races. And then this in turn had to have a biological and political standing so that it was actually a question of blood, that the *gens* — as it means, *gentis*, "birth" — you are a gentleman because you live inside the pale, and you are of pure blood, and the *de-gens* are of impure blood. But that was a construction. It's a cultural-legal construction which then took hold. And, of course, then with the Reformation two centuries later, Protestant was attached to the *gens*, Catholic to the *de-gens*, and that was one of the reasons it took so many years, hundreds of years, to undo that extraordinary cultural myth, invention.

David Cayley
The idea of two utterly distinct and irreconcilable peoples began undeniably with the English. But the Irish, beyond the pale, soon constructed a counter-story, a Celtic myth to rival the Anglo-Saxon myth. The two peoples, Richard Kearney says, became twins whose stories continually reinforced each other. And on the shared territory of Ulster, he goes on, the twins were joined at the hip. The sticking point, once Ireland gained its independence, was the question of who had sovereignty in Northern Ireland, and sovereignty is an all-or-nothing story. Ulster could only be Irish or British, not both. The only way out, Richard Kearney says, was to retell the story.

Richard Kearney
Sovereignty was based on the principle that each nation state has a sovereign status, the unilateral right to self-determination based on the principle of being one and indivisible. That goes back to Bodin and Rousseau, the old social contract, the sovereignty of the nation as being one and indivisible. Well, of course, we're not one and indivisible. Just look at Northern Ireland. You can only have peace because it's divisible in the sense of shared sovereignty, that is, British and Irish. Before you had an end game, which was the following: Either you have a United Ireland, or you have a United Kingdom. If you have a United Kingdom, then British sovereignty is intact, one and indivisible. If you have a United Ireland, which the IRA and the Republicans wanted, then you have Irish sovereignty, one and indivisible. But one excluded the other. Two into one didn't go. So, the great breakthrough of the 1998 peace agreement was the ability to imagine a post-nationalist, post-sovereignty situation where you go beyond the exclusive, absolutist boundaries and borders of the

two nation states, and you share sovereignty, and that brought about peace.

David Cayley
The achievement of a post-nationalist Ireland was something that Richard Kearney himself worked for for many years. In the early 1980s, while he was teaching at University College, Dublin, he edited a journal called *The Crane Bag*, which tried to build bridges between north and south. He wrote a book called Post-Nationalist Ireland, in which he questioned the sacrificial myths of Irish nationalism. And he spoke publicly in favour of the idea that was finally accepted and instituted in the Good Friday peace agreement of 1998: the idea that the citizens of Northern Ireland should be recognized as both Irish and British. His first and most problematic public presentation of this idea came in 1983 at Dublin Castle when he and a Northerner called Bernard Cullen addressed an advisory body called the New Ireland Forum.

Richard Kearney
Sometimes it was very contentious. I was called a traitor when I first proposed that. It was televised live on Irish television. And at the time, even though two of the parties, the Labour Socialist Party and *Fine Gael*, the left-of-centre party, were supportive of what I was saying, they were allowing me to go out there as, not a ventriloquist's dummy, because I was speaking for myself, but as a decoy...what's the word I'm looking for?...a guinea pig, trial run to see what would happen...

David Cayley
Sacrificial lamb?

Richard Kearney
Sacrificial lamb is pretty accurate too. So, of course, the walls came tumbling down, and I was a traitor to the nation, I was giving up what my forefathers and Padraic Pearse and the United Irishmen and the Irish Republican Army had fought for for so many centuries. But as it happened, I was working pretty closely with John Hume, in Northern Ireland, a man of great, great peace and a worthy winner of the Nobel Prize, and also with Garrett Fitzgerald in the south, who was a wonderful, very inspiring Prime Minister; and Mary Robinson, who then went on — she was Labour Party at the time — to become the President of Ireland, the first woman President, and a wonderful President she was. All these people — and I was able to help them a little bit — opened up Ireland to the idea of a post-nationalist vision, that we're not confined to frontiers and barriers and borders, that in fact the Irish nation, if we want to talk about a nation, is as cultural as it is political. And there are 72-million people in the Irish diaspora throughout the world, over 40 million in North America, who claim Irish identity or Irish descent or Irish origin of some kind. And the goal was to widen the frame, open up the debate about what it means to be Irish, to include these people. Seventy-two-million people in the world — there's only four to five million living on the island of Ireland. It's very important to open, it seems to me, the sense of national identity to that multiplicity, to that hyphenated sense of Irishness so that then we can get down to the daily responsible business of politics without tying it up with the very vexed issue of the nation. So, I was arguing for a certain separation of the nation from the state and letting the nation float freely. Let people have different interpretations of what they mean by the "Irish nation." Let it accommodate Protestants and Catholics and dissenters, as the United Irishmen first proclaimed in the 1790s, and let it accommodate immigrant people who are now coming into Ireland, since it is such a wealthy country with, I think the second or the highest GNP in the European Union. So, we have Romanians and Arabs and North Africans — all kinds of people coming in. Let the Irish state function politically and the Irish nation have that more capacious and generous and moveable feast sense of identity that I think we need. After all, what is the first book ever written in Irish literature. It is The Book of Invasions. We are made up of a multiplicity of different peoples coming to our shores.

What's the first word ever written in English, the first Irish character ever pronouncing a sentence in English? It's in Shakespeare's Henry IV, Captain

Macmorris, the Irish captain, and what does he say? He says, "What ish my nation?" "What ish..." — he even has a kind of a 'h' to the 'is' to show this is an Irish guy talking. "What is my nation?" And that's what it means to be Irish. It's to always ask the question, what does it mean to be Irish? If you ever have the answer, and you try to fix it or fixate it to some kind of sovereign nation state that's one, indivisible, it's a recipe for war, and it was a recipe for war, and the British were part of it. And when Blair came along, and he said, I'm now prepared to accept that Britain is a multicultural, multinational, multi-confessional state, and I'm almost presiding over, as he did, the breakup of Britain into Scottish Assembly, Welsh Assembly, Northern Irish Assembly. That allowing of Britain to move to a post-nationalist, post-sovereignty situation happened to time well, and chime well, with what we were doing in Ireland, moving towards a post-nationalist solution in terms of the Irish Republic. So, the beneficiary of that was Northern Ireland, where finally, after the Good Friday Agreement — Good Friday, of course, was a telling phrase — people were finally able to accept the enemy, the other, the stranger. The Irish in the north could accept the British, the British, the Irish, and people could be both if they wanted, which makes perfect sense.

David Cayley
Retelling Ireland's story required what Richard Kearney describes as a "revolutionary breakthrough." This breakthrough was fostered by a changed climate of opinion in Europe generally, with other historic enemies also merging sovereignties. But Kearney thinks that it was, above all, a work of imagination. Ireland had to re-imagine itself, and this re-imagining began with writers like James Joyce, who first challenged the binding myths of nationality, language and religion. The Good Friday Agreement, when it came at last, was a recognition of a much deeper and more prolonged narrative reworking.

Richard Kearney
As I see it, what politics was doing at that point was catching up with what culture had been doing north and south of the border, where our great poets, playwrights and novelists had, for 100 years and more, been arguing that our dual identity as Irish and British, Catholic, Protestant, nationalist, Unionist, north, south is a positive, not a negative. And many of our writers had talked and written about the extraordinary fecundity in the coming together of differences. And Seamus Heaney, the Nobel Prize winner, a poet from Northern Ireland, had this wonderful line in one of his poems where he says — he grew up on a farm, of course, in Northern Ireland — "Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between." And growing up in between is something which, in my own small way in the south, I did too, I think. I grew up between two cultures: Irish-speaking, English-speaking, Protestant, Catholic, nationalist, Unionist, Irish, English, British, European — what have you. That sense of growing up in between was actually ultimately to prove to be a great healing and a great blessing and a great source of creativity for many, many Irish people rather than an invitation to bloodshed and violence and hatred, which it had been for so many years and indeed centuries.

David Cayley
Richard Kearney's book On Stories is concerned in the main with human affairs, with stories that individuals tell about themselves or that nations tell about one another, like the Irish and the English. But stories are told about the world beyond the human as well, and Richard Kearney has dealt with these mythological realms in a companion volume called Strangers, Gods and Monsters, to which I now want to turn. Here, Kearney is concerned with things that exceed our understanding — with the divine, the uncanny, the sublime — but his point, in a sense, is the same as it was in the earlier book: that we need to engage with the products of our imaginations if we are not to become their victims.

Richard Kearney
What interested me was the idea that when reason reaches the point of no return and no further can I go, enigmas arise, and these haunt us. And three names for these enigmas or figures that go beyond the limit of what can be thought philosophically are strangers,

gods and monsters. And I was interested in suggesting that, rather than consigning strangers, gods and monsters to irrationality or to some kind of primitive superstition or to nightmares at night or to caricatures of the enemy in war or to denunciations of other people's false gods and graven images, that we should nonetheless try to conduct some kind of dialogue with these figures; that it's not enough just to consign this domain to silence or paralysis. What I really wanted to do was to try and take the fear and the threat out of these figures of otherness that go beyond the limit of human reason and to suggest that there are other ways of coming at them through metaphor and myth and symbol and narrative and, in the process, develop some kind of conversation with these figures of otherness.

In a way, to try and build bridges — that's what I see the work as doing — to try and build bridges, a bit like Jacob's ladder that goes up and down between our realm of understanding and some other realm, whatever you call that realm — a transcendental, other world, heaven, Valhalla, nothingness, there's different names you can give to this other realm beyond what is thinkable and knowable — but, in any case, I wanted to follow the model, which I call the hermeneutic model of interpretation, where these are not evident meanings, these are not transparent meanings with an evident, clear and distinct sense. They are doubled meanings, multiple meanings. They come in different ways and different guises and disguises. And, of course, in Jacob's dream, in the biblical episode in Genesis, it's angels going up and down, because that's what angels do. They're metaphors for *angelos*, bringing messages from the human to the divine, the transcendent and vice versa. So, I wanted to suggest that ladders and bridges and connections and traversals are possible between what's knowable and un-knowable. I want to keep the notion of transcendence, but suggest that there are two-way tickets, back and forth, between the two worlds.

David Cayley

Richard Kearney wants to interrogate the strangers, gods and monsters that swarm continually out of our imaginations. He acknowledges that there is something that surpasses our understanding — what he calls the transcendent — but he doesn't simply take it a face value. His is a middle way, neither denying the gods nor quailing helplessly before them. It's the way of interpretation, of careful sorting and sifting, in which one hearkens to the other world but talks back as well. And such a path is more necessary than ever, he thinks, after the virtual apocalypse of 9/11. Otherwise, he says, the United States and the West generally are in danger of being trapped in the same mindset as their enemies.

Richard Kearney

Clearly, Al-Qaeda were determined to prove that they had the gods on their side, and that the West was basically composed of monsters. Israel was the little monster, the little Satan, and America was the big Satan, the big monster. So, what do you do when you have absolute good on your side? Well, you kill. You conduct a crusade or a *jihad* or a counter-crusade, which is what Al-Qaeda did on September 11th. And then the question was, how would the West respond? And, unfortunately, at least in part — this is my thesis in the book — it responded in kind; that is, it joined the apocalyptic discourse of crusade, *jihad*, and off we went in pursuit of the monster. And, of course, it was interesting how the notion of the monster morphed from Bin Laden initially to Saddam Hussein. When Bin Laden couldn't be found in his cave, he just kind of disappeared, volatilized into thin air, as sometimes supernatural monsters tend to do. Demons have an ability to be there one moment and gone the next. Then it morphed into Saddam Hussein, and he became the monster. And the word "terror" became a word to justify war rather than think about it and think about the causes of it and think about the alternatives of dealing with the enemy, because there's no doubt there's an enemy out there who wants to kill and did kill in the case of September 11th and in other cases. But we have not done as Spinoza, the enlightened Jewish philosopher, bade us do when faced with something enigmatic — he said, "Do not complain, do not rejoice, try to understand." I think there has been a singular, and egregious failure of understanding and a slipping into an ideology of

apocalypse, which in a sense is a covert religious ideology. And so, the war on terror becomes a war about something unthinkable, unnamable. It becomes a war about strangers, gods and monsters. What I'm trying to suggest is that, behind strangers, gods and monsters in the instance of that apocalyptic scenario that Bush pursued and Al-Qaeda, of course, were pursuing all the time — we are the pure, you are the impure, we are absolutely good, you are absolutely evil, we are angels, you are devils — behind that scenario, there was also another motivation, it seems to me, which is not just to punish the evil enemy in this apocalyptic way, but also to unite the people. I had moved here, to the States, from Ireland maybe one or two years before 9/11, and I was incredibly struck by the nationalist fervour that flourished and proliferated in the wake of 9/11. "We are all one nation now." Now, I had come across this in Ireland, "a nation once again" and so on, but never with the zeal or the fervour that I encountered here.

David Cayley
Richard Kearney doesn't dispute the monstrousness of the attack on the World Trade Center. What interests him is how indefinite the figure of the monster has remained, how vague the object of a war on terror is, how easily a discourse about evil has displaced sober political analysis. So it's not that there is no monster, he says, but rather that the righteous on both sides would prefer not to look the monster in the eye.

Richard Kearney
There's a very interesting story I read about Pima Chodron, who is a Buddhist therapist. She tells of how she was counselling somebody who was having these nightmares, and she was talking to her patient, and the patient said, "There's this monster that keeps chasing me, and I go into one room, and then I lock the door, and the monster opens the door, and I go into another one, and it goes on and on and on." And this was a recurring nightmare. Eventually, Pima Chodron said to her, "What does the monster look like?" She said, "I've never looked. I'm so terrified, I couldn't look at the monster." She said, "Next time you have the dream, look at the monster." So, she did, and she came back, and she said, "I had the dream again, I had the nightmare." And Pima Chodron said, "Did you look at the monster?" And she said "I did." "And what did it look like?" She described it in great detail and never had the nightmare again.

Now, that can be read in different ways, but there is a need in human beings to face the monster and recognize that the monster is actually not that different from ourselves, and come into some kind of relationship, even if it's adversarial, with the one we most fear.

Another way of doing it is to keep the monster out there and keep it elusive and indefinable but still give it some kind of a location and a name, but don't make it too familiar because if you make it too familiar, you take the evil out of it, and we need the evil in it. So, it seems to me the dangerous way of relieving anxiety is to scapegoat by putting a name and a face of some kind, but it has to remain quasi-mystical because if it's familiar, that takes, as I say, the magic and the evil and the excitement out of it.
And the other way is actually to domesticate it, is actually to face it and to try to understand it, which doesn't mean to condone it, of course, but to try and understand it.

David Cayley
To understand, for Richard Kearney, is, at least in part, to become aware of the power of imagination. It is to stop disowning imagination and acting as if we have some sort of unmediated knowledge of other worlds. It is to recognize the difference between other people and the mythology in which we are so quick to clothe them. The monster must be unmasked, he says, even when the crime is as monstrous as the killing in Rwanda in 1994.

Richard Kearney
These men, women and children who went out and slaughtered their neighbours went home that evening and caressed each other and fed each other and laughed together and were decent to each other. Now, we've got to work out how human beings can do that.

The temptation, of course, is to say, "They're no longer human when they're doing it. They're possessed by a devil. They become monsters." They do become monsters, but why do they become monsters? And they remain human when they become monsters? Human monsters? That's the conundrum we have to think through. What I oppose is the perversion of the apocalyptic scenario, which takes a very legitimate sense of division between justice and injustice and literalizes it in a fundamentalist way into, "We are the divine, elected people of God, they are the demonically possessed and damned evil ones, part of an evil empire, we're the good empire, they're the evil empire" — where did you last hear that? *Star Wars*? No? Or did certain American Presidents use terms like that? That's what's kind of frightening about it, and it's not a joke because, in a way, it has consequences. Some say, it's just a metaphor, he doesn't mean it, he doesn't really believe that it's an axis of Evil (with a capital 'E') and that they're demonically possessed and that God is really on our side. That's just rhetoric. Well, it's rhetoric, but it's a rhetoric that has quite a purchase on a lot of imaginations in this country and indeed in other countries. It's the alliance of belief with power and particularly imperial power that I think is very, very dangerous.

David Cayley

Richard Kearney wants to make the imagination, the storytelling power, conscious. Conscious of this power and aware of our responsibility for exercising it, he says, we become capable of imagining new stories and transforming old ones, as Britain and Ireland did in the Good Friday peace. Unconscious and unwilling to interrogate this power, we can be imprisoned in our stories, a prey to gods and monsters. But, though Kearney believes that imagination properly interpreted is a liberating power, he also recognizes its limitations, and it is to these limitations that I want to consider in the remainder of the program. Are there things that cannot and should not be imagined? Are we at risk from the overwhelming abundance of images that now surround us? One of the discussions that interested me in Richard Kearney's book On Stories concerned the first of these questions. Are there things that should not be directly represented? He approaches the question by considering a controversy about cinematic representation.

Richard Kearney

I was very taken by the debate surrounding two films that came out about the Holocaust as two attempts to respond to the question, how do we ethically remember such an appalling, unthinkable, unimaginable event? Steven Spielberg produced his now very famous film *Schindler's List*, and Claude Lanzmann, a French filmmaker, produced a film called *Shoah*, which was 8½ hours long. *Shoah* is the Hebrew term for Holocaust. And he chose not to use fictional scenarios or professional actors to dramatize the scenes, as Spielberg had done in *Schindler's List*. Instead, Lanzmann decided that the more ethical thing to do was to only use "to camera" interviews with survivors, both S.S. survivors, mainly filmed incognito, mind you, and Jewish survivors. And so, he produced this 8½-hour documentary, which is very difficult to watch. It's extraordinarily moving and devastating and painful and is certainly very faithful to the memories of the survivors.

Now, the question that arises on foot of that is, who is more faithful ethically to the event? Because it seems to me that there are two fidelities here. One is to make us feel how horrible that event was, and, at the same time, we've got to know what happened, which first-person testimony, of course, gives you, even the voice that cannot properly articulate or communicate its experience, the person who breaks down, who can't finish the sentence, who turns their head off-camera, who sobs. That is itself a mode of testimony that is so different from the fluent, dramatic exchanges and editing of a fictional drama. And I suppose the issue is this: that Lanzmann is more faithful to Aristotle's demand for a certain distance so that you can properly understand what has happened. But Spielberg is more faithful to what Aristotle says in any story is also necessary, and it's a tragic story he's talking about, which is *pathos* and *eleos*, feeling. So, Spielberg brings us into the suffering and enables us to suffer with the victims, whereas Lanzmann pulls

us back, as it were, and we watch, but we can't connect with the characters because it's all too horrible, in a way. There's more distance with Lanzmann. There's more passion and feeling with Spielberg.

And the debate went on. Lanzmann was very critical of Spielberg, saying this is typical Hollywood kitsch, and he's using catharsis and all kinds of emotionalism so that people who go to the movie can voyeuristically and vicariously participate in the suffering without taking any of the consequences or taking any responsibility. On the other hand, Spielberg was saying, look, I've got to get this message out to people. And Spielberg's film was shown all over the world. It was even discussed in the US Senate, and, in a day of national remembrance of the Holocaust, it was shown in every public school, and debates followed. And even skinheads went to see it in Germany, and many people in Germany did not know the story in that way and in that sort of detail. Now, these are not the people who are going to stay up until two o'clock in the morning to watch some arts channel showing 8½ hours of pretty difficult straight documentary. So, at the level of communication and feeling and empathy and imagination, I think Spielberg probably did the right thing and was more successful in helping us to remember what happened so that it will never happen again. On the other hand, it's probably true that a certain aesthetics of distance and discrimination and understanding and pure witness that is faithful to the cold facts was better represented by Lanzmann. So, it's a very tricky one in terms of, how do you use imagination to recall such an event?

David Cayley

Richard Kearney makes a good case that *Schindler's List* manages to strike a successful balance between ethical purpose and the dramatic demands of popular movie making. And I think he is generally more of a populist, more tolerant of popular culture, than many of his fellow philosophers have been. But he does recognize that the imagination faces a unique threat today from the sheer volume of song, story and image that now pours down on us.

Richard Kearney

I think the wall-to-wall culture of simulation that we have now where everything seems to be immediately available through the Internet, through video, through computers — whatever — there is a danger that the very distinction between the real and the imaginary will disappear altogether. And, in The Wake of Imagination and in On Stories too, I look at this collapse of the distinction between the real and the imaginary in our postmodern age, where everything becomes mere simulation such that you even get a philosopher like Baudrillard in France saying, the Gulf War was a TV war. Well, sorry. There were people out there who got killed on both sides in those desert nights as the bombs descended. So, there's a kind of hysteria about simulation and simulacra where everything is a copy. You see it in the art world. Andy Warhol tried to say, look, we're living in a culture of copies, and produced these multi-series of the heads of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy and Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell Soup tins, and everybody said, "Isn't this great!" And suddenly, the very critique of simulation becomes a cult of simulation. And even in reality TV shows, there's a camp sense of the collapse of the distinction between the real and the imaginary. There's nothing sacred, private, untranslatable into simulation or exposure or exhibition of some kind through this civilization of the image. So, yes, I am certainly worried about that.

But a curious thing I've noted is this strange collusion between post-modernity in the West and fundamentalism in the so-called East, although, as you know, we have it in the West as well. And it's this: that post-modernity, or a certain version of it, collapses the distinction between the real and the imaginary and says everything is now imaginary, conflates the two, subsumes reality into simulation, image. Fundamentalism collapses the distinction also by saying there's nothing imaginary, everything is to be taken literally, including The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie, including Kazantzakis's books and movies. Whether it's Christian or Islamic fundamentalists, the argument is: there's no distinction between the real and the imaginary, but, in this instance, we collapse the imaginary into the real.

And, in a way, in both cases, the failure to discriminate and distinguish and discern what is being done at the level of fiction and fantasy and image and what is actually happening on the ground in real people's lives is one of the great dangers of our time, and fundamentalism and postmodernism collude in their different ways in that collapsing of that incredibly important differentiation between the real and the imaginary, and if we lose that, then we're in big trouble. I think we're in trouble aesthetically as well as ethically and politically.

David Cayley
So, what's your own view then about the need for a certain renunciation or a certain...

Richard Kearney
I think it's very important for imagination to revivify the real and bring it to life and open up possibility, but I think it's also very important for imagination to recognize its limits and that there are points at which it must attend to the real and acknowledge that there are things in reality that we cannot adequately imagine. We can gesture towards them, we can indicate them, we can make motions towards them, but we can't capture them. And that's true of the otherness of another person. I can use my imagination all right, but there's something about the reality of the other person that will always escape me. There's something about the reality of God, if I believe in God as an absolute other, that will always escape me. Now, I need images, parables, myths, stories because that's my way of accessing God, but there's always something about the otherness of the other person, the otherness of God, the otherness of suffering, to go back to the case of the Holocaust or war, that will always escape my imagination. And I have to be dutiful to that line or limit in the sand that says I can imagine so much but no more, and there's something that will always remain unimaginable beyond this line so that when it comes to strangers, gods and monsters, there will always be something strange about the stranger that I can never adequately capture in images. The same about the monster: There will be always something about evil that I will never be able to fully explain away. Even Kant knew this. He called it "radical evil," something just incomprehensible. How could people do this? And we've got to try and understand that, but the imagination cannot always do that work and, likewise, it seems to me when it comes to gods, we've also got to be humble, I think, and vigilant about overstepping the mark and reducing God to our image. Because some of the greatest crimes in our history and in the known history of humanity have been caused by people creating God in their own image, and that reversal can be a very, very pernicious and dangerous reduction.

David Cayley
The imagination, Richard Kearney says, eventually reaches a limit. In the Gospel scene of Jesus' transfiguration, which Kearney has analyzed in his book The God Who May Be, Jesus suddenly appears as nothing but a dazzling whiteness before which the imagination completely fails. Kearney compares this passage to a chapter in Melville's Moby Dick called "The Whiteness of the Whale." There, Melville speaks of the whale's colour as a "dumb blankness, full of meaning." It means more than can be said or pictured. Again, the imagination falls short. And, when it reaches this limit, Richard Kearney says finally, it can only wait on the other.

Richard Kearney
When the imagination goes on sabbatical, for example, and rests, what it does is it listens. It listens to the real. It becomes an auditory imagination rather than a productive imagination. T.S. Eliot spoke about the auditory imagination and that wonderful way that it attends to the real, it's open to the real... But to do that, it has to become inoperative in any productive sense of projecting and creating and fictionalizing, and it just has to say now I'm on holidays or on strike, I'm out of order, and I'm just listening. I'm listening to what my senses tell me, to what the world tells me. I'm suffering rather than acting, if you will. And as human moral agents, we are actors and sufferers, and all too often, imagination only goes into gear on the active front and doesn't sufficiently go into passive mode, go into receptive mode, where it becomes vigilant to and sensitive to and susceptible to realities that it could never have dreamed of.

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio." There's always something more about heaven and earth than we could ever dream of. And, of course, in attending to the reality of suffering, of evil, of goodness, of otherness, we are reminded, once the week begins again, and we come out of the sabbatical rest and receptivity and passivity of suffering as in the sense of suffering little ones to come unto me, suffering the world to reveal itself to me — it doesn't have to be painful suffering, it can be suffering in the sense of receiving — when we go back into our ordinary weekdays again, we go back to work, go back into active, performative, productive, creative mode, we are reminded that there's something else out there that our imagination has not sufficiently responded to, and, therefore, we must become more responsible again as imaginative beings in the sense of trying to respond better to that reality out there. And how do we do that imaginatively? We do it with more images and then more ideas and then more projections. That's how we do it. But always reality will be ahead of the *posse*, leading imagination to a new promised land and a new promised land and a new promised land. And that's what's messianic, if you like, about the reality-imaginary relationship, that the reality of the kingdom will always be ahead of what we can imagine, so we must always imagine more, knowing we'll never get there. It's a bit like the Beckett play, Waiting for Godot. You keep on imagining that Godot is going to turn up tomorrow, but the Gaelic word *go deo* means forever. You're waiting forever, and we will always be waiting forever. Imagination will be imagining forever, unless it comes to a full stop. When it comes to a full stop, we're in trouble because then it thinks it has completed its duty of imagining possibilities, and it takes itself as an end in itself, and then it totalizes itself, and it becomes megalomaniac. And then we're in trouble. Then the good imagination, as it were, has slipped back into the evil imagination. We've become self-sufficient, egocentric, closed off from others, incapable of listening to the other. So, the auditory imagination is just as important as the productive imagination, it seems to me. Why? Because it is more open to the alterity of the real and the reality of others.

David Cayley
I'm very happy to end with a speech about listening.

Richard Kearney
Good.

David Cayley
It's a good way to end a radio program. Thank you, Richard.

Richard Kearney
Thank you, David.

Paul Kennedy
On *Ideas*, you've listened to the third and concluding episode of "The God Who May Be," a conversation with philosopher Richard Kearney. He's a professor of philosophy at Boston College and at University College, Dublin. The program was produced and presented by David Cayley with the assistance of Richard Handler. Our thanks to Nathan Loewen of McGill University for the introduction to Richard Kearney. Technical production by Dave Field. Associate Producer: Liz Nagy. Our e-mail address is ideas@cbc.ca The Executive Producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht. I'm Paul Kennedy.

Transcript by Ian Godfrey