

God's Alterity and the Particularity of Christ

Richard Kearney, David Bentley Hart, and the Conditions for Doing Theology in a Postmodern Setting

BJÖRN VIKSTRÖM & ELLI BARSNES

Björn Vikström is Professor of Systematic Theology at Åbo Akademi University.

Elli Barsnes is a doctoral student in Systematic Theology at Åbo Akademi University.

bjorn.vikstrom@abo.fi – elli.barsnes@abo.fi

Introduction

Alister McGrath expresses a perpetual theological dilemma: “Christian doctrine exists under constraints similar to those affecting poetry: it is obliged to express in historical forms, in words, those things which by their very nature defy reduction to these forms.”¹ The challenge is to combine a respect for God’s unfathomable alterity with the ambition to preserve the possibility of rational argumentation and critical communication between those who represent different perspectives or worldviews.

In a postmodern intellectual landscape (or late modern, if one prefers Charles Taylor’s expression),² theologians are required to take into consideration not only the existence of diverse Christian traditions, but also a wide spectrum of other religious and non-religious perspectives. The Finnish philosopher of religion Olli-Pekka Vainio expresses these conditions for doing theology in the contemporary world as a three-part endeavour. This consists of a diachronic loyalty to one’s own tradition, a synchronic openness to contemporary Christian and non-Christian identities, and, thirdly, the task

1. Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism*, Oxford 1990, 69.

2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA 2007.

to relate these two perspectives to each other by using the Christ event as a normative and authoritative criterion.³

Although Vainio underscores the importance of openness towards other worldviews in the contemporary world, his strong focus on the particular nature of the Christ event seems to create barriers more than open ways for dialogue. This could in our opinion be avoided if the particularity of the Christian story is balanced by a simultaneous humble awareness of the human incapability to grasp God's being in its fullness. We therefore intend to investigate how theologians working in a postmodern pluralistic environment balance between the particularity of the Christ event and various comprehensions of God's unfathomability, when they negotiate between their diachronic and synchronic loyalties.

As a consequence of this task, we also strive to contribute to the discussion regarding the relation between rationality and faith in contemporary theology. According to Vainio, the notions "particularism" and "fideism" are often used in a vague and pejorative sense. The crucial point in a postmodern setting, according to Vainio, is what kind of particularism or fideism is elaborated, and whether these positions leave room for discussions with outsiders or not: "This raises the question: can Christians negotiate with the other (meaning both other Christian and non-Christian) stories and if so, how?"⁴

The aim of our article is therefore to contribute to the understanding of the conditions for doing theology in postmodernity (or late modernity). The field opened by these questions is, however, so vast that our scope has to be a more narrow one. Our contribution is limited to an investigation of how two prominent and influential scholars have elaborated on these issues, namely the Irish philosopher of religion Richard Kearney, of Roman Catholic origin, and the North American Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart.

We find the contributions of Kearney and Hart relevant for our elaboration because they explicitly strive to relate their own ecclesiastical traditions critically and constructively to the challenges raised by the multicultural and pluralistic society of today. Both Kearney and Hart criticize various traits in modern and postmodern epistemologies, but they phrase their critique in different ways. Kearney aspires to find a balance between a dogmatically fixed metaphysical God and a relativism that denies the existence of anything transcendental at all.⁵ Hart, on the other hand, argues that Christian

3. Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Beyond Fideism: Negotiable Religious Identities*, Farnham 2010, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315569185>, 136.

4. Vainio, *Beyond Fideism*, 136.

5. Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Bloomington, IN

faith is the only viable option to nihilism, and he bases this conviction on his studies of Christian metaphysics and transcendence.⁶ They both underscore the importance of the aesthetical, narrative, and imaginative dimensions of the Christian tradition, and they represent the “faith seeking understanding” tradition in theology, while they carefully try to avoid falling into irrationality.

The structure of the article is the following: After this introduction, we aim to define our use of the notion “postmodern” and engage in a critical discussion with Olli-Pekka Vainio. Our goal is to create an analytical tool for our interpretations of the positions of Richard Kearney and David Bentley Hart, which are the scopes of Parts 3 and 4. In line with Vainio’s argumentation, we put emphasis on how they relate diachronically to their own tradition and synchronically to other stories in the current world. Furthermore, we investigate how they in these negotiations relate the particularity of the Christ event to the aspiration to defend the unfathomable nature of God. In addition, we assess whether there are fideistic traits in their thinking, and if so, what kind of fideism they represent. In the final part, we summarize our findings and discuss their relevance for the ongoing discussion regarding the conditions for doing theology in a postmodern setting.

Postmodern Theology, Particularism, and Fideism

Postmodern theology is an umbrella term for a wide variety of theologians influenced by philosophical positions such as phenomenology, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, but, paradoxically, also by the theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968). Even though we here use the notion postmodernity, we want to underscore, together with Charles Taylor (and, among others, Kearney and Hart), that there remain many elements from modernity in the postmodern epistemologies.

Postmodern theologians may defend very different, even conflicting positions, but a uniting feature is a critique against the idea of a universal rational foundation for epistemology, as well as a rejection of the idea of a sovereign subject.⁷ The ideal of objectivity is abandoned, because our understanding of ourselves and the surrounding world is profoundly conditioned by our language(s), understood in a broad sense as the whole cultural framework. History is never simply a depiction of “what actually happened”. As

2001, 4–5.

6. David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics*, Grand Rapids, MI 2017, 24–26.

7. Ola Sigurdson & Jayne Svenungsson, “‘En gåtfull spegelbild’: Introduktion till postmodern teologi”, in Ola Sigurdson & Jayne Svenungsson (eds.), *Postmodern teologi: En introduktion*, Stockholm 2016, 13–14.

a consequence, questions of power and authority become essential: whose truth is acknowledged, and whose interests are ignored?⁸

Postmodern epistemology has appealed to many theologians, who have found that the scientific ideals of modernity are not able to grasp the meaning of religious faith. The rejection of a solid foundation for knowledge and morality has, however, aroused charges against postmodern thinking for being relativistic and even nihilistic.⁹ Therefore, postmodern theologians are required to show on what conditions communication and understanding between representatives of different traditions is possible, and whether it is possible to critically evaluate individual contributions.

Olli-Pekka Vainio discusses the conditions for doing theology in a pluralistic society after the postmodern turn. His focus is on the double challenge of, on the one hand, preserving the Christian identity without falling into an irrational version of fideism, and, on the other hand, upholding the possibility of communication between representatives of different theological traditions, without ending up in relativism. Vainio distinguishes between four typical positions in postmodern theology: traditionalism, descriptionism, revisionism, and correlationism. For our investigation, it is not necessary to analyze his categorization in detail, but we note that the two first mentioned categories according to Vainio underscore the diachronic loyalty to tradition, while the other two put more emphasis on the synchronic relation to current ideologies and philosophies, as well as to political challenges in the social context.¹⁰ In our analysis of Kearney and Hart, we aim to evaluate how they, in their theological thinking, negotiate between these diachronic and synchronic loyalties, and what kind of function they in these negotiations assign both to the Christ event and to the unfathomable nature of God.

Our second task is to clarify how Kearney and Hart manage to uphold a rational communication with those who represent other perspectives, without losing the particularity of the Christ event. This task is motivated by an interest in evaluating Vainio's claim that all Christian theology is particularistic and even fideistic in some sense. According to Vainio, this is not only a postmodern condition, but also an essential element of Christianity. Christian faith has its roots in specific events that occurred in a particular historical and cultural setting.

From an epistemological point of view, particularity is located between universalism and subjectivism. According to a particularist, there are no

8. Sigurdson & Svenungsson, "En gåtfull spegelbild", 10–12.

9. Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, New York 2010, 133.

10. Vainio, *Beyond Fideism*, 82–83, 125–126.

universal criteria for assessing truth claims. This does not necessarily imply a denial of the existence of a common reality, only that there are no universally applicable means for proving what is true and what is not.¹¹ Fideism can be regarded as a specific case of particularity, where religious faith, often in combination with adherence to a certain community united by this faith, is considered a requirement for understanding and accepting the truth claims of that particular community or tradition.

Vainio claims that almost no one is a *conceptual fideist*, because this would imply an irrational position, denying all possibilities for any communication with outsiders. He distinguishes between two other types of fideism: A *conformist fideist* denies the possibility of objectively proving a religious statement to be true even inside a certain community, and considers religious communities as the consequence of a pragmatic need to find support for our beliefs in a community of likeminded. A *communicative fideist*, on the other hand, claims that religious beliefs and practices can be critically discussed and evaluated in public: the theological discourse needs to be coherent and follow the rules of logic, the beliefs should not require a dismissal of conceptions we normally hold to be true, and they are not immune to criticism.¹²

With the help of the analytical tool and the conceptual distinctions developed in this section, we now proceed to identifying, analyzing, and comparing the positions and arguments of Kearney and Hart.

Richard Kearney – God as the Stranger amidst Us

Philosopher Richard Kearney is a prominent scholar of continental philosophy, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstructivism. He has published books and articles on topics such as imagination, interpretation, stories, and hospitality. He has also shown a great interest in Irish culture and history.

The Relation to the Christian Tradition(s)

Kearney is careful to underscore that he is a philosopher, not a theologian. Yet, he has elaborated on several central theological issues, building on his Roman-Catholic identity, but conscious of not limiting himself to a certain doctrinal tradition. He considers himself “a guest or visitor to theology”, whose aim is to reflect philosophically on theological issues.¹³ Therefore, we,

11. Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Amsterdam 2011, 161–167.

12. Vainio, *Beyond Fideism*, 63–64.

13. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 5–6; Richard Kearney, “In Guise of a Response”, in Richard Kearney & Jens Zimmermann (eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates*

together with many of Kearney's commentators, claim that he can be treated as a theological thinker.¹⁴

Kearney criticizes premodern theology for its focus on dogmatism and metaphysical, "onto-theological", conceptions of God. He is sharply opposed to the search for rational proofs of God's existence or for logical explanations to the enigma of theodicy. In *The God Who May Be* (2001), Kearney is looking for answers to the question: "what kind of God comes after metaphysics?"¹⁵ According to Kearney, God is not a being, but, as Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) already expressed it, God is potentiality: God is coming, or actually returning, again and again. Through the help of God, potentialities are realized and impossibilities are made possible.

In his more recent book, *Anatheism* (2010), Kearney criticizes likewise the notions of an omniscient and omnipotent God, and to this extent he affirms the atheistic critique of religion. According to Kearney, however, this criticism does not go far enough, by which he refers to a new affirmation of God and faith beyond this critique. He describes this affirmation as a "recovery of the sacramental in the lived world".¹⁶ Anatheism is an attempt to return to "God after God", to restore what was lost by Western metaphysics. This requires an inclusion of both theism and atheism, without abolishing the tension between them.¹⁷

Kearney's abandonment of classical metaphysics has raised considerable critique, not least among Roman Catholic theologians.¹⁸ His counterclaim is to underscore the kenotic pattern of Christianity: we have to be ready to lose God in order to rediscover God – as a gift. The omnipotent and all-knowing Father needs to be overcome as an idol, but recovered as a symbol.¹⁹

God, New York 2016, 244–245.

14. Yolande Steenkamp, "Of Poetics and Possibility: Richard Kearney's Post-Metaphysical God", *HTS Theological Studies* 73 (2017), 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4689>.

15. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2.

16. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 73.

17. Richard Kearney, "God after God: An Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God", in Richard Kearney & Jens Zimmermann (eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, New York 2016, 6–9.

18. Michael Barber, "Richard Kearney's *Anatheism* and the Religious and Theoretical Provinces of Meaning", *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 76 (2020), 973–1008, https://doi.org/10.17990/RPF/2020_76_2_0973.

19. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 22–23; Kearney, "God after God", 7, 17. Kearney's kenotic theology has close affinities with Gianni Vattimo's (1936–2023) so-called "weak thinking". Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, New York 2002, <https://doi.org/10.7312/vatt10628>.

The Relation to Other Stories in the Current World

One of Kearney's starting points is that there are many narratives in a pluralistic culture, but he opposes the postmodernist claim that it is impossible to judge between these narratives. On the one hand, he criticizes the destructive atheistic critique developed by the New Atheists, based on a positivist understanding of knowledge.²⁰ On the other hand, Kearney criticizes representatives of what he calls "bad" postmodernity for relativism, in some cases even for nihilism, and for a "fragmentarization" of reality.²¹ Even if there are no absolute, immutable truths, we still should strive for truth.

Kearney also criticizes representatives of "bad postmodernity" for cutting the ties between words and reality, because this destroys the interplay between hermeneutics and ethics. Imagination has a crucial role in Kearney's ethics through its capacity to create future possibilities, transmit testimonies and memories, and enable emphatic receptivity.²²

Monotheism runs the risk of leading to exclusivism and violence, but it can also encourage ecumenical and interreligious hospitality: we are all seeking the same God. There are according to Kearney common elements in the different religions, especially when they acknowledge and promote mystical encounters with a radical Stranger called God. Anatheism is interreligious, claims Kearney, but this does not mean that it would be possible to create some kind of a critically purified "super-religion" encompassing all existing religions. Interconfessional dialogues, or "transreligious hospitality", does not eliminate differences regarding confessions and ritual practices, but welcomes them: the alterity of the other needs to be respected.²³ Interreligious encounters should, however, not be romanticized; the choice of hospitality over hostility remains a wager, a risk without warranties.

The Negotiations Regarding Loyalty to Tradition and to the Contemporary World

In his anatheistic comprehension of God, Kearney puts a lot more emphasis on the unfathomability of God than on the particularity of the Christ event. He has been criticized for not giving due weight to the cross and the particular suffering of Christ.²⁴ This does not mean, however, that he dismisses the founding stories of Christianity. Rather, he wants to overcome their particularity by extending their influence to the everyday world of today. The incarnation, God's Word made flesh, is for Kearney above all a pattern that

20. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 16, 39.

21. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 133.

22. Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-Modern*, New York 1998, 225–226, 236.

23. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 14, 19, 49; Kearney, "In Guise of a Response", 244.

24. Steenkamp, "Of Poetics and Possibility".

is repeated again and again. He interprets incarnation as a self-emptying kenosis; God empowers human beings by giving away his power.

Like Karl Barth, Kearney expresses the need to listen to a word of which one is neither source nor master, but contrary to Barth, Kearney does not want to emphasize the abyss separating God and human beings. Truth – as well as God – is made manifest, albeit in hidden and ambiguous ways, in the everyday encounters with friends and strangers, and through symbols, stories, and pieces of art. Therefore, Kearney interprets texts, images, films, and art with the ambition to be confronted with both the human and the divine “Other”.²⁵

Kearney explicitly aspires to combine the unfathomability and the communicability of God. In his critique of certain elements in postmodern theology, Kearney rejects the kind of mystical or negative theology that considers God as so far above human comprehension “that no hermeneutics of interpreting, imaging, symbolizing, or narrativizing is really acceptable”.²⁶ On the other hand, Kearney also distances himself from the idea that God is so beneath the experiences reachable through symbolic and imaginary expressions that God becomes identical with the abysmal, the monstrous, or the sublime. With the help of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), Kearney attempts to liberate religious language from these dead-ends through an “endeavor to say something (however hesitant and provisional) about the unsayable”.²⁷ Christian truth, like all truth, is according to Kearney subject to a hermeneutic polysemy of expression and interpretation. This invites to a rich plurality of readings, not to a single and final truth.

Fideism – or What is Christian Faith?

Kearney rejects fideism as an epistemological position: “I am no advocate of blind irrationalism and fideism.”²⁸ He also rejects Christian triumphalism in relation to other faiths, and he defends the possibility to learn from representatives of other traditions. The defense of the unfathomable nature of God is a central element in his thinking, as it makes these kinds of interreligious dialogues possible. But what happens to the particularity of the Christian faith?

Faith is for Kearney a foundational and uncontrollable encounter with God as the Other, the Stranger, as well as encounters with human strangers. Since not every stranger we meet is the hidden manifestation of God, we

25. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 75, 85–87, 166–167.

26. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 7.

27. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 7.

28. Kearney, “God after God”, 17.

need to practice discernment. This marks, according to Kearney, the difference between blind faith and responsible acting in faith. Kearney agrees with radical postmodern theologians like John D. Caputo that we have no access to absolute knowledge in ethical matters, but he strongly underscores that regardless of this, “we have a duty to decide between what is better and what is worse”.²⁹ He describes “genuine” faith as an interpretation, even “an art of endless hermeneutics”, leading to application in loving and caring actions in our everyday life.³⁰

Here a couple of critical questions arise: Has Kearney reduced religious experience to ethics,³¹ and does his strong emphasis on human action not place a too heavy burden on individual humans? Kearney’s response to this challenge is that the responsibility for the coming of the Kingdom is shared between God and humanity:

Is such a thing possible? Not for us alone. But it is not impossible for God – if we help God to become God. How? By opening ourselves to the “loving possible”, by acting each moment to make the impossible that bit more possible.³²

David Bentley Hart – the Christian Interruption

David Bentley Hart is an American Orthodox theologian, author, and cultural critic. He has written several books and essays on various topics from philosophy to baseball and is known for his essayistic and sharp-edged style. Hart regards theological aesthetics to be the core of all theology and considers beauty as a “measure of what theology may call true”.³³ Hart has also made an own translation of the New Testament and written several works of fiction.

The Relation to the Christian Tradition(s)

Even though being an Orthodox theologian, Hart freely uses Western sources for his theological work, whilst emphasizing that it is from the Eastern

29. Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 229. See also John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington, IN 1987, 239–240, 260; John D. Caputo, “Where Is Richard Kearney Coming From? Hospitality, Atheism, and Ana-Deconstruction”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47 (2021), 551–569, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537211021929>.

30. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 11, 14; Kearney, “God after God”, 9, 11.

31. Barber, “Richard Kearney’s *Anatheism*”.

32. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 111.

33. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, Grand Rapids, MI 2003, 3.

Church that his argumentation derives its logic.³⁴ According to Hart, ancient philosophy saw everything that is as a “structure of sacrifice” and based its metaphysics on the idea of the reality as a battleground where different powers and gods compete against each other.³⁵ Humans were living in a closed, finite world where they were required to sacrifice to the gods in order to survive.³⁶

Hart states that the Christian story entered the world as a “contrary history” and showed the world a new way of thinking and living.³⁷ The concrete, particular man born in history, the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, came to end the economy of sacrifices and showed the emptiness of the idea of being’s necessity, an idea that Hart finds symptomatic for both pre- and post-Christian nihilistic philosophies. If being would be necessary, that is, a finite, closed system where the powers of chaos and order endlessly seek balance, then, Hart argues, being would ultimately show itself as violence. Without the transcendental disruption of Christ, the “revolution of Christianity”, there would be no way out of this empty totality.³⁸

The myth of necessity was therefore, according to Hart, challenged by the understanding of being as a gift, that is, a contingent reality wanted and created by God. Theology interrupted the history of nihilism and showed that because the world is an over-pour of God’s love, a “needless ornament”, the reality is ultimately based on harmony, freedom, and peace.³⁹

The Relation to Other Stories in the Current World

Because Christianity caused the death of the ancient myths and gods, it also sowed the seeds of modern nihilism.⁴⁰ Whereas Hart criticizes premodernity for its belief in closed systems of sacrifice, he criticizes modernity for its belief in “disinterested rationality”.⁴¹ Modern philosophies built their narratives around the belief that rationality is the only hope for humankind and the transcendental was forgotten. In a post-Christian culture, Hart argues, modern people have been left with only two serious alternatives: Christianity or a belief in the nothingness of everything.⁴²

34. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 29–30.

35. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 129.

36. David Bentley Hart, “Christ and Nothing”, *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing>, accessed 2024-10-31.

37. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 127.

38. Lauri Kemppainen, “David Bentley Hartin retorinen rauhan ontologia”, *Niin & Näin* 3 (2013), 22.

39. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 127–128, 291.

40. Hart, “Christ and Nothing”.

41. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 3.

42. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 132–133; Hart, “Christ and Nothing”.

Like Kearney, Hart extends his critique of modernism to postmodernism. Hart endorses postmodernism for its interest in different narratives and its skepticism towards universal truths of reason, but at the same time criticizes it for not being consistent enough and properly breaking away from modernism. He states that postmodernism, rather than being a reaction to modernism, is its culmination.⁴³ The postmodern story of no truths has become the new truth, the meta-metanarrative, replacing modernism's grand narrative.

More specifically, Hart criticizes postmodernism for what he calls its "metaphysics of violence". He borrows the terminology and the initial idea from John Milbank and develops his critique further.⁴⁴ Hart argues that central for this metaphysics, found hidden in the narratives of Western philosophies, is its emphasis on categories such as chaos, abstraction, and will, and the above-presented thought of being's necessity. Hart contrasts this story of continental Western philosophies with what he sees as the Christian story, the ontology of peace, characterized by analogy and gift, and the preference of rhetoric over dialectics.

In one of his newest books, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, Hart further develops his critique of modernism by criticizing what he sees as the modern thought of religions as systems that are either true or false. He prefers what he regards to be the ancient or medieval model of using other traditions to better understand the own tradition, and thinks that Christians can gain more understanding of their tradition with the help of, for example, Indian philosophy.⁴⁵

Hart therefore thinks that the "horizon of Christian tradition" can be the ultimate horizon of many other traditions, too. He writes that there is no historical or dogmatical "essence of Christianity", and that Christian tradition is not guided by any rational necessity.⁴⁶ But how can Christianity be regarded as a true story of reality, if its narrative symptomatically lacks any evidence of historical and logical coherence? Hart explains that the truth in the Christian story can be found precisely in this persistent questioning and search for a fuller truth. According to Hart, a truly living Christian tradition "anticipates and even wills its own overthrow in a fuller revelation of its own inner truth".⁴⁷ He admits that this emphasis on the apocalyptic nature of

43. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 7.

44. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 35–36. John Milbank is regarded as one of the founders of the Radical Orthodoxy movement that also Hart sympathizes with. See, for example, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford 1993.

45. David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*, Grand Rapids, MI 2022, 182–184.

46. Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 32, 41, 183–184.

47. Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 154.

tradition can sound idealistic, but argues that such future-oriented dogmas are discernible in the Christian doctrinal development already in the council in Nicea: “a certain unity could be at once imposed upon and extracted from the resources of the tradition without drastic violence to its apparent integrity.”⁴⁸

The Negotiations Regarding Loyalty to Tradition and to the Contemporary World

The particularity of the Christ event is at the centre of Hart’s theological approach. In his book *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Hart presents the idea of beauty being the corner stone of trinitarian dogmatics, and Christian thought in general. According to Hart, all Christian theology depends on the notion of beauty, but not beauty as merely the sublime, which he considers to be the postmodern view, but beauty as a concrete and particular category. The incarnation of this beauty, Jesus of Nazareth, shows how beauty is revealed to humankind, not as some abstract and general truth, but as *a* truth born in history.

This beauty tells about the nature of God’s glory, the attractiveness of God’s beauty inviting his creation to participate in it.⁴⁹ Important for Hart is to revive an emphasis on the importance of the analogical relationship between creation and God, *analogia entis*, that presents itself through the creation, which has received the gift of being and thereby participates in God’s beauty.⁵⁰ According to Hart, “the Christian use of the word ‘beauty’ refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being”.⁵¹

With the help of the analogy of being, Hart expresses God’s simultaneous hiddenness and closeness. Creation reflects the way God is, but never fully. Consequently, there exists a tension in Hart’s theology between the particularity of God’s beauty and this analogical relationship: God has revealed himself and his beauty as a particular man born in history, but this beauty is complete, objective, and infinite in a way that creation cannot be, and, for that reason, it is always fleeing the incomplete human understanding.

This analogy of being and the category of beauty defines Hart’s alternative to postmodern nihilism, the Christian ontology of peace. Against the modern emphasis of reason and dialectical ways of arguing for the truth,

48. Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 129–130.

49. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 17.

50. John D. Morrison, “Review: The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth”, *LBTs Faculty Publications and Presentations* 43 (2007), 664.

51. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 18.

Hart states that Christianity shows its truth only through rhetorical practice, and only as beauty.⁵²

Fideism – or What is Christian Faith?

Despite Hart's emphasis on the primacy of delight – God is known through delighting in his beauty reflected by the creation – he does not think that Christianity is above or beyond logical argumentation, or that faith should not be rationally grounded. What is important is the order: faith starts in wonder and grows into a logical and coherent understanding of the world through the tools that faith gives.

This stems from the notion that, according to Hart, the truth of the Christian narrative cannot be found by comparing it with something outside of the narrative itself. Choosing between narratives is ultimately done through aesthetic preferences. Christianity does not convince because its logical argumentation is more coherent than that of the “competing narratives”, but through its beauty. Hart's own theological style is meant to reflect this point – form cannot be separated from the message. As Ari Koponen puts it, “in the realm of narrative, Hart's aim is not to provide a universal truth, but rather to show how a particular truth can be universal”.⁵³ The Christian narrative, the gospel, is not a narrative of truth but the particular and historical narrative of Christ as the truth itself.⁵⁴

Hart emphasizes the Christian narrative as an “open story” that will take its proper form first in the eschatological future. He describes Christianity as a narrative amongst many, yet completely unique, as it is the key to the understanding of other stories, such as atheism and secularism, and it marks the end of all other narratives. Koponen notes that Hart shares this position with John Milbank.⁵⁵

With its emphasis on the narrative and aesthetic character of truth, and its rejection of universal rational principles, Hart's theology evidently runs the risk of fideism. In light of the typology developed by Vainio (see the second section of this article), Hart's position should be regarded neither as a conceptual nor as a conformist fideism, but rather as a communicative fideism. This is because Hart underscores the need to evaluate the possibility for the particularistic claims of Christianity to be regarded as universal, as well as the importance of avoiding relativism, and he is open for impulses from other traditions. Christianity is according to Hart understood

52. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 6.

53. Ari Koponen, *The Interruption of Christ: The Language, Beauty, and Theological Aesthetics of David Bentley Hart*, Joensuu 2019, 29.

54. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 5.

55. Koponen, *The Interruption of Christ*, 25.

incorrectly, if it is classified as an alternative world view amongst others, one that can either win or lose over the other views based on its rational coherence. The particularistic character of the Christian story of Christ born in time demands a certain kind of fideism with a strong eschatological dimension. Hart's rhetorical style is characterized by a bold demand for a leap of faith: truth, in the end, is a question of taste, and Christianity is, in his opinion, the most beautiful narrative of reality, and therefore both *a* truth and *the* truth.

Conclusions

The conceptual framework we have adopted from Olli-Pekka Vainio is explicitly created for analyzing theologies in a pluralistic, postmodern environment, which is the intellectual landscape where both Kearney's and Hart's theological thinking is located – even though they strongly criticize certain aspects of postmodernity.

Kearney's relation to Christian tradition, and especially his own Roman Catholic tradition, is considerably more critical than Hart's more openly apologetic defense of Christian thought. Kearney develops his "anatheistic" concept of God as an explicit alternative to the, in his view, problematic concepts of God in the Western theological tradition. He attempts to navigate between apophatic irrationality and a rationalistic dogmatic discourse that claims to explain the mysteries of God, evil, and the human existence.

Whereas Kearney argues that the omnipotent Father needs "to be overcome as an idol and recovered as a symbol",⁵⁶ Hart defends a more traditional approach, but from the viewpoint of theological aesthetics. Hart emphasizes the role of the omnipotent God as the perfect, infinite Being that interrupted the human history by being born as a man, and argues for the uniqueness of the Christian narrative. God's infinite beauty invites people to see the truth in the Christian story, leaving rational argumentation in the second place and showing how this story differs from the others through its aesthetical attractiveness.

Regarding the synchronic openness to other Christian and non-Christian stories and identities, Hart and Kearney share a critique of the use of rationalist or positivist criteria for assessing truth claims. They criticize the search for rational proof of God's existence, and they both want to make a distinction between good and bad atheistic critique. In accordance with his frequent reference to kenosis, Kearney argues for a return of God and a reaffirmation of faith beyond the atheistic critique, whilst Hart argues for

⁵⁶ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 22–23; Kearney, "God after God", 7, 17.

the importance of seeing everything that exists as a gift instead of the result of necessities.

Hart and Kearney have somewhat different emphases when it comes to choosing between narratives. Kearney claims that it is possible, even necessary, to choose, whereas Hart emphasizes that the Christian narrative cannot be chosen by rationally comparing different narratives. The Christian narrative persuades by its rhetorics and its beauty, and the “choice” is made based on aesthetic preferences. They both underscore that Christians can learn from other religious traditions, and that other faiths or traditions have the potentiality to clarify aspects of the Christian tradition. Kearney argues for the possibility of interreligious communication and critical assessments of other traditions – as well as of the own tradition. Hart’s position is particularist in the sense that he claims that the Christian story is both the interpretive key to, and the end of, all other competing stories. Hart denies the existence of an objective Christian tradition but advocates the continuous search for truth as a means to get closer to God’s reality.

How do Hart and Kearney then negotiate between the diachronic and synchronic loyalties of theology? Kearney does not disregard the importance of the Christ event, but it functions primarily as a model case for God’s strange and surprising involvement in the current world. God is incarnated in multiple ways, but especially in the strangers and in the victims of violence and social injustice. The role Kearney assigns to the believer in the coming of (the Kingdom of) God, gives his conception of faith a voluntarist character, by putting great weight on the freedom of choice and the responsibility of the individual.

Hart defends the traditional Christian dogma as a means to secure the infinite transcendency of God. Consequently, the unfathomability of God is an essential part of his approach, but he definitely puts more emphasis than Kearney on what he calls the interruption of Christ. Hart’s approach succeeds in pointing out the centrality of the Christ story for connecting the infinite God with the finite human reality, but his strong emphasis on the particularity of the Christian narrative undoubtedly risks weakening the communicability of the Christian tradition.

This leads us to the final research question, that is, whether the positions of Kearney and Hart can be regarded as fideistic, and if so, in what way. Kearney is definitely not a particularist, even though he shares their refusal of any universal foundation for theology. Kearney is a fierce advocate of the possibility of communication and translation between different contexts. He strives to revive the resources of the Christian tradition through a

forward-oriented reinterpretation of these texts and theological concepts in the light of the current postmodern multireligious context.

As opposed to Kearney, Hart can easily be categorized as a particularist. He defends many traditional Christian dogmas and criticizes all attempts to find a general metaphysics or to “go behind” what he sees as the particular Christian story. Vainio uses Hart as a typical representative of what he calls traditionalism, pointing out Hart’s emphasis on Christianity as a story on its own terms and as the opposite of a timeless wisdom.⁵⁷ Hart’s theology is, however, closer to what Vainio labels communicative fideism than the category of conformist fideism, because Christians according to Hart can learn from other traditions: a faith without critical discussion with the other is not a faith that has reached its full potential.

One fundamental difference between their approaches is that Kearney’s primary aim is the ethical application of faith, which he describes as a continuous interpretation, while Hart’s theology has strong eschatological dimensions. This affects how they negotiate between the unfathomability of God and the particularity of the Christ event. In Kearney’s thinking, the incarnation of Christ is one of many ways that God continuously makes himself manifest in the world: the distinctiveness of the Christ event is mainly that it represents God’s kenotic love in its most pregnant form. For Hart, the interruption of Christ marks the decisive end to nihilism and the laws of necessity, and one must therefore give the Christian story primacy as the central object of faith. The full understanding of God’s nature is, however, postponed to an eschatological future, which requires of theology a persistent questioning and search for this fuller truth.

What, then, is the contribution of our findings in this article to the ongoing discussion regarding the conditions for doing theology in a postmodern setting? For pedagogical reasons it could have been tempting to draw a clear line between, on the one hand, those theologians who emphasize the unfathomability of God and the synchronic openness to other identities, and, on the other hand, those who emphasize the particular nature of the Christ event and the loyalty to the own tradition. This simplified conclusion is, however, contrary to our ambition. Reading Kearney and Hart side by side is an attempt to show how the abyss separating universalism and particularism can be bridged from both sides.

Whereas Kearney proposes a religious universalism with theological arguments taken from the particular Christian tradition, Hart defends a Christian particularism that is open for influences from other religious traditions. The strength of Kearney’s approach is his emphasis on the features that are

57. Vainio, *Beyond Fideism*, 91.

common for representatives of different traditions, which lays the foundation for a genuine trans-confessional interaction. Hart's contribution has its strength in advocating for the outspoken uniqueness of the own tradition. These two approaches cannot be assimilated into each other, and the theological and epistemological stances dividing them should not be overlooked. By bringing them into conversation, we, however, claim that it is possible to explore and elaborate ways of doing theology where a critical fidelity to the own particularistic tradition is combined with a sensitive and constructive dialogue with representatives of other traditions. ▲

SUMMARY

The article explores ways of doing theology in a postmodern intellectual landscape. The authors claim that this requires a balance between the particularity of the Christ event and the universality of the mystery of God, which by necessity transgresses the limitations of individual perspectives. Relying upon the philosopher of religion Olli-Pekka Vainio, the authors propose that the crucial question in postmodern theology is what kind of particularism or fideism is applied, and whether the chosen position leaves room for discussions with outsiders or not. The article provides a comparison between how the philosopher Richard Kearney, of Roman-Catholic origin, and the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart relate the particularity of the Christ event to the unfathomability of God. They both underscore that Christians can learn from other religious traditions, and that other faiths or traditions have the potentiality to clarify aspects of the Christian tradition. Kearney's kenotic approach underscores God's unfathomability, while Hart's eschatological perspective gives the Christian story primacy as the central object of faith. The interchange between these two prominent thinkers contributes to the search for a way of doing theology that succeeds in combining a critical fidelity to the own tradition with a constructive dialogue with representatives of other traditions.