

# Restoring Difficulty:

## How Theology of Religions Seeks to Avoid the Fragility of Encounter and Why We Need to Reclaim It

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### Introduction

Interreligious encounters can be profoundly unsettling. Exposing one's cherished, deeply personal beliefs and traditions to outsiders makes us vulnerable to their potentially unexpected or uncomfortable questions. What we considered self-evident or well argued could turn out difficult to explain,<sup>2</sup> and what we thought was singular to our tradition could unexpectedly prove to be shared with our conversation partner. On the other hand, exposing oneself to the testimony of the other means risking the possibility that there is faith and light outside one's own tradition—or quite the opposite, that the differences are much greater than we expected. This experience can be distressing, and holds the double temptation of either closure or the withdrawal into a merely metaphysical, uncommitted faith. In the words of theologian Marianne Moyaert, “the religious other is the vulnerable other who challenges us to understand her. But that challenge is not experienced as ‘pleasant’ as a matter of course. The religious other can be experienced just as easily as disruptive or disturbing, as someone whom we'd rather ignore. In this respect, hospitable openness...is a difficult virtue.”<sup>3</sup>

It is this fragility, this difficulty, of interreligious encounters that I am interested in. I believe recognizing, accepting, and embracing this fragility, this unsettling, opens up ways of meeting authentically, of authentic encounter with a stranger *as* other. To facilitate interreligious encounter

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<sup>2</sup> I have frequently seen Christians go through this experience when asked about the Trinity.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 277.

and reconciliation, the task of theology and theory in this respect should therefore be to find ways to embrace this difficulty, to be unsettled well. However, typical approaches in theology of religions have focused more on attempts to still this difficulty, to resettle the scene by means of comprehensive answers to the question of religious difference. Although this may be soothing and reassuring to a distressed Christianity faced with an unpredictable and uncertain world of plurality, it also hinders authentic meeting, hospitality, and reconciliation.

In this article I will argue that the dominant approaches in theology of religions are insufficiently capable of embracing the difficulty of interreligious encounters, and that theory needs to turn to philosophical hermeneutics in order to find an approach that appreciates and embraces this unsettling as a means to open up the conversation and let it flourish. I am inspired in this endeavor by philosopher John D. Caputo, who is looking for a “hermeneutics of facticity”, in order to:

keep a watchful eye for the ruptures and the breaks and the irregularities in existence. This new hermeneutics would not try to make things look easy, to put the best face on existence, but rather to recapture the hardness of life before metaphysics showed us a fast way out of the back door of the flux. That is the notion of hermeneutics with which I wish to begin: hermeneutics as an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics.... Metaphysics always makes a show of beginning with questions, but no sooner do things begin to waver a bit and look uncertain than the question is foreclosed. The disruptive force of the question is contained; the opening it created is closed; the wavering is stilled.<sup>4</sup>

I will start by briefly describing two approaches to theology of religions current in wider ecumenical circles: pluralism and postliberalism.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that each of these seeks to arrest the conversation, rather than opening it up, and by so doing, hinder real relationship. The other person, as soon as she or he

<sup>4</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>5</sup> For more elaborate discussion of this kind, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, or, for a different typology, Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002). These authors also include “inclusivism” and “exclusivism.” I am omitting these categories for reasons of brevity, as they appear to be less relevant in academic debate. Paul Hedges lists six reasons why the debate between exclusivist and more open approaches is no longer a real issue: Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 11–12.

appears at the horizon, is made to disappear again into the service of my metaphysical scheme, not allowed to be other, or kept at such a distance that their story is not allowed to affect me. These approaches, then, are insufficient—as is reflected in the apparent impasse in the academic debate.

For the second part of the article, I will discuss two hermeneutical approaches to religious difference that embrace difficulty and avoid the easy way out. The first is from Catholic theologian Marianne Moyaert. Rather than starting from concerns with universality, and taking a page from the postliberal playbook, she starts with a deeply particular approach, seeing religious tradition as constitutive of faith, rather than as a secondary byproduct. Comparing this horizontal role of the tradition to that of a language, she then argues for an approach to interfaith encounter as translation, a going back-and-forth between particular practices, concepts and experiences, accepting that there is no “neutral” ground, no “perfect” translation. Emphasizing the fragility and unsettling character of interreligious encounter, her work allows a “re-focus” away from big answers towards the fragile difficulty of building relationship and understanding the other.

The second approach I will discuss is that of philosopher Richard Kearney who, after the post-enlightenment and post-Holocaust “death” of the God of metaphysics, argues for encountering anew a sacredness in love and service to the stranger. The temptation to absolutize the other in distance or deny her otherness entirely is suspect—the relationship to the other is always to a recognizable other human, marked by both commonality and remaining difference. Kearney espouses a “hermeneutic pluralism of otherness,”<sup>6</sup> which takes as its core not a singular experience of the divine (as in liberal pluralism) but rather the remaining strangeness of the divine, the other and ourselves. I argue that both Kearney and Moyaert can offer us valuable insights for a theology of encounter that avoids easy answers and takes seriously the difficulty, facticity, and “hereness” of the world and our others.

Before moving on to the conclusion, I will then briefly pause to consider connections to specifically Anabaptist thought and practice, which I understand as favoring the ethical over the metaphysical, and orthopraxy over orthodoxy. Both traits offer a valuable foothold for a re-appreciation of the difficulty in relating to the stranger. As my training is primarily in western philosophy, not theology, these connections will necessarily be somewhat roughly sketched.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 81.

## Theology of Religions

To start with, I will describe two of the main ways theology of religions seeks to make sense of the unsettling experience of interreligious encounter. Both are second-order discourses, arguing within the space opened up by the clash of first-order theological discourses.<sup>7</sup> The first is *pluralism*, which describes the experience as primarily one of *commonality*, the realization that all religions share a common core. The second is *postliberalism*, which describes the experience as primarily one of *difference*, even incommensurability.

### *Pluralism*

Pluralism asserts that different religions share a common essence. This perspective has a certain intuitive attractiveness, as it is capable of answering the apparent contradiction that there are various religions which all claim to be true with an affirmation of a deeper commonality. There have been, and continue to be, many proponents of pluralism. These include Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Paul Hedges, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, and many more, leading to a wide variety of pluralisms to which this short article could never do justice. I will therefore discuss the basic argument of philosopher of religion John Hick, arguably the most influential and foundational thinker in pluralism.

According to Hick, the plurality of faiths presents itself as a problem. There is a point to religion, but the apparently conflicting claims of religions cannot all *simply* be true. The diversity of the realm of religious experience “must preclude any simple and straightforward account of it.”<sup>8</sup> The possibility that in an interreligious encounter I am confronted with approaches that are simply *wrong* whereas mine is *right* is an “implausibly arbitrary dogma.”<sup>9</sup> There is a need for a theory that can explain how different religions can be valid responses to the divine alongside each other, without contradiction or conflict.

As a response to this problematic, Hick advances the “pluralist hypothesis” “that the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all

<sup>7</sup> By “second-order” discourse I mean an argument that is not directly based on religiously specific (“first-order”, e.g., biblical) arguments, but is a more abstract philosophical reflection on those arguments and on the nature of religions. A second-order discourse is *about* first-order religious language. See David Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 4.

<sup>8</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

our varied versions of it.”<sup>10</sup> He thus makes a distinction between the object of religious experience in a given religious tradition, on the one hand, and a transcendent and ineffable reality, which underlies that experience, on the other. The distinction is made along the lines of the Kantian epistemological distinction between the *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, between the thing-in-itself and the object of perception as it appears to the perceiving mind.<sup>11</sup> The contribution of the perceiving mind to perception is not merely one of passive reception or active grasping, it is *productive*: perception happens at the intersection of the human categories of perception and the thing-in-itself. Human consciousness thus contributes actively and positively to the world as it experiences it.

In parallel to Kantian epistemology, the pluralist hypothesis postulates a noumenal Real, “whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience.”<sup>12</sup> This Real can never be experienced directly by human consciousness, but only ever through the mediation of religious speech, myth and tradition,<sup>13</sup> a view that is in line with the traditional Christian doctrine of divine ineffability.<sup>14</sup> God, Brahman, Sunyata, and so on are the various personal and impersonal phenomenal manifestations of the Real.<sup>15</sup> Faith in one or more of these manifestations enables some kind of appropriate response to the “ultimate mystery.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus it [the Real] cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm. All that we can say is that we postulate the Real *an sich* as the ultimate ground of the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience. Nevertheless perhaps we can speak about the Real indirectly and mythologically. For insofar as these gods and absolutes are indeed manifestations of the ultimately Real, an appropriate human response to any of them will also be an

10 Ibid., 235–36.

11 Ibid., 241.

12 Ibid., 243.

13 Hick describes the Real as “postulated” (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 350).

14 To support this point, Hick quotes amongst others Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, the Qur'an, and the Upanishads. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 238–39.

15 Ibid., 243.

16 Ibid., 349–50.

appropriate response to the Real.<sup>17</sup>

Different religions, then, are not mutually exclusive truth-claims, but rather mutually complementary perspectives on the final truth, existing but unattainable as the transcendent, ineffable core of each tradition. This means religions have a certain primary interconnectedness; any differences are superficial. The stranger in interreligious encounter is, when it comes to the ultimate truth, never really stranger.

There have been many critiques of Hick's and other pluralisms. These critiques have focused on, amongst other topics, the effacement of difference, a perceived crypto-relativism, and an implicit rethinking of Christology, none of which I will go into here.<sup>18</sup> I want to take issue with one specific aspect of pluralism's modernist, metaphysical approach: how pluralism works as a response to the unsettling character of interreligious encounter.

Hick started life as a conservative, exclusivist thinker, but was moved by his interreligious encounters to question those views and move in the direction of pluralism.<sup>19</sup> This is a good illustration of the disruptive force of authentic encounter: it can cause fixed ideas to waver, creating an open space for something new to emerge from beyond the control of either conversation partner. However, it seems that, barely having set out on this journey, pluralism purports to arrive at its destination. The emerging open space is not cherished, but closed by the assertion of underlying commonality.

It is not hard to imagine why this strategy is appealing. It makes believers less vulnerable to the other, less exposed to what is not under their control. In addition, it allows them to look away from their own strangeness, protecting them from the discomfort of their own otherness and vulnerability.<sup>20</sup>

In adopting a pluralist world-view, loosening my attachment to the particularities of my faith tradition and embracing a faith in a general, universal essence, I am effectively expanding my own metaphysical scheme to include the other's religious tradition. The other person is thus not allowed to appear as *an other person*, but only as an illustration of what I already know in essence. She has nothing essential to tell me about their own perspective, as I already

17 Ibid., 350.

18 For good overviews, see the works cited under note 4.

19 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 35; John Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 2.

20 Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Value of Openness; Taking the Vulnerability of Religious Attachments into Account," *Heythrop Journal* 51, no. 5 (September 1, 2010): 737, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2265.2010.00574.x.

know—before even encountering her—that, in essence, her perspective is the same as mine. I might even have a *better* grasp on the other's religion than she does, as she might not yet have reached the enlightened stage of pluralism.

Universalist pluralism thus removes the risk of rupture, distress, and vulnerability, but it does so at the cost of the opportunity for particularity, difference, and relationship. The disruptive force of the encounter is contained; the opening it created is closed; the wavering is stilled.<sup>21</sup> The conversation is arrested before it begins. The loss of particularity in pluralism gives rise to its main competitor in the theology of religions: postliberalism.

### *Postliberalism*

Another prominent perspective on Christian relations to other religions is postliberalism. Where pluralism emphasizes commonality or similarity, postliberalism emphasizes difference or alterity. The deeply communal and specific nature of truth in religious traditions means interreligious encounters cannot simply be explained by referring to a purported shared root—indeed, respect for our own tradition and that of the other means approaching the others as entirely different systems of thought and experience.

Again, postliberalism is a broad movement, including theologians of wildly different plumage, from John Milbank and Kathryn Tanner to Stanley Hauerwas. I will therefore focus on one of the foundational arguments of the postliberal position: the view of religion put forward by George Lindbeck.<sup>22</sup>

Where the liberal perspective “locate[s] ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience,”<sup>23</sup> Lindbeck suggests a reversal: the religious tradition is not a response to an experience of transcendence, but rather, the experience arises in the context of, and is conditioned by, the tradition. “It is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience.”<sup>24</sup>

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21 John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

22 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, underlining edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

23 Ibid., 21.

24 Ibid., 37.

Lindbeck calls his model the “cultural-linguistic” (postliberal) model in contrast to the “experiential-expressive” (liberal, modern) model.<sup>25</sup> “Instead of deriving external features of a religion from inner experience, it is the inner experiences which are viewed as derivative.”<sup>26</sup> Doctrines, then, are primarily rules of conduct, much like grammatical rules. Their normativity in community is their primary justification; there is no reason to “insist on an ontological reference.”<sup>27</sup> There is a certain nonfoundationalism to Lindbeck’s argument, and he describes his approach as “intratextual”: “meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it.”<sup>28</sup> For postliberalism, there is no “final” foundation or ground (common or otherwise) that we should seek outside the particularities of our own tradition.<sup>29</sup>

As the very structure of our experiences is conditioned by the cultural-linguistic context in which we have them, there are no primal or unshaped experiences, which could be related directly to a transcendent Real as an interreligiously shared essence. Speaking of an inexperienceable, inexpressible, unattainable root of all religious experience is, for the postliberal, not only philosophically problematic, but also irrelevant, as this is not what lived religious reality is about. Being a Christian means learning the Christian stories and coming to see the world through them, much like how one learns language when growing up.<sup>30</sup> Being religious, having religious experiences, and subscribing to certain confessions of faith are fundamentally conditioned by the particular tradition through which one learned to view the world.

Faith, religious tradition, and identity, then, are not aspects of one’s life which one can regard from outside. It is rather scripture and the church that allow the Christian to regard the world.<sup>31</sup> There is no neutral, common field from which we can look at the world or even at our own tradition—especially not science or secularism. In a way, the second-order discourse of postliberalism works to emphasize the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31–33. A third model, the “cognitive-propositionalist” model, which takes religious statements as propositional truth-claims, is disregarded early on in the work.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39–40.

<sup>31</sup> Michener, *Postliberal Theology*, 6.

primacy of first-order discourse.<sup>32</sup> Scripture and other Christian texts are all that is necessary for engaging with the world and maintaining identity. Understanding the meaning of other religions can only be the result of reflection upon Christian sources.<sup>33</sup> It does not require any knowledge or consideration of the nature, history, or lived experience of the other religion.<sup>34</sup> Given the constitutive role of the specific traditions, there is even a certain incommensurability between them, as there is no neutral third language both traditions could express themselves in.<sup>35</sup> Although postliberals are not typically opposed to dialogue, the only goal of such dialogue can be practical cooperation or mutual respect in difference<sup>36</sup>—certainly not an unsettling of settled identities.

According to postliberals, this rejection of commonality and emphasis on difference means the other is respected *as other*, as opposed to the reduction to the Same in pluralism. But at the same time, the other is kept at arms' length: nothing of relevance to our identity or our understanding of God in the world can happen in our dealings with them. Similarly to pluralism, postliberalism reassures Christians worried by a plural and confusing world, soothing us with the affirmation that the experience of alterity can only be reflected upon by ceasing our exposure to it, by withdrawing within the safety of a Christian discourse.

In their response to the unsettling experience of interreligious encounter, postliberalism thus arrives at the same goal as pluralism, albeit by a substantially different route: the other person still has nothing of essential value to tell me, she is not allowed to *relate* to me as an other person, but only as an illustration of what I already know: the unbridgeable chasm separating Christians from the rest. “In both approaches the religious other is seen as a problem that can and should be solved, either by retreating to the security of sameness (pluralism) or by distancing otherness (particularism),”<sup>37</sup> as Moyaert puts it. The conversation

<sup>32</sup> An issue noted by David Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Hedges mentions the view that postliberals are “simply exclusivists or inclusivists in post-modern guise,” Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 161.

<sup>34</sup> As pointed out eloquently by Hedges (*ibid.*, 155).

<sup>35</sup> Michener, *Postliberal Theology*, 107–9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Marianne Moyaert, “On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology,” *Religions* 3, no. 4 (December 2012): 1149.

is arrested before it begins.<sup>38</sup>

So, what now? Having considered two dominant approaches to the question of interreligious encounter, one giving the answer of commonality, the other giving the answer of irreconcilable difference, we are no closer to embracing the difficulty of interreligious experience. Both are united in that they answer an ambiguous and unresolved question with a singular, clear answer. Encounter with the other, they seem to say, is only difficult if you do not come prepared: with the right theory, one can sail through the experience risk-free, without being exposed to its dangers.

### **Interreligious Hermeneutics**

We have seen that neither pluralism nor postliberalism can offer us insights that let us restore a sense of difficulty to our encounter with the other. Pluralism, through its emphasis on commonality, does not let the religious other be other. Postliberalism, through its emphasis on irreconcilable difference, keeps the other at arm's length. In order to find insights that can help us avoid either of these extremes, I will examine two thinkers who have been inspired by philosophical hermeneutics, most notably by Paul Ricoeur.<sup>39</sup> Hermeneutics means, in this sense, an avoidance of fixed answers, returning always to the question, knowing that there is no God's-eye view available to us, but that our being in the world is always conditioned, indeed, made possible, by our presuppositions. I will start with theologian Marianne Moyaert, and then consider the philosopher Richard Kearney.

#### *Fragility: Marianne Moyaert*

Theologian Marianne Moyaert's work on interreligious hermeneutics is formulated as a response to the "impasse" in academic debate between pluralism and

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38 In this context, Thomas Finger argues for expressing universal truths to enable authentic conversation. Thomas Finger, "Universal Truths: Should Anabaptist Theologians Seek to Articulate Them?", in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA and Scottsdale, PA: Pandora and Herald, 2000), 75–90.

39 In theology more broadly, hermeneutics means interpretation, particularly of the Bible or other texts. Here I understand philosophical hermeneutics as that branch of philosophy, building on Heidegger and Gadamer, which takes the process of interpretation beyond the reading of texts and understands it as constitutive to human life and being in the world as such.

postliberalism, which she sets out to break through.<sup>40</sup> Her approach is marked by a recognition of the fragile nature of religious identity, and the concurrent distressing nature of encounters with the religious other, “for it is especially in the encounter with the other that the human person becomes aware of his/her own strangeness and vulnerability.”<sup>41</sup>

Neither pluralism nor postliberalism formulate appropriate responses to this fragility and to the tension between the foreign and the familiar, according to Moyaert. Both exhibit “a nostalgic longing after purity and unity.”<sup>42</sup> Where pluralism overemphasizes similarity, postliberalism overemphasizes difference. Both emerge from a desire for a “definitive solution—the correct theological interpretation of religious plurality,”<sup>43</sup> which is at the same time “a desire to be redeemed from restlessness.”<sup>44</sup>

Moyaert agrees in principle with the postliberal claim that religions can be understood as languages, but she disagrees with the claim that this would make them incommensurable. If religions are somewhat like languages, then interreligious dialogue could be somewhat like translation. She therefore looks to Paul Ricoeur’s work on translation<sup>45</sup> for a way forward. In order to better understand interreligious dialogue, we need an appreciation of the work of the translator: “a constant mediation between the foreign and the familiar,”<sup>46</sup> marked by “the pragmatic tension between faithfulness and betrayal.”<sup>47</sup> Interreligious encounters are possible, but they are not *easy*. Like interlinguistic translations, they are “won on the battlefield of a secret resistance motivated by fear, indeed, by hatred of the foreign, perceived as a threat against our own linguistic [or religious] identity.”<sup>48</sup>

A translator is always moving back and forth between two masters: the author, who demands a faithful translation, and the reader, who desires appropriation of the text into the target language, “doubly sanctioned by a vow

40 Marianne Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions? Ricoeur’s Linguistic Hospitality as Model for Inter-Religious Dialogue,” *Exchange* 37 (2008): 338.

41 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Value of Openness,” 737.

42 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 353.

43 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 298.

44 Ibid.

45 Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

46 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions,” 351.

47 Ibid., 354.

48 Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 23.

of faithfulness and a suspicion of betrayal.”<sup>49</sup> The translator needs to bring the reader to the work, and the work to the reader—a task that is doomed to fail, as some particularities and idiosyncrasies of the text are always lost in their translation. The work of translation therefore “implies a labour of mourning, applied to renouncing the very ideal of the perfect translation.”<sup>50</sup>

The only reason why the translator feels sadness and guilt is because s/he experiences a calling to be faithful to both particularities of the familiar and the foreign. To not feel this guilt implies the absence of this promise of faithfulness, and for this rather awkward situation, there is no solution. That is why it is appropriate to designate the space between the familiar and the foreign as fragile.<sup>51</sup>

Lacking a third, neutral, “pure” language that could assimilate all of both languages and create fully transparent understanding without the need for translation, the only answer to an imperfect translation is *another* translation. The work is never *finished*, the problem is never *solved*. This is cause for mourning, but it also means that “what drives the foreign and the familiar apart also keeps them driving towards each other.”<sup>52</sup>

Interreligious translation means, then, letting go of the dream of perfect, transparent understanding as well as the fear of the strange, and allowing this fragile space to open itself up. The willingness to be interrupted by the strangeness of the other requires “the trust that there is something, which can be understood,”<sup>53</sup> while recognizing that there will always be a remaining strangeness. This is a stance she describes as “the ethical posture of hermeneutical hospitality for the religious other.”<sup>54</sup> It is a willingness to make space in one’s own tradition to welcome the other in their otherness,<sup>55</sup> this openness is accompanied by a willingness to accept such hospitality in turn, to become guests, to become strangers ourselves.<sup>56</sup>

To be unsettled in the encounter is not a sign of a lack of openness; rather, the difficulty is a necessary part of genuine engagement. “To be disturbed is to

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 4 referring to Franz Rosenzweig; Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 351.

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 354.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>56</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, 314.

be touched.”<sup>57</sup> It is not the answer, be it commonality or difference, that enables reconciliation, but rather it is an embrace of the unresolvedness of the question. To reject the *a priori* answers of theology of religions is a way of holding back the violent imposition of our metaphysical frame, of engaging nonviolently with an other who is allowed to speak with her own voice, as a subject.<sup>58</sup>

In this vulnerable, fragile, and potentially unsettling space, people of faith are not there to reach consensus, or to debate, but rather to give *testimony*, to witness to a fragile certainty. Our faith, when expressed as testimony, is “fragile because there are no irrefutable criteria to decide its truth, fragile because of the risk of rejection.”<sup>59</sup> The question of truth is not bracketed or left out, but rather, in this space, it coincides with the truthfulness of the speaker’s faith commitment. To believe is to trust.<sup>60</sup>

It must be accepted and mourned that the wholeness desired by both plurilateralism and postliberalism is not available in the here and now. However, eschatologically, this wholeness *is* promised to us. The vulnerability and imperfection of the encounter must therefore be understood in an eschatological framework of hope. Vulnerability in interreligious encounters thus also opens us up to the opposite: a foretaste of what is yet to come. Moyaert describes this as a *feast*.<sup>61</sup>

The generosity of understanding, we could say, presupposes the generosity of festive hospitality. This ritual framing is thus not secondary to interreligious dialogue but shows precisely that, despite the real differences, the misunderstandings, possible injuries, and the non-recognition of the religious other, a choice is made for solidarity in the hopeful expectation of final reconciliation. Making room for the religious other is not simply a question of the understanding. Only when the adherent of another religion is recognized as a table companion is hermeneutical openness also theologically meaningful.... In the feast people acknowledge their fragility on the one hand and, on the other, draw the strength to enter the fragile hermeneutical space in which interreligious dialogue occurs in the hope of the final reconciliation.<sup>62</sup>

In Moyaert’s work, we find a great appreciation for the difficulty, the fragili-

57 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 360.

58 Moyaert, “On Vulnerability,” 1155–56.

59 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 293.

60 Ibid., 294; Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures 3: Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 95.

61 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, 298–314.

62 Ibid., 313–14.

ty, the restlessness that occurs in interreligious encounters. Not only does she recognize that meeting the religious other can *be* unsettling, she moves further and rejects the longing for purity of pluralism and postliberalism, stressing that the difficulty is a sign of genuine engagement. Her move towards translation, including the mourning of the perfect translation, does not seek to give big answers but, rather, asks how to understand the question better. In order to enter the fragile space of dialogue, we need to understand the difficult work of moving back-and-forth between the familiar and the remaining strangeness of the other.

This remaining strangeness plays an even greater role in the hermeneutic pluralism of another Catholic author: Richard Kearney.

### *The Stranger: Richard Kearney*

Kearney's philosophical project is rooted in a deeply personal discontent with the way we understand religion in postmodern societies. "The fact that two of my uncles refused to mention religion after what they witnessed during World War II left a lasting impression on me,"<sup>63</sup> he intimates. Facing off both dogmatic theism—he grew up in Northern Ireland—as well as dogmatic atheism, he seeks to rediscover something of God after the death of the God of metaphysics.<sup>64</sup> After the enlightenment critique of theism, but most of all after the terrors of the twentieth century, "the Omni-God of theodicy, invoked to justify the worst atrocities as part of some Ultimate Design"<sup>65</sup> is dead—necessitating, and making possible, the rediscovery of faith as "a commitment not to some transcendental otherworld but to a deep temporality in which the divine dwells as a seed of possibility calling to be made ever more incarnate in the human and natural world."<sup>66</sup> He calls this re-turn to God "Anatheism."

This return to the sacred, this re-discovered faith is summed up as the preference for "a God of hospitality over a God of power."<sup>67</sup> Kearney inscribes this preference in an eschatological understanding of God's promise to Moses in Exodus 3:15, paraphrasing God's *ebyeh asher ehyeh* as "I am the God who may be, can be, shall be, if you listen to my summons and choose liberty over slavery, life over death...."<sup>68</sup> God and the *eschaton* are active, not as a metaphys-

<sup>63</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xvi.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., xii, 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 141–42.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 54.

ical solution to wrap up existence at the end, but as a concrete possibility for people of faith here and now. This is a *wager*, for which we first need to lose our certainty in the God of metaphysics: “The *ana* signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief.... Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God.”<sup>69</sup>

The encounter with God-as-Stranger, as never *mine*, remaining always ungraspable, also opens us up to the divinity in the stranger, to the Stranger-as-God. “The message is this: the divine, as exile, is in each human other who asks to be received into our midst.”<sup>70</sup> This means hospitality and nonviolence take center stage as leading ethical virtues. This necessarily includes interreligious hospitality, which Kearney describes as “indispensable...a summons of cultural imagination to translate between one's own religion and that of others.”<sup>71</sup>

Guided by the interpretation of John 14:6 as the exclusion of exclusion—you cannot come to the divine except through the least of these, the stranger<sup>72</sup>—Kearney emphasizes the commonality and connectedness between the religions.<sup>73</sup> But this commonality does not mean embracing a general, universal, rationally posited Real, expanding my own metaphysical scheme to include the other, as in Hick's view. For Kearney, hospitality always also means recognizing the other as *different*, recognizing an irreducible strangeness.<sup>74</sup> “There is always something more to be said and understood, some inexhaustible residue never to be known. And it is this 'more'—which many religions call God—that allows the stranger to remain (in part at least) always strange to us.”<sup>75</sup>

Kearney's understanding of God as stranger allows him to cross commonality and difference over each other—not a middle ground between the two, but commonality and difference in dynamic interaction, a “hermeneutic pluralism of otherness.”<sup>76</sup> Compared to Hick's modernist pluralism, this hermeneutic pluralism comes with an important anti-metaphysical twist: the ineffable mys-

69 Ibid., 7.

70 Ibid., 20.

71 Ibid., 149. In expanding on this notion of translation, Kearney follows many of the same cues in Ricoeur's work as Moyaert does, albeit via a less extensive engagement.

72 Ibid., 55.

73 Ibid., 150.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 180.

76 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 81.

tical point of unity, common to all religions, *is* the unsayable and untranslatable, the remaining, unsettling otherness. This gives the old doctrine of ineffability a new turn, as it takes seriously the *unavailability* of the divine, allowing at once a post-metaphysical pluralism *and* a move towards concrete hereness.<sup>77</sup> Deep down, we are all “answerable to an alterity which unsettles us.”<sup>78</sup>

It is the incapacity to embrace this irreducible alterity, the unwillingness to find a certain peace with the strangeness and difficulty of life, which leads us to close in on ourselves in sanitized communities. Thus we “project onto others those unconscious fears from which we recoil in ourselves,”<sup>79</sup> defining our own identity in opposition to a well defined enemy or exotic object of fascination, suppressing “the stranger before us as a singular other who responds, in turn, to the singular otherness in each of us.”<sup>80</sup> The claim of postliberism that religions are untranslatable and unreconcilably different, then, is suspect: “the claim of untranslatability is inspired by a fear of contamination.”<sup>81</sup>

Hermeneutic pluralism involves an insistence that the stranger must, somehow, be recognizable *as* another, neither as an absolutized Other<sup>82</sup> nor as assimilated into the Same. The possibility of relationship is in allowing the other to *be* as another, neither so much like myself to make relationship impossible, neither quite so different as to make it unattainable. “For how are we to address otherness at all if it becomes totally *unrecognizable* to us?”<sup>83</sup>

Though Richard Kearney does not explicitly address pluralism or postlib-

77 Compare also Jeannine Hill Fletcher's emphasis on mystery: “God is the incomprehensible mystery of overabundance whose reality might be reflected in the stories and experiences of our neighbors of other faiths. In this way of thinking, it is the very distinctiveness and particularity of the other—his or her religious ‘otherness’—which is seen as an invaluable resource for an ever-broadening vision of the mystery of human existence and the mystery which Christians call ‘God.’” Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 136–37.

78 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 5.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 353.

82 For Kearney the absolutization of the other includes any *unconditional* hospitality, as it also makes the stranger unrecognizable. “Unconditional hospitality is divine, not human,” Kearney, *Anatheism*, 48. It would lead “less to praxis than to paralysis, less towards new tasks of communal emancipation than to a certain bedazzlement before the mystical sublimity of the event itself.” Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 107–8.

83 Ibid., 10.

eralism, he starts his argument with an initial agreement with the postliberal skepticism of disembodied God's-eye-view metanarratives. "D'où parlez vous?", he quotes his mentor Ricoeur asking each of his seminar students.<sup>84</sup> From where do you speak? Every experience is embedded in a framework that gives it meaning. However, he continues, hermeneutics cannot end there. There is something outside the tradition, as well. "Hermeneutics is a lesson in humility (we all speak from finite situations) as well as imagination (we fill the gaps between available and ulterior meanings)."<sup>85</sup> This puts him at odds with both modernist pluralism and the postliberal tradition—we speak *from* somewhere and have no absolute, neutral perspective available to us, but this does not mean we are so without imagination that we cannot relate to what is outside our tradition.

Like Moyaert, Kearney is seeking ways to navigate the extremes, to avoid giving unambiguous answers and give space to indeterminacy. Kearney's hermeneutics are marked by carefulness: this, but also that. That, but always this as well. Irreducible strangeness, but also commonality. The stranger as the divine, but always also as the concrete person she happens to be. His "atheist" return to the primordial wager in the face of God-as-stranger means a rejection of the fixed answer for the sake of a rediscovery of the question. It is this tendency of dissatisfaction with reassuring answers that makes his insights so valuable in embracing the difficulty, the never-finished-ness of encountering the other.

### Anabaptists and reconciliation

I am not proposing the above as an Anabaptist theology of religions, nor do I believe there should or even could be such a thing, given the wide diversity of theological profiles in our global communion.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the above contribution and my continuing research is, by the grace of the author being a committed Anabaptist in life, *an Anabaptist approach* to interreligious encounter and theology of religions. I believe that there are valuable connections that can be made between interreligious hermeneutics and Anabaptist theology and witness. I will sketch these briefly, focusing on the preference of Anabaptists for ethics over metaphysics and the resulting understanding of reconciliation

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<sup>84</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, xi.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>86</sup> Scott Holland, "When Bloch Pointed to the Cages Outside the Cathedral," in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA and Scottdale, PA: Pandora and Herald, 2000), 150.

as central to theology.<sup>87</sup>

An Anabaptist approach to interreligious encounter should take seriously an understanding of truth not as a metaphysical universal, but as always embedded in a community of faithful witness.<sup>88</sup> Anabaptists therefore, when the question of interreligious encounter arises, often refer to the ethical imperative of service to the stranger and love for the enemy as primary over any theological considerations.<sup>89</sup> Fernando Enns describes Mennonites as “less concerned about doctrinal orthodoxy and more focused on orthopraxis, [a] specific ‘undogmatic’ way of *doing* theology that is very conscious of the contextuality of any theological reflection.”<sup>90</sup>

The central theme to such an Anabaptist “orthopraxis” is, typically, reconciliation. In opposition to a Constantinian, enforced wholeness or imposed purity, however, Anabaptists emphasize the practical and at times dangerous *work* of reconciliation. Mennonite peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach describes peacemaking as “a reiterative process, accumulated and built slowly over time, and one that is easily destroyed with a single wrong move or action.”<sup>91</sup> The resonance with Moyaert’s emphasis on fragility is clear.

Above, I spoke of an appreciation of difficulty, the recognition that there is always something left to say, that interreligious translation is never finished and that no metaphysical schemes can provide easy answers. Again, this is echoed in the field of peacebuilding, and Lederach calls this “the Gift of Pessimism”.<sup>92</sup> “Pessimism suggests that the birth of constructive change develops in the womb of engaging complex historical relationships, not avoiding them. To be gauged authentic, that change can neither be ahistorical nor superficially utopian. The birth of the genuine requires the embrace of complexity and the

<sup>87</sup> The potential for connections between the adult baptism of Anabaptism and the “return to God” of Anatheism I can only mention here.

<sup>88</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “The Christian Difference: Or Surviving Postmodernism,” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA and Scottdale, PA: Pandora and Herald, 2000), 41–59.

<sup>89</sup> E.g., Gayle Gerber Koontz, “Evangelical Peace Theology and Religious Pluralism: Particularity in Perspective,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 14, no. 1 (1996): 57–85.

<sup>90</sup> Fernando Enns, “Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Peace,” in *Just Peace: Ecumenical, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Fernando Enns and Annette Mosher (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 29.

<sup>91</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, reprint edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 51.

commitment to nurture birth and growth through thick and thin.”<sup>93</sup>

As was the case with hermeneutics, peacemaking is never only one thing. As interreligious hermeneutics must be both humble and imaginative, as it must both mourn the unavailable wholeness and celebrate the promised reconciliation, so peacebuilding from a faith perspective must be imaginative of what is still to come. Lederach describes it as “a journey through difficult terrain in search of a place with great promise but where it is hardly possible to live except in short, extraordinary moments.... This is also the place where the heart of peacebuilding pounds a steady but not often perceived rhythm....”<sup>94</sup>

The connections between Anabaptist work for reconciliation as an expression of its specific faith commitment and the above field of interreligious hermeneutics can only be superficially indicated here. I hope to have shown, however, the points along which such connections could be made in future research: a distrust of patent solutions and an appreciation for the difficulty of the work, while being maintained by hope in what is yet to come.

## Conclusion

Interreligious work for reconciliation will continue to be of vital importance to faithful witness in the world. At the same time, interreligious spaces are fragile and interreligious encounters can be unsettling and uneasy. I hope to have shown that the two dominant approaches in theology of religions primarily function to reduce this fragility and reassure us in the face of a religiously plural world. I have argued that neither enables a relationship with the other *as other*. Real encounter and real relationship require an embrace of difficulty and vulnerability. I have explored insights from philosophical hermeneutics, as worked out by Moyaert and Kearney, which can help us to avoid the extremes. I hope these insights allow us to see interreligious dialogue as something that is never finished and must be waged, riskily, again and again, knowing that we do not know it all, indeed, that we cannot know it all, as the wholeness we seek is not available to us, not yet, and is the subject of an eschatological hope. Encountering the other in dialogue is neither a subsumption of difference, nor the impossibility of understanding, but “just that, dia-legein, welcoming the difference.”<sup>95</sup>

These have all been very initial sketches, and further research is necessary

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 55–56.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>95</sup> Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 358. “Dia-legein” is Greek for “having a conversation”; it is the verb corresponding to the noun “dia-logos” (conversation), from which the English “dialogue” originates.

to better understand the potential contribution of philosophical hermeneutics and postmodern philosophy of religion to the debate in theology of religions. Particularly the relation to recently popular deconstructive and phenomenological approaches such as that of John D. Caputo or Jean-Luc Marion should be explored, focusing, for example, on the aporia of unconditional hospitality in a hermeneutic of otherness, or on a comparison of the saturated phenomenon and the Derridean impossible (justice, hospitality) as it relates to pluralism's shared mystery. Further research should also focus on the development of the above in conversation with peace theologies as an Anabaptist contribution to theology of religions, of which I have only scratched the surface above.

Another necessary connection future research should make is to postcolonial theology. Hedges submits that interfaith encounter takes place within the context of empire and western (Christian) hegemony.<sup>96</sup> Seen in this context, it might be argued that by stilling the unsettling experience of religious difference, both pluralism and postliberalism stabilize, rather than transform, oppressive relations and systems. In the words of Kwok Pui-Lan: "a postcolonial theology of religious difference needs to examine how Christianity constructs difference.... The issue before us is not religious diversity, but religious difference as it is constituted and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials."<sup>97</sup>

But above all, what is necessary is practice. If I am right and interreligious dialogue is a fragile, unfinished space, then churches, institutions, and individuals cannot content themselves with official meetings between church representatives, resulting in statements of solidarity and reconciliation, however indispensable these may be. It is necessary for Christians at all levels, from professors to youth groups, from missionaries to otherwise uninvolved churchgoers, to approach people of other faiths openly, vulnerably, and personally. Christians and people of other faiths need to enter that fragile space of encounter together, maintained and encouraged by the eschatological hope of final reconciliation.

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<sup>96</sup> Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 109.

<sup>97</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 205.