The Reluctant Mennonite: Reflections on an Ambiguous Inheritance

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Abstract

Drawing on the more general relationship between religion and philosophy, this essay reflects on the extent to which the author's Mennonite past is an ambiguous inheritance that can never be completely left behind but nevertheless leaves room for a certain kind of indignation, particularly as it relates to the exclusion of women. Drawing on diverse figures from Arendt to Derrida, the author suggests that there is something to be said for moving as far as one can to the peripheries of inherited traditions when they have taken something vital from us and, further, that there is a kind of exhilarating, if painful, liberation to be experienced on the edges of such traditions.

Clarity is one of the gifts of aging. The shape of a life only comes into view the further we are from its most important moments, and as we see it in relation to all other lives. We sift through the years behind us searching for the meaning of every road taken, every relationship, decision, and event that made us who we are. Our "inheritance"—the world that was given to us—is illuminated in all its intriguing complexity: the circumstances into which we were born, the rough outlines of our characters, the situations we have little choice but to survive. These constitute the hodgepodge of what is bequeathed to each of us—the good and bad, beautiful and ugly, kind and cruel. What we do with this ambiguous inheritance shapes us as much as the inheritance itself.

I have been asked to reflect on what it means for me to be a philosopher with a Mennonite past, and on the conclusions to which such reflections lead me regarding the relationship between religion and philosophy more generally. This is an opportunity to revisit my contribution to a 2010 volume of essays by philosophers who were asked to discuss their religious

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upbringing and its effects on a life devoted to philosophical pursuits.[1] With frequent references to "flight," I wrote then about leaving the Mennonite church in my early twenties and rejecting my faith in the Christian God—a faith that had been the unshakeable core of my existence throughout my teen years. I believed this was a necessary rejection in order to escape the narrow-minded moralism and conformity of my community, with its emphasis on obedience and prohibition on thinking. It was only as a young adult, after some exposure to the world from which I had been protected, that I began to see my religious belief as fundamentally at odds with the life of the mind I sought—a life of asking questions, of thinking independently and critically, a life open to the complicated world around me.

At the time of writing that essay I was still under the illusion that we can flee our pasts with some success. I have since come to realize that absolute escape is impossible—the past always shadows the present, reminding us of where we have been and what we have inherited. If we do achieve some clarity of vision, we may learn to accept the ambiguities of our inheritance; the edges of bitterness wear away as we come to terms with any adverse effects, and perhaps even appreciate the indelible marks these effects have left on our lives. But any heritage marks more than one life. There is room for indignation; if we don't transform the world we have collectively inherited, its debilitating structures will be left intact for ensuing generations to inherit.

A Plenitude of Meaning

1) The Inner Life

I begin my reflections on the contradictions of heritage with thinking itself—more specifically, with Hannah Arendt's incisive distinction between thinking and knowing. Following Plato, she describes thinking not as a technical or theoretical exercise whose objective is to know the truth about something, but as a silent dialogue with oneself. Thinking is "the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content." [2] It does not lead to certainty but

[1] See Diane Enns, "For the Love of Paradox: Mennonite Morality and Philosophy," in *Religious Upbringing and the Costs of Freedom: Personal and Philosophical Essays*, ed. Peter Caws and Stefani Jones (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2010).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *One/Thinking, The Life of the Mind*, One-Volume Edition (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1971), 5.

to *meaning*; we think in order to give an account of someone or something we encounter, to understand what it means.[3] But meaning is slippery and can't be pinned down; it changes as we acquire hindsight or adjust our understanding after reflecting on meaning discovered by others. We think for its own sake, then, not as a means to an end, as is the case with knowing, which has thinking as its condition but always moves toward the goal of establishing something with certainty. Another way of putting this: when we think, we think about unanswerable questions, and if we couldn't do so, we would lose the capacity to ponder all the questions we can answer. Only by asking the unanswerable questions—those that give us meaning rather than certainty—do we establish ourselves as "question-asking beings." [4] Arendt insists we can all think in this sense of "pondering reflection,"[5] and, in fact, should never leave thinking to the professional philosophers or specialists."[6]

This means thinking can never be instrumental. It should never settle; it moves in and around us like the wind, shaking and loosening. We must be vigilant against the ever-present risk that thinking will solidify concepts and doctrines that are no longer open to the provocation of further thinking. As Arendt puts it, thinking must undo every morning what it has finished the night before[7]; it unfreezes frozen thoughts.[8] In this work of undoing, there is no satisfying outcome; thinking merely reminds us that all we have are perplexities, "and the best we can do with them is share them with each other."[9] This was Socrates's method; he is Arendt's exemplary thinker because he gave his life not to defend a doctrine, but "for the right to go about examining the opinions of other people, thinking about them and asking his interlocutors to do the same."[10]

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[3] Ibid., 100.

[4] Ibid., 62. An "unanswerable question," we might say, is whether God exists, a question philosophers and theologians seek to answer definitively, when the question's unanswerability leads to something much more important: the *meaning* of God, religion and faith as human experiences. Essential to this meaning is the *meaningfulness* faith may provide for an individual and community.

[5] Ibid., 171.

[6] Ibid., 167.

[7] Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 166.

[8] Arendt, *One/Thinking, The Life of the Mind*, 175.

[9] Ibid., 175.

[10] Ibid., 168.

Arendt's shift from the quest for truth and certainty—the darlings of philosophy—to the quest for understanding and meaning through persistent, restless, thinking, illuminates one of the most interesting contradictions of my childhood and youth. There was certainly a prohibition on thinking as a skeptical interrogation of the church's teachings. Questioning our faith was considered dangerous, it meant Satan was worming his way into our souls. Socrates, who calls himself a gadfly in his role of rousing others from the sleep of thoughtlessness,[11] would not have been welcome in the Mennonite church to which I belonged in the 1970s. At the same time, in my constant communication with an imagined other I learned the art of pondering reflection, of the silent dialogue with oneself that Arendt calls a conversation of "two-in-one," between me and myself.[12] I learned to leave nothing unthought, nothing unspoken to myself, even if I thought only within the narrow limits my faith afforded me.

There is no way to know whether I was born with a propensity to reflect and was drawn to the daily habit of communing with God due to my Mennonite enculturation, or whether my inner conversation with God habituated a life of reflection. Perhaps both are true. I certainly identify with the temperament William James variously calls the "sick" or "morbid-minded" soul—terms that fail to convey the high value he assigns to these temperaments. The morbid-minded are unusually sensitive, reflective persons, prone to anxiety and melancholia because they are all too aware of the dark side of life. They find it impossible to ignore suffering and are often tormented by the deep feelings it evokes. But they also recognize that suffering is a fundamental part of life through which the meaning of the world is accessed.[13] James concludes that it is not reason that gives life meaning, but rather these deep feelings, or "passions," as he calls them. They are gifts to us, and the value we give to others and to the world because of

[11] Ibid., 172.

[12] Arendt writes: "We call *consciousness* (literally, as we have seen, 'to know with myself') the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me … I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness." Arendt, *One/Thinking, The Life of the Mind*, 183.

[13] See William James, "The Sick Soul," *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature,* Centenary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 103-131.

these feelings are our gifts to the world.[14]

In my youth I began to cultivate a life abundant with meaning due not only to a strong sense of purpose—to know God's will, to please him, to be good—but also to the awareness of an inner life that has no utilitarian value, no ultimate ends. If Arendt is right—that thinking can condition us against evil—this inner life is no small thing, but a requirement for making moral and political judgments. How desperately we need this focus on meaningfulness now, in a world all too rapidly adapting to superficiality and thoughtlessness, since nothing is demanded of us except conformity and the endless consumption of information and products. "A life without thinking is quite possible" Arendt warns, "it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive"—the unthinking "are like sleepwalkers."[15]

James's discussion of deep feelings as gifts brings me to another experience of inner life, one that has been called mystical, sublime, sacred, spiritual, transcendent, ek-static, or divine. Some of these terms are overdetermined for me; I am unable to wrest them free from their religious institutional associations and as a result have an almost allergic reaction to hearing them (I will return to this point). Sublime captures the experience of being deeply moved by music, art, a breathtaking line, and of sheer awe at the spectacle of the natural world. In my youth it was an out-of-body sensation that could occur during intense moments of prayer, by myself or with others, or during choir performances when the boundaries of the self dissolved—the feeling was one of rising to the ceiling with the sound of our perfectly harmonized voices.

Some would immediately recognize this as a transcendent or mystical experience of unity with God. Freud, and others before him, called it an "oceanic feeling," a sensation of undifferentiated oneness with the universe. Freud was uneasy with the feeling, thinking it might be an expression of the death drive. But Julia Kristeva attributes his discomfort to our early dependency on mothers and the lifelong psychic impact of this dependency—an impact Freud did not sufficiently acknowledge. When we experience the oceanic feeling, the self is lost "to what surrounds and contains us," Kristeva writes, and we are momentarily returned to the security and absolute

[14] Ibid., 120.

[15] Arendt, *One/Thinking, The Life of the Mind*, 191.

satisfaction of infancy, when there are no established borders between the unborn and the maternal body. We lose ourselves in the unremembered undifferentiation of our pre-birth condition, before the advent of the individuated self and its inevitable loneliness. Both Freud and Kristeva suggest this experience supports religious belief, a belief that Kristeva claims is necessary. She means by this that human beings need a powerful sense of "unshakable certainty," "sensory joy," and self-dispossession. We need to experience something "more-than-life" that perhaps commemorates the archaic experience of containment in the maternal body.[16]

I am drawn to this description of a sublime or transcendent experience as an extraordinary sensation of unity in which the self is happily, if momentarily, lost—a sensation that is reminiscent of our original home. We might call this a silent dialogue with nature or the universe, as essential to the expansion of an inner life as the silent dialogue with oneself. It is often said that when in nature, we experience solitude rather than loneliness, surrounded by life forms to which we suddenly feel joined.

The experiences I have thus far highlighted—silent reflection and conversation with God, and the sensation of sublime oneness—contributed to a meaningful inner life for me and form an essential part of my heritage. In crucial ways these experiences have made me the philosopher I am, drawn to the most profound and often unanswerable questions of human existence; how we are to understand the nature and experience of freedom, for example, or violence, love, loneliness, and community.

2) Community Life

The outward orientation of an inner life of dialogue with oneself, a God, or nature, has an obvious parallel in community life. A theme that underlies much of my work is driven by what is perhaps one of those unanswerable questions: How to live together? In a collection of lectures with this question as its title, Roland Barthes suggests that what fascinates us most about other people, and what inspires the most envy, is groups "getting along well together," living with others harmoniously. He explores the fantastical element of living together—the fantasy of the perfect family, of perfect

[16] Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans., Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia Univ. Press), 7-8.

group togetherness.[17] Nostalgia makes it difficult to pry apart the fantasy from the actuality of community life, a nostalgia that intensifies as we lose places and communities to which we once belonged. As Zygmunt Bauman writes, our desire turns the community into a paradise lost, inflating its mythic proportions.[18] This is the most stubbornly ambiguous dimension of my heritage, for in a tightly-bound community we find the best and worst that human beings have to offer one another in a concentrated form—in sum, we find the same love and violence we find elsewhere, but in the faith community the relation between these is often obscured and disavowed. The paradise we long for can become a prison, as is well known by the women of Manitoba Colony in Bolivia where, what are referred to as the "ghost rapes," occurred in the early 2000s.[19]

We are caught in a dilemma that appears irresolvable—we long for the security community offers us but also crave freedom from it. For the privilege of being in a community, we may lose the individual freedom to be the authors of our own lives. For the privilege of autonomy, we may lose the security of living among a trusted group of people who will care for us.[20] These desires are in tension, so we must find a way to live that fully satisfies neither, recognizing that both ideals are illusory: we are never the absolute authors of our lives, and we are never absolutely safe and secure. Some will decide a contingent security is better than a contingent independence; others—myself included—will choose a contingent independence.[21]

Here too we must think of meaningfulness, for it is a rare person who can conceive of a meaningful life without trust in others, or the care and friendship social life ideally provides. The intensity of Mennonite

[17] Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013), 5.
[18] Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001), 3.
[19] See "Bolivian Mennonites jailed for serial rapes," BBC News, August 26, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-14688458; Andres Schipani, "'The work of the devil,': crime in a remote religious community," *Guardian*, September 10, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/10/mennonites-rape-bolivia; Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, "The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia," *Vice*, December 22, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/4w7gqj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8.
[20] Diane Enns, *Thinking Through Loneliness* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2022), 95.
[21] Ibid., 96.

community life as I knew it from the 1960s to the early 1980s demonstrated an orientation toward others now thrown into stark relief by our pandemic-influenced distortion of freedom, perceived as *my right not to consider you*. Never have we faced more the need for care and civility from others. At the same time, I have to ask who was doing most of the care work in my Mennonite community—unpaid, often unrecognized, and certainly undervalued. I might also ask who was intentionally excluded from care and trust and cast out of the fold, generally at the moment they needed that care and trust the most? These questions can, and should, still be asked.[22]

The unique experience of a rather intense collective life founded on shared historical trauma as much as ethnicity and faith has also made me the philosopher I am—still in need of vigilance against dogma and the certainty of my own opinions, wary of group-think, fearful of ideologues. Arendt once again provides us with provocative insights. We can bind with others through collective action rather than through common beliefs or ethnic origins, maintain our focus on the human affairs that affect us all, and build and sustain the world we have in common. When solidarity is founded on what we are doing rather than on what we are, the borders around a community become porous, and belonging is based on a shared desire for a better future rather than a shared past.

Inheriting Traditions

1) Philosophy

One legacy of my Mennonite heritage is thus a plenitude of meaning drawn from a rich inner life of reflection and a life devoted to community. I would like to shift now to the broader implications of inheriting traditions, and with them, the institutions, norms and beliefs we did not choose, but which, as Jacques Derrida claims, choose us. He makes this remark in a discussion of his inheritance of the Western philosophical tradition, a heritage he loves but challenges with equal admiration and suspicion, always wary of the dangers of nostalgia.

Derrida tells us that inheritance contains within it a contradictory double injunction: to leave the past behind and at the same time preserve it.

[22] Mennonite churches are still divided on the question of including LGBTQ members, for example.

In fact, he argues it is our responsibility "to receive what is larger and older and more powerful and more durable" than we are, but also "to choose, to prefer, to sacrifice, to exclude, to let go and leave behind."[23] He insists that the traditions we are both preserving and leaving—whether of language, culture or philosophy—contain the conceptual tools necessary to continually reinterpret and amend them. If philosophy at its origins is Greek—as he affirms—it is also "a constant movement of liberation" and "*universalization.*" [24] Philosophy recognizes yet surpasses "its own ethnocentric or geographic limit" and it does this without "necessarily betraying" that limit.[25] We could draw an analogy with human rights, which have always been what Derrida calls "perfectible"; the idea of right embedded in the project of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enables us to challenge the limits of our rights heritage.[26] These are limits well known to anyone who does not have "the right to have rights," to use Arendt's astute formulation, including the women and slaves left out of our oldest rights documents, and the stateless, who continue to prove the lie of so-called "inalienable" rights.

Nevertheless, Derrida believes we can use the tools bequeathed to us by a heritage to challenge the very limits of that heritage.[27] The point is not to kill it off; we must choose, and choose again, to keep our inheritance alive, if transformed.[28] This reiterates my earlier point: we cannot abandon or flee the past, its shadow we cannot shake off; we neither leave the past nor stay within it in any absolute sense. Derrida might be right—we can still fight to uphold the ideal of rights and its basic condition of respect for all human life. What makes this a herculean task is the fundamental exclusion—I will call it a trauma—at the origin of the attempt to implement this ideal.

Remaining for a moment in the context of philosophy, I want to point out that it is all well and good for Derrida to value the preservation of a heritage, however transformed, for he comes by his inheritance honestly. Philosophy is his birthright; he inherits it from a long line of learned men

[23] Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow… A Dialogue,* trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004), 5.
[24] Ibid., 18.
[25] Ibid., 19.
[26] Ibid., 19.
[27] Ibid., 19.
[28] Ibid., 3.

stretching back to Plato. There is no ambiguity in his entitlement to this inheritance, despite his outsider status as an Algerian Sephardic Jew—a "very Arab Jew" as he puts it, an identity that caused his expulsion from school in 1942 under the officially sanctioned anti-Semitism of the Vichy administration in Algeria.[29] Still, within a few decades, Derrida became an internationally renowned philosopher. If we use Arendt's formulation about the condition of rights as an analogy, we might say that Derrida has the right to have rights. He is a proper citizen of the territory that is Western philosophy—he has the right to interrogate this tradition, and to wield its tools.

There is no trauma at the site of his inheritance that might make him want to abandon it, no trauma of alienation or nonbelonging—of having the wrong body within a community of men. Derrida speaks with supreme confidence that philosophy is Greek (albeit universalizable)—audaciously suggesting that other intellectual traditions are something else. In a 2005 documentary about his life and work he says with as much audacity that philosophy is male. When asked which philosopher he would have liked to have been his mother (an admittedly insipid question), Derrida launches into a brief explanation for why his philosophical mother would actually have to be his granddaughter. First, he notes that since historically "the figure of the philosopher is … always a masculine figure," "a philosopher is a Father, not a Mother." This is one of the reasons he embarked on his project of deconstructing the tradition, Derrida claims, transforming rather than abandoning his heritage. But this means that the woman philosopher is still to come; she can only arrive after deconstruction—she must be Derrida's inheritor, and consequently his offspring, his own granddaughter.[30]

Derrida's response illuminates the very heart of the problem for me, related to the trauma to which I have alluded, and captured in his concluding comment: "a thinking mother—it's what I both love and try to give birth to."[31] Here is yet another display of what Virginia Woolf calls the arrogant posture

[29] Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Paraphrases," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 58.

[30] Kirby Dick, Jacques Derrida, Amy Ziering Kofman et al., *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 97.

[31] Ibid., 97.

of the masculine "I"—that "straight dark bar," as she famously describes it in *A Room of One's Own*, in whose shadows we find the women.[32] In this instance the philosopher brings the mother into being after her historical disavowal; a reiteration of the philosopher's appropriation of birth going back to Socrates's identification as a midwife. Derrida's appropriation is doubled, for he not only plays the benevolent life-giving mother, but gives birth to one who gives birth. He is the mother of all thinking mothers.

At the origin of philosophy, we thus find a fundamental theft. It is admirable that Derrida seeks to transform a tradition that prevented women from the right to a philosophical inheritance, but in congratulating himself on being the mother of women thinkers, he merely repeats the theft and erasure. Furthermore, and ironically, he seems oblivious to this repetition despite his own claim to outsider status. Why not dissemble the "I," the straight dark bar that prevents women from being seen and heard, and interrupt that line of authority? I confess I am not sure this is possible, given the belief that intellectual authority is male has lasted more than two millennia.

What do we abandon and what do we save? What is our responsibility to preserve from an immensely powerful canonical tradition whose male authors actively, intentionally ignored and excluded women's ideas, or passed them off as their own? So powerful that still today philosophy students may complete their degrees without ever having been required to read a woman's work. And when they do, they may not take it seriously: de Beauvoir is a mere footnote to Sartre; Arendt, to Heidegger; Stein, to Husserl, and on and on. What right do I have to belong to philosophy? A reader might reasonably protest that we find women philosophers throughout history. Though they were not recognized as philosophers in the past we are recovering their work, incorporating them into our courses, and adding them to our library shelves. Certainly, this is an exciting recent development in academic philosophy.

Yet with all of these changes, we still find a universal deference to male intellectual authority and expertise. In philosophy departments everywhere this translates into overly-confident male students and insecure female students, women faculty who find it difficult to shed a stubborn inferiority complex, or what we often refer to as an "imposter syndrome," and male

[32] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own: Three Guineas*, ed. Michèle Barrett (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 89.

faculty who consciously or unconsciously balk at making room for thinking women, or coming to terms with an entitlement they did not realize they had. All of these groups have simply accepted their respective inheritances.

Derrida is right to argue against killing the traditions we inherit, for they are not monolithic, homogeneous entities. We find intellectual treasures in even the most misogynist philosophers of the past. But it is not yet clear how women are to choose and preserve a tradition founded on their exclusion, a tradition that continues to uphold the belief that intellectual, public authority has a male face. I do not want to be the one to raise these issues. I did not ask for this struggle. I want to live in a world in which the life of the mind is not gendered. Yet this is *my* philosophical inheritance.

2) Religion

The masculine lineage of philosophy is mirrored in the masculine lineage of Christianity; the power of one is the power of the other. I knew no one who challenged the authority of men in my Mennonite community—from God the supreme Father, to all the church fathers, to my own father. The women were not behind the pulpit, but running the Sunday School, leading the children's choirs, and cooking Christmas turkey suppers for the congregation in the church kitchen. There were no women disciples, there was only Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom I describe in a previous work as "mute, docile, adoring, a model of passivity"; and there were the prostitutes to whom Jesus extended mercy and compassion, but who certainly had no voice, no authority.[33] Even the Catholic version of Mary, though revered, is not divine in her own right. As Elaine Pagels points out, "if she is 'mother of God,' she is not 'God the Mother' on an equal footing with God the Father."[34] Pagels goes on to remark that religious rhetoric often assumes that men constitute "the legitimate body of the community," while women are only allowed to participate "insofar as their own identity is denied and assimilated to that of the men."[35] We could say the same of philosophy, since reason

[33] Diane Enns, *Love in the Dark: Philosophy By Another Name* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2016), 16.

[34] Elaine H. Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 293.

[35] Ibid., 294.

and contemplation are forever sutured to the mind of man. Lea Melandri captures this perfectly when she says woman is a body "that simply stands next to the words of men."[36]

The Christian tradition is also being revised, thanks to the work of feminist theologians and religious scholars who intervene in the often seamless gendered narrative of biblical interpretation. Had I read Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza or Rosemary Radford Ruether and sampled the heresies of the gnostic gospels while still a Christian, the effect might have been revolutionary (the question remains: would I have been able to hear them?). Exciting as these developments are, I wonder if they will be heard as anything more than a whisper in the dull roar of church doctrine. It may be that I am too impatient in waiting for that revolutionary effect.

I have alluded to an original theft, a trauma. This is the only way I have found to articulate the part of my inheritance that has caused irreparable harm—the theft of a voice, desire, autonomy, power in its positive sense of being empowered to speak and act, to rise to one's full potential. It is all very simple—inculcate in half the population a desire to please, and the needs of the other half are always met; teach love as sacrifice, and there is no need to love in return, even violence will be forgiven. Suture love to the authority of fathers, *the* Father and all his ardent subordinates, and we become unable to distinguish between love and submission; indeed, we learn to love those who can easily abuse their authority over us, *and we may not even see it for what it is*. We learn the art of deference to men, a deference that dogs us our entire lives because we have learned it so well at such an impressionable age. When they chastise, belittle, or hate us—our gods, fathers, lovers, sons—we chastise, belittle, and hate ourselves too.

This is the deep injury of an effacement justified by the lack of entitlement to an inheritance. I still feel its effects in a kind of claustrophobic reaction to certain words and phrases: sacred, spiritual, divine, prayer, God the Father, our Lord and Saviour. Or those names we hear over and over again: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. I know this is not a fair or reasonable response to terms and names that constitute valuable traditions of thought and experience and are meaningful to many for this

[36] Lea Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilization*, trans. Antonio Calcagno (New York: SUNY Press, 2019), xi.

reason, but the associations are too strong for me. I hear these references to my inherited traditions and feel the walls closing in.

If we want to transform our traditions without abandoning them, we must examine the psychic and emotional effects of being controlled by them. No one should have privileged access either to divine authority or to the canonical authority of philosophy. It is this access, this entitlement, that renders these traditions highly effective and efficient instruments of patriarchal control. There is a bigger picture here, beyond the personal repercussions of one's childhood. The fact is, both Western philosophy and Christianity have been instrumental in the control of women throughout their very long histories.

Once we have had an ideological conditioning, are we ever the same again? Where is the line between faith and ideology, and how do we guard against crossing this line? I am alluding to dangers that Richard Kearney seeks to mitigate in his discussion of "anatheism." He uses this term to describe a "movement" or "way" between a dogmatic theism and a dogmatic atheism, both of which lead to pernicious outcomes. Much like Derrida, Kearney seeks to transform a tradition that is rife with the settlement of thinking into frozen concepts and doctrines. He engages in the work of leaving and preserving: a sovereign, omnipotent, dogmatic God is left behind, while an encounter with a radical other is preserved—a "Stranger" in Kearney's formulation. Alterity intervenes in any closure—Kearney reveals a vital openness or hospitality to the unknown and the uncertain. He maintains we can choose whether or not to call this other or stranger "God,"[37] yet everywhere refers to anatheism as "a return to God after leaving God." The God we return to is a God of interconfessional hospitality, a non-sovereign or "postdogmatic God."[38] This is an admirable deconstructive project motivated by palpable outrage and weariness over the violent excesses of religion—its "murderous potential" as Kearney describes it—and optimistic belief in a different experience of faith. But the *return to God* after God sounds suspiciously like pouring old wine into new wineskins. I remain doubtful that any transformative project can be achieved if we persist in naming a divine entity; whether male or female,

[37] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 7.
[38] Ibid., 52.

the temptation to anthropomorphize is too great. As soon as we name God, or religious experience more generally, institutions spring into life, bringing with them moralism, doctrine, orthodoxy, and criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of their members.[39]

A Reluctant Conclusion

To conclude (hesitantly, for I have raised more questions than answers), I wonder if it is enough to have the experiences with which I began—the silent dialogue with oneself or with nature (the Stranger if we prefer Kearney's term)—without naming or containing them, without calling the sublime a *return* to God. At most we can admit that there are dimensions to life that we cannot know or understand—they are gifts of wonder. If we allow these gifts into philosophy, we might privilege thinking over knowing, and give up our relentless reinforcement of the philosopher as father. If we allow them into religious experience, we might avoid dogma and moralism, and eliminate deference to men in the name of deference to a male God.

Our philosophical and religious institutions and traditions, however, provide us with somewhere to belong. In a 2007 lecture entitled "The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite," Sandra Birdsell discusses her writing in relation to a mixed Métis and Mennonite heritage. Regardless of her insider-outsider status, she describes feeling a sense of "kinship" when she finds herself among Mennonites, a sense of being "sheltered" at the mention of those familiar names, and admiration for the "mostly positive" Mennonite traits that have supported her throughout a sometimes "difficult, precarious, and often lonely life."[40] Some of these sentiments resonate. I too feel grateful for learning the values of generosity, kindness, and responsibility for one's community—and when I hear a familiar Mennonite name I certainly feel as though we must be related. But when Birdsell concludes her reflections by

[39] I am aware that there is a vast body of literature dealing with the question of naming God and with concerns over the institutional dimension of religion, in which Richard Kearney is only one voice. But such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper and my expertise. I merely wish to express my concern with the risk of institutionalizing spiritual experience. Others may be willing to take this risk in order to benefit from the positive attributes of religious institutions.

[40] Sandra Birdsell, "The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite," 2007 Bechtel Lectures, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 26, no. 1 (2008): 8-40, 22, 40.

declaring she would "gladly" carry a Mennonite version of the identity card that attests to her Métis heritage, we part company. Perhaps there are degrees of reluctance.

An inheritance cannot be withdrawn, and it would be impossible to abandon our traditions in any absolute, definitive sense—but also unwise to make the attempt. We live and move with our pasts as though they were our limbs and ligaments. There is something to be said, however, for moving as far as one can to the peripheries of our inherited traditions when they have taken something vital from us. This is the only option for some of us; we look in from the edge, from a self-imposed exile. But from this vantage point we can experience an exhilarating, if sometimes painful, liberation.

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