

When the thin small voice whispers.

Richard Kearney’s Anatheism and the postsecular discernment of spirits

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Abstract

What meaning does the theological notion of discernment have in a postsecular cultural condition? Three levels of the meaning of postsecular are distinguished: first the ‘postsecular’, as a notion that characterises a cultural condition, mainly in Western society, full of diverse religious expressions; second, ‘postsecularity’, as a reflective model for interpreting religious expressions and behaviour; and third, ‘postsecularism’, as a cultural-philosophical or theological programme. After elucidating the concept of the postsecular, we consider some key elements in discernment, investigating the subject, the nature and the object of discernment. We then turn to Richard Kearney’s *Anatheism*, as a fine example of how the notion of discernment receives a new usage in postsecular reflection. We ponder upon his idea of discernment as ‘prereflective carnal response to the advent of the Other’ and reflect upon its meaning for postsecular thinking. The concluding section offers a consideration of the meaning of Kearney’s interpretation of discernment for judgment in postsecular culture.

Keywords: Richard Kearney; postsecular; discernment; judgment.

1. Introduction: A matter of discernment

I was riding home on my bicycle late on a Friday night, when suddenly two human figures jumped out of the darkness on the bicycle path, shouting out loudly. They were dressed as clowns, wearing masks over their faces. My immediate reaction in the range of freeze, fight or flight was one of freezing, which made my bicycle swerve over the road. This reaction was sufficient for the clowns to go on their way to find another victim.

It was only then that I realised that this night was Halloween. While in previous years many young people would have chosen to be dressed like witches, skeletons or ghosts, they have now decided to dress as clowns. Their dress refers to the horror clowns that dominated the media in France in October 2014: teenagers dressed as clowns, who not only scared passers-by but also indulged in aggressive behaviour and sometimes criminal acts.¹

Afterwards, I realised that what had scared me was the fact that I could not see their faces. Apparently, this is some deeply rooted condition that I need in order to judge people. This comes to my mind when I go to the supermarket the next day and see two women walking on the street, dressed in long black clothes and wearing niqabs. Although these veils cover their faces, I can see their eyes, and that makes their appearance not threatening for me.

I mention these encounters because they both have to do with discernment: the discriminative judgment of what appears to my sensory perception when I enter the public sphere. With the scope of this article, the act of discernment has to do with the sensory perception of public appearance. It concerns, first, the act of interpreting whether a perception is real or an illusion, and second, what reaction to the perception is appropriate. I see someone, I hear screaming, I taste a strange flavour on my tongue, I feel something touching my skin in the dark, or I smell something burning, and this perception urges me to a judgment: is this situation good or bad, safe or dangerous, healthy or harmful, pleasant or unpleasant?

The act of discernment takes place on the level of sensory perception. It can be viewed as a form of judgment prior to ethical judgment. It is a matter of discernment to distinguish whether a person in the street is a beggar in need of help or a robber, while it is a matter of ethical judgment to decide whether one should help beggars or how one should treat robbers.

A further characteristic of discernment has to do with a certain urgency. My entire life is filled with registering my senses and reacting to them. In short, I use the notion of discernment when there is a confusing multitude of sensory perceptions that require discrimination, or when certain perceptions have a firm impact on me as a perceiver (e.g., a loud noise, a pervasive look, an unexpected experience) that urges me to react.

What makes such discernment interesting for me as a theologian is the fact that discernment may have religious and theological dimensions. The religious dimension may be present in religious claims that I perceive. The two women in black, wearing niqabs, make a religious statement with their clothing, expressing a certain Muslim convention for how women should appear in public. Discernment may also have a religious aspect in the way that I use a set of religious values and norms to interpret my perception. The way my life is shaped by being a member of a religious community may influence me in making an interpretation in the encounter with a tramp asking for money. The tramp's actual request does not have religious claims, but my religious biography may have taught me that an encounter with a tramp does not mean a danger or a burden, but an opportunity to serve another human being. It is then up to me to decide what actions should follow from my discernment of this encounter.

Discernment has a theological aspect as well. Theological concepts may help me to reflect on actual experiences that require discernment. Theological concepts (as analysed in systematic theology, historical sources, and reflections on religious practices) create a better understanding of the religious elements that I observe and the criteria that I use to form my judgment.

Theological reflection may also lead to a better understanding of the act of discernment in the present condition of living. Theology has a task in the hermeneutics of culture. I characterise the present cultural condition as postsecular. I will expand on this term below. For now it is sufficient to regard the postsecular as a rearrangement of the relations between religions and society in considerable parts of Western culture, which makes for an 'unexpected presence and resurgence of religion in the public

domains of presumably secular societies.² It is my conviction that the cultural situation of the postsecular leads to new forms of discernment in the public sphere and requires a renewed reflection, to which theology can make a contribution.

The main question of this article is how the postsecular relates to the notion of discernment: what meaning is given to discernment in a postsecular condition?

This question is far too large to deal with within the scope of what I can offer in an article. Therefore, I make two limitations to the main question. First, I approach the question as a systematic theologian, and as such I will reflect upon some elements that have historically appeared in a concrete Christian theological concept: the discernment of spirits. Second, I will focus upon one actual example of postsecular dealing with the notion of discernment, by turning to Richard Kearney's idea of 'anatheism', which has an explicit place for discernment, in which the theological idea of a discernment of spirits returns in a different form. An analysis of this difference may lead to a better view of the specific forms of postsecular reflection.

Having this focus, I will turn to the notion of the postsecular and its consequences for the idea of discernment in the second section. The third section will concentrate on some facets of the idea of discernment as they are present in the Christian tradition. The fourth section discusses Kearney's *Anatheism*, while the fifth section analyses Kearney's use of discernment. The final section offers a conclusive consideration of the meaning of Kearney's interpretation of discernment for postsecular culture.

2. Discernment and the postsecular: a theological interest

Anyone who turns to the subject of the postsecular is likely to complain about its diffuse and complex character.³ Many meanings, some even contradictory, of the postsecular may be distinguished, to such an extent that one may be inclined to denounce its further use.

Such a plurality of meaning, however, should not deter us from using the notion of the postsecular. In favour of the view, one may assert that such plurality of meaning is a feature of all dynamic phenomena. The plurality and diversity in the occurrences of the postsecular might be viewed as an argument for its actuality and importance. There is even a firm, intricate connection between the postsecular and diversity, as the postsecular refers to an appearance of religious utterances in the public sphere in a cultural context of social diversity. In public discourse, religions appear in the plural and their expressions are widely varying, as are their claims.

The concept of 'postsecular' that appeared in the above paragraphs is used with several meanings. As a matter of clarification I distinguish three levels of meaning. First I distinguish the notion of the 'postsecular', as a notion that characterises a cultural condition, mainly in Western society, in which religious expressions are part of the public sphere without a given predominance of a particular religion. Second, I distinguish the notion of 'postsecularity', as a reflective model for interpreting religious expressions and behaviour. The diversity of certain religious symbols and religious behaviour may be understood better when they are framed within a model of postsecular interaction in society. Third, I distinguish the notion of 'postsecularism', as a cultural-philosophical or theological programme, an intention to realise certain values that go with the phenomenon of the postsecular and the model of postsecularity.

Thus, in the notion of the postsecular, we meet a cultural condition, full of religious expressions. These expressions rest upon religious traditions that have lost their self-evidence in culture but still make a claim to be meaningful utterances; they transform those traditions into new meaningful entities, or they blend religious expressions into a new whole. In using the notion of postsecularity, we create a concept to interpret the religious expressions that we encounter in society. And by proposing an idea of postsecularism, one may unfold a programme to activate values that go with living in a postsecular culture.

I approach these three levels of concepts as a systematic theologian, which of course is not the only possible point of view. The postsecular allows for many approaches, from the perspectives of philosophy, religious studies, sociology, social geography, and theology. As a systematic theologian I claim that ideas from the tradition of Christian systematic theology can be put forward in order to contribute to a better understanding of the postsecular, to a more solid notion of postsecularity, or to the realisation of a postsecular programme in reflection and action.

When the postsecular involves the appearance of religion in the public sphere of Western society, which had been filled by secularist, non-religious norms, a new view on discernment is needed.

It is easy for us to conceive how an expression in the public space is perceived in a cultural situation that has a single predominant religion. An utterance in the public sphere is interpreted as religious when it relates to the forms of the predominant religious tradition. For example, the sound of a tolling bell is recognised as a religious expression when it comes from a building that is experienced as religious (a church tower), at a time which traditionally refers to a common religious experience, for example on Sunday morning.

What changes in a secularist setting is not so much the recognition of the expression as religious (there are enough religious memories in secularist society for people to recognise the sound of tolling bells from a church as a religious expression), but the judgment that follows on discerning the sound of tolling bells from a church. Secularist society asks critical questions on the legitimacy of tolling bells: is it really necessary to make sounds in the public space, meant for only a small part of the population, in an age when everybody possesses watches and alarm clocks? Any judgment on the validity of tolling bells must then be based upon common norms that are not religious per se, such as the worth of preserving cultural heritage. Secular society creates a gap between the discernment of something as religious and its judgment.

What the postsecular condition adds to this is the difficulty of discerning religious manifestations as religious expressions. When there is no shared religious frame, much effort is required to recognise a religious expression as a *religious* expression, even before the moment of judging it as a *valid* religious articulation. I remember how such confusion of discernment arose in Dutch society, when some women started to wear face-covering veils in public. The discussion arose as to whether such veils should be viewed as a cultural expression, taken from a Moroccan background, or as a religious expression of Muslim faith. Such discussion was difficult, because many of those taking part were not used to making the distinction between cultural habits and religion.

Matters of discernment get even more complicated when it is not religious expressions that are concerned, but experiences that receive a religious interpretation. It is not commonly understood that experiences like storms, disasters and harvests evoke

religious utterances, so that behaviour following a storm or disaster (e.g. making the sign of the cross) is not recognised as a religious expression, even before judging whether such behaviour is sensible.

At the same time, there is a need for discrimination. There are so many religious voices that are crying for attention and for recognition in the public sphere of present society that they cannot be ignored. How has one to discriminate among their claims for being religious expressions? Or how can religious facets be used to discern perceptions and expressions that come from the public sphere? It is specifically postsecular that such discrimination should not refer to a given tradition or a fixed set of criteria (as would have functioned in premodernity and modernity), but that a new sensitivity has to be developed for phenomena that appear to us and demand our attention, even before the urge for a normative judgment arises.

Having formulated such needs, we may turn to the theological notion of discernment, as discernment has to do precisely with the preliminary field of judgment that arises as problematic in postsecular society: the immediate perception in actual encounters and perceptions of persons and situations which we cannot just simply relate to a familiar framework or common ground, and that require interpretation and judgment.

3. Elements of discernment in theology

In the history of theology, we encounter the idea of a ‘discernment of spirits’, as an expression of the need to judge forces that make a claim on a person’s perception and behaviour. Though the idea of ‘discernment of spirits’ is related to personal growth rather than to the perception of the public sphere, I consider it as a useful notion for our aims. Therefore, I want to put forward this theological view of discernment, which has been developed in early Christian theology, has been interpreted in various ways in the course of history, and reappears in recent publications.⁴

The theological notion of discernment refers to an act of judging a confusing and obtrusive perception of someone or something as good or bad; both the perception and the judgment are framed in religious terms. For example, a Christian believer who has fasted for a certain period perceives an alluring image of luxurious food. He interprets this image as a hallucination. He may even add, from his religious framework, that this hallucination is a temptation from the devil, which should not be followed as an urge to eat.

Fundamentally, discernment is an act in which a subject interprets something that he or she perceives as something (trustworthy or not, good or bad). I distinguish three systematic questions that arise when we consider this notion of discernment. All these questions have to do with the range of the elements involved in the fundamental structure of discernment: who is the subject of discerning, what is the nature of the act of discernment, and what is the object of discerning?

3.1 Who is the subject of discerning?

When discernment is an act, we should first ask about the subject of discerning. The act of discerning presupposes that a human subject is capable of discernment, of making decisions on what is a trustworthy perception. When the Christian theological tradition uses the notion of a ‘discernment *of spirits*’, it is because some theologies view human beings as torn between several higher powers or spiritual forces. In theology, this is a truth valid for every human being.

A fine theological example of such discernment can be seen in Origen's *Peri Archon*.⁵ Origen presents his readers with a view of the human soul as torn between good and evil spirits:

It is then clearly established, by many proofs, that while the soul of man exists in this body, it may admit different energies, i.e., operations, from a diversity of good and evil spirits. ... But a man receives the energy, i.e., the working, of a good spirit, when he is stirred and incited to good, and is inspired to heavenly or divine things ... And from this manifest distinction, it is seen how the soul is moved by the presence of a better spirit, i.e., if it encounter no perturbation or alienation of mind whatever from the impending inspiration, nor lose the free control of its will; as, for instance, is the case with all, whether prophets or apostles, who ministered to the divine responses without any perturbation of mind.⁶

This is not a passive state for the human soul, because

... our heart must be kept with all carefulness both by day and night, and no place be given to the devil; but every effort must be used that the ministers of God—those spirits, viz., who were sent to minister to them who are called to be heirs of salvation—may find a place within us, and be delighted to enter into the guest-chamber of our soul, and dwelling within us may guide us by their counsels; if, indeed, they shall find the habitation of our heart adorned by the practice of virtue and holiness.⁷

These passages are taken from the book in *Peri Archon* in which Origen defends his concept of human freedom of will. Therefore, it is vital for Origen that human beings are not passive victims of spiritual forces, but that they have the capacity to discern what is good and bad and to resist the bad forces. This human capacity for discernment is reason.

Reason, therefore, demonstrates that external events do not depend on us, but that it is our own business to use them in this way or the opposite, having received reason as a judge and an investigator of the manner in which we ought to meet those events that come from without.⁸

To show that there are alternatives to this view, I quote a passage from the apostle Paul, one of the few passages in the New Testament where a discernment of spirits is mentioned, in 1 Corinthians 12: 4–11:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.⁹

In contrast to Origen, Paul expresses discernment as a spiritual gift, not as a human capacity of reason, and, furthermore, as a gift that is given to some people in particular, and not to all, nor to all believers. It is essential for Paul that the believers within the church have to complement each other with their spiritual gifts.

In these two expositions, Origen tries to construct his interpretation of discernment by appealing to a general idea of human beings, while Paul makes use of his apostolic authority in order to persuade his readers to accept his interpretation. Both share the unproblematic supposition of the possibility of the communion of the human subject with the Transcendent (Origen) or the Spirit (Paul), once the act of discerning has been developed. These are exactly the approaches that are not likely to function in a postsecular context. How then may we conceive the subject of discernment in a postsecular setting? This is a question we must consider in the example of Kearney below.

In all matters of postsecularity the function of (religious) communities arises. How do such communities relate the individual subject of discerning? Does an individual faculty of discernment have tendencies that stretch into communities? Or do we have to conceive the relation between individual and community in the other direction? Is the communal life the actual source of discerning, and is the individual act of discerning just the momentous expression of norms and standards that are developed in a community?

A good example of a conception of discernment as communal property can be found in Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*. McIntosh views discernment as an attitudinal process of fostering a discerning mind, distinguishing characteristic impulses, dealing with problems of deception, and attaching an eschatological or teleological perspective.¹⁰ Discernment is a form of embodied knowledge, or in Hans Urs von Balthasar's terminology even a form of *Theodramatik*. It is also this use of discernment that leads to a broadening of the scope of the notion of discernment, until it covers a 'theology of knowledge', as is expressed in the subtitle of McIntosh's book.¹¹

In this conception discernment consists in an act of growing participation in a truth given by God. More than a moral act, it is an epistemological activity, expressed in life. This act is for McIntosh achieved within the communal life of the church.¹² Discernment is, fundamentally, not a competence of certain gifted believers, but a characteristic of the church, the community of believers. Discernment is directed towards recognising the spiritual in the reality of matter. It has a positive task. It does not concern the task of repelling seductive forces, but it is directed towards the common realisation of spiritual forces in material life. The distinction of devils and demons fades into the background of theological attention.

Discernment is a competence that has to be achieved in the individual believer, but it comes forth from the religious community of the church, at least in McIntosh's interpretation. But does such a conception still hold when community life and shared standards are not self-evident suppositions in culture, as is the case in the postsecular?

3.2 What is the nature of the act of discernment?

The materials as presented above not only lead us to examine the subject of discernment, but also the nature of the act of discerning. What is actually done by someone who discerns? For traditions like Origen's or Paul's this act clearly involves distinguishing good spirits from evil spirits at work.

The New Testament presents discernment as an act of identifying spiritual powers. An exemplary story is the narrative of the temptation of Jesus in the desert (Matthew 4: 1–11 and parallels), which tells how Jesus resists three temptations

presented by the devil. The story is clear about the identity of the evil spirit, the devil or 'tempter', but it is far more difficult to discern the evil character of the temptations. The devil proposes that Jesus use his power to make bread out of stones, to offer his life, and to rule the world. Jesus resists all these temptations.

This story leads us to the desert fathers, monks in early Christianity, who withdrew into the desert to lead an ascetic life. They were confronted with physical pain, with psychic hallucinations, and with the temptation to turn to a more social and comfortable life. They overcame these troubles by viewing them as temptations from the devil. They literally envisaged evil demons that tormented them. It is a matter of vigilance to discern an evil spirit behind a seemingly attractive perception or proposal, only to be countered by a severe concentration of thinking and acting in Christ.¹³

It is this setting that turns the discernment to a competence that arises in asceticism. The seductions of evil spirits come to those who fast and devote themselves to an ascetic life, and the overcoming of evil spirits is a capability that is achieved by monks. Discernment of spirits becomes part of a spiritual life and something that is deepened through spiritual growth. Discernment of spirits leads to a general ability to know oneself. It is a faculty that can be trained, and this leads to an Ignatian tradition of 'spiritual exercises' in which seduction by evil spirits and discernment of these evil forces become a initial part of personal spiritual development and self-knowledge.¹⁴

It must be stated that the Bible does not expound a clear doctrine on discernment, though the cultural setting of ancient biblical culture is one in which 'spirit' and 'spirits' appear as frequent ideas that denote manifestations of higher forces than human ones. But there are also traces in the Bible that show no clear intention to identify such forces. One could, for example, read such spiritual lack of identification in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, which describes the rule of King Saul. His character is connected to the spirit of God in an ecstatic moment of inspiration, when meeting a group of prophets: 'The Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he joined in their prophesying' (1 Samuel 10: 10). But Saul can also be overwhelmed by an evil spirit (1 Samuel 16: 14). It is interesting to read how this evil spirit is explicitly distinguished from the spirit of God (16: 14.23b), while the very same story names Saul's state of being overwhelmed an act of the 'spirit from God' (16: 23a).

Clearly, there is no extensive interpretive need in the Old Testament of always discerning the specific identity of a spirit. It is obvious that the surpassing of material bounds and cultural limits must be called a work of a spirit. When such a spirit acts destructively, it is mostly labelled an evil spirit. There is little need for discerning such a spirit. From its destructive or benevolent effect it is made clear what kind of spirit troubles or inspires a person or group.

All kinds of manifestations transcend the confines of the body, matter, and cultural conventions, but express themselves in the material realm of body, matter, and culture. Mostly, the spiritual receives a personal form, as 'a spirit' or 'spirits', but the exact identity of such spirits often remains unspecified. More important is that the spiritual or spirits are uncontrollable forces. Their powers transcend the nature and confines of matter and culture.

In a secular and postsecular context we cannot simply repeat the act of identifying spirits as good or evil, or just recognise any transhuman spiritual force, without the need for identification. It is part of our condition that we do not perceive spiritual forces in every perception that comes to our senses. However, when the act of discerning as identification disappears, there is another way of viewing discernment: discernment in this condition could be expressed as a metaphorical activity that consists in seeing a perception as something that transcends our common understanding of

sensory perceptions. Discernment has to do with interpreting experiences that break through our common pattern of understanding. They need to be interpreted as either transcendentally trustworthy or not, that is, as a valid expression of otherness or as a misleading impulse of our senses.

When discernment is a metaphorical activity of seeing something as something else, we may understand how the meaning of discernment in the theological tradition drifts from the actual distinguishing of spirits to a moral general ability of discretion.¹⁵ In using ‘discretion’, a more general faculty of judging is meant, that leads a human being to choose between good and evil alternatives in acting. Discernment as discretion becomes a synonym for practical wisdom,¹⁶ for moral decision-making¹⁷ and for critical identification of societal forces.¹⁸

3.3 What is the object of discerning?

Such broadening of the scope of discernment not only affects the nature of the act of discernment, but also its object. Such an extension can be observed in McIntosh’s book. The perspective of McIntosh’s discernment is a mystical perception of the world, viewing the world as a manifestation of God’s Spirit. ‘Make a hole in your world, you may see something through it,’ says Brendan in Iris Murdoch’s *Henry and Cato*.¹⁹ For McIntosh, this quotation is an adequate description of the task of discernment, which, in this view, becomes a synonym for spiritual growth. Following McIntosh, the goal of discernment would be the development of a capacity to see the whole world in another light. In other words, discernment is for him a synonym for a religious perception of the metaphoricity of the world, an ability to view the world as transcendent, as an experience of different qualities than mere materialistic forces.

It is a long road from an initial conception of discernment as identification of illusory perceptive incidents to this late-modern notion of discernment as metaphorical perception of the world. It is especially in a postsecular context that such metaphorical ability arises. John McClure shows how certain novels and films, which he deems exemplary for postsecular culture, treat the everyday world as just one dimension of a multidimensional cosmos, or as hosting a world of spirits.²⁰ Such labelling of the multidimensional as a plurality of ‘spirits’ leads us, along the road of art and literature, to the actuality of the notion of discernment of spirits in the postsecular. When the postsecular is a cultural condition of plural voices, does that match with the plural of a discernment of *spirits*, to be interpreted as an irreducible diversity?

4. Kearney and the wager of atheism

How does the notion of discernment match with the features of postsecularity? This question leads me to Richard Kearney’s study *Anatheism*. This book is an excellent example of how the postsecular can reach to the third level of philosophical-theological reflection and can be developed into a philosophical programme of postsecularism. I turn to this book specifically, because it explicitly features discernment.²¹

The subtitle of the book, ‘Returning to God After God’ expresses the conviction that philosophy can bring the idea of God into play again after the hegemony of secularism. Kearney takes a hermeneutical position with the conviction that meaningful God-talk is possible, once the philosopher takes an interpretative mode.

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). Hermeneutics reminds us that the holiest of books are works of interpretation – for authors no less than readers (...) If God and prophets talk, the best we can do is listen – then speak and write in turn, always after the event, ana-logically and ana-gogically, returning to words already spoken and always needing to be spoken again. Hermeneutics was there from the beginning and will be there to the end.²²

Such a hermeneutical mode correlates with the object of religiosity, ‘God’, the absolute, or transcendence.

If transcendence is indeed a *surplus* of meaning, it requires a process of endless interpretation. The more strange God is to our familiar ways, the more multiple our readings of this strangeness. If divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.²³

So hermeneutics appears as a receptive and imaginative enterprise, responding to cultural and religious forms of the absolute, without any claim of absolutism.

Such an ‘anatheism’ has a formative task, which Kearney describes as a wager. His wager consists of five components: imagination, humour, commitment, discernment and hospitality.²⁴ Kearney’s intention is not to describe five phases of a development. He presents the wager of an anatheistic hermeneutics as one in which these five go together, multilayered.

For Kearney, discernment is a major component in a wider intellectual endeavour, the wager of anatheist, postsecular thinking. When, however, we may conceive from the above how in the theological tradition discernment has been associated with values like vigilance, perseverance, and sobriety, and now see discernment placed side by side with humour and imagination, we may imagine how conventional notions in theology and philosophy may receive a totally different shape in postsecular reflection. For Kearney, discernment forms the culmination of an attitude of openness to the Other, sensitivity for otherness and moral dedication to the needs of the stranger.

Discernment is a necessary component for hospitality. A responsive attitude to the Other cannot be realised without caution.

Not every stranger is divine. There is the other who kills and the other who brings life. The other who loves and the other who lies. The knock on the door may be the Lord (qua host) inviting us to a feast or (qua guest) seeking entry to our home; but it may also be a psychotic murderer, a torturer come to inflict pain on innocents, a rapist bent on violating loved ones.²⁵

Kearney does not admit to the seduction of providing an a priori criteriology of discernment, as if there are given rules to discern good from evil. Discernment is a kind of embodied knowledge, which arises in the sensual reactions to otherness.

There is always a discernment to be made – often in the middle of the night, in the depth of a cave, in an instant of holy not-knowing –when the ‘thin small voice’ whispers. And such discernments are often made in a moment, by the body, by the ear and eye (...) Discernment is, to be sure, a matter of prereflective carnal response to the advent of the Other *before* it becomes a matter of reflective cognitive evaluation. The body already ‘ponders’ in dia-logue with the stranger.²⁶

It is essential for Kearney that discernments can be made. This is what makes his hermeneutical stance different from postmodernism, which deconstructs any possibility of definitive judgment in response to the Other as a voice of the divine. ‘For deconstructors all gods are ghosts’, Kearney states, and that is without any doubt meant disapprovingly.²⁷

The criteria of discernment are clearly not rational-cognitive. There is no set of rational rules available to apply to the sensory perceptions. But there is the strong, embodied conviction that decisions can be made and that decisions must be made. There have been too many people who ‘provoked the voice of God to persecute heinous atrocities’ for one to adopt an attitude of indifference.²⁸ The lives of the great saints and mystics show the need for ‘disciplined criteria of discernment’.²⁹ But such criteria can only develop in a discerning movement that incorporates all levels of embodied existence.

The drama of discernment involves an intense act of attention starting at the most basic carnal level and accompanying the movements of imagination, commitment, and humility (which includes the wisdom to learn from initial mistakes and misreading). This multilayered hermeneutic drama – extending from embodied prereflection to critical reflection – is indispensable to the atheist wager.³⁰

For Kearney’s hermeneutics of atheism, it is essential that human beings are not just passive to an Otherness that overwhelms them. In discussion with Jean-Luc Marion, for whom responding to the Other is a ‘fundamental traumatism of uncritical subjugation and subjection’ (in Kearney’s words), he proposes both a passive and active response to the divine Stranger, ‘a ‘pathos’ of receptivity to the incoming Other and a ‘poiesis’ of hermeneutic agency (choice, imagination, reading, commitment, and humorous/humble consent)’. Crucial for Kearney is the Annunciation story: the angel Gabriel overwhelms Mary with his entrance and message of birthgiving, but still there is a choice for Mary to say yes or no. ‘Consent is a choice, not servile conformity.’³¹

5. Discernment as carnal response

In Kearney’s *Anatheism* we meet a vibrant description of how a postsecular philosophy may be expressed. The notion of discernment is pivotal within this postsecular model of reflection. It is to this actual conception of discernment that I relate the three systematic questions that I formulated above.

5.1 Who is the subject of discerning?

Although Kearney mentions the examples of some gifted religious guides, the act of discerning is part of the atheistic wager that forms an invitation to everybody. Apparently, claims to a special religious endowment have no self-evident value in a postsecular condition that has a plural religious context. We cannot reckon with a common anthropological faculty of discernment either. Rather than a spiritual gift or human faculty, discernment appears for Kearney as a moral sensitivity that arises in response to the actual call of the Other. For Kearney there is some self-evidence in the fact that such calls are made.

An immediate carnal response, as Kearney proposes, seems to be restricted to the actual reaction of individuals. That raises the question of the philosophical status of community, to which I find no direct answer in Kearney. It seems a hidden presupposition that our carnal response is a hyper-individual reaction to the Other. But we might as well conceive the role of communities in forming the conditions of individual perception of the Other. And we might conceive the role of communities as communities of interpretation, in which experiences of response to Otherness receive forms of expression. Kearney's atheism is built upon (religious) traditions as offering 'a rich grammar, vocabulary, and imaginary of radical hospitality from traditions not readily available in an exclusively secular discourse'.³² Still, the acuteness of discernment is always laid down in the actual appeal to a person. A collective grammar can teach the words to be spoken to the Other, but not fulfil the actual phrase of welcome. For Kearney the role of the community seems to be secondary, taking place in the reflection.

5.2 What is the nature of the act of discernment?

For Kearney it is the Other who creates a prereflective response. Discernment does not concern a reflective capacity, but is a designation of 'prereflective carnal response'. It seems to me that such a response arises from the actual confrontation with an Other: it is a momentary experience. The only ability that can be trained is our willingness to follow and trust our prereflective reaction to the other. In this respect there is indeed a 'wisdom to learn from initial mistakes and misreading'.³³ But that is a reflective wisdom that comes after the immediate carnal response.

Discernment as such cannot be reduced to an amount of grown experience. 'Discernment' is the designation of the immediate response in situations of encounter, which will always rise from a situation. Kearney proposes a form of situational ethic. Every situation forms a new appeal to be sensitive. Such a view does not leave much room for growth in prereflective experience. Or does the body have its own faculty of learning? That is a question that Kearney does not answer directly.

5.3 What is the object of discerning?

Kearney interprets our basic human moods of living as metaphorical:

Our most basic existential moods – fear and love, anxiety and wonder – are, as Heidegger and the phenomenologists noted, already modes of prepredicative interpretation: they follow the basic structure of *understanding-as*.³⁴

We might designate discernment as the unavoidable metaphorical aspect of the confrontation with an Other. Each experience of meeting an Other leads us to the inevitable question: can I consider this confrontation as safe or as unsafe? Discernment is metaphoricity in action, an urge to response that comes from encounters with the Other. While the world and human being may give way to metaphorical understanding, it is especially in experiences of alterity that such understanding is realised. Discernment is part of the hermeneutics of the concrete. The hermeneutics of atheism may stretch to the whole of reality, but it will always be formed in concrete encounters with the Other.

6. Conclusion: The thin small voice in the postsecular wager

What makes Kearney so typically postsecular is his refusal to turn the concrete appeal of the Other into a more general set of norms that could replace personal judgment. His conception of discernment is governed by the idea of a prereflective carnal response. Whereas many appreciate embodied experiences in culture, Kearney searches for a level

even deeper, where only a small voice of Otherness whispers.

Now we have to deal with an actual cultural reality in which many voices from many traditions and perspectives try to receive attention. Is there a place for ‘small voices’ in such a reality?³⁵ How can the whispering of the ‘small voice’ in the corporeal experience of discernment be heard in the public sphere?

It is a big step from the thin voice of Otherness in the carnal experience of bodily discernment to the multitude of voices in postsecular society that ask for attention. It is a big step because not only we have to deal with a diversity of religious and voices with numerous religious interpretations, but also because there is so much in the public sphere that transcends the experience of an actual encounter with persons. At this point we need all the elements that make up the anatheistic wager: imagination, humour, commitment, discernment, and hospitality. These are the components that lead the prereflective carnal response of discerning into an embodied stance towards Otherness in postsecular culture.

The history of the concept of discernment ranges from the discrimination of actual disturbing perceptions to a general criteriology of reflective judgment. Kearney reverses the notion of discernment by interpreting it as a prereflective response. By this turn, he seems to weaken the concept into a kind of circumstantial responsiveness and sensibility to a thin voice of Otherness. Such prereflective interpretation of discernment makes it impossible to develop any criteriology based upon a presumed common tradition or common sense.

Still, judgment has to be made in society, not only through prereflective carnal responses, but also as a reaction to the multitude of voices in the public sphere. No simple, rational criteriology can be forced upon these voices. But they can be stimulated to engage in the wager of postsecular society to live with imagination, humour, commitment, and discernment, leading to an encompassing value of hospitality. It is only through the actual forms of acting and responding, fed by these five components, that the value of voices in the postsecular public sphere can be evaluated. As for postsecular society, religion and theology cannot claim to provide the criteria for judgment, but they can contribute to the representation of living examples of an anatheistic wager, made up by these components.

It is the value of Kearney for postsecular thinking that he has turned the notion of discernment from a perceptive criteriology into a component that leads to hospitable living and acting, fed by a religious wager to view Otherness as a thin voice from the divine.

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Notes

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- 1 Cf. BBC News Europe, 31 October 2014: “France Halloween: Town bans clowns after assaults.”
 - 2 Molendijk, “Pursuit Postsecular,” conclusion.
 - 3 Cf. Beckford, “Critical Reflections”; Furani, “Is There a Postsecular?”
 - 4 Waaijman, “Overview”, 1, notices some 280 studies over the past two decades.
 - 5 P.B. Decock, “Discernment in Origen”.
 - 6 Origen, *Peri Archon*, III 3,4. Cf. P.B. Decock, “Discernment in Origen”.
 - 7 Origen, *Peri Archon*, III, 3,5.
 - 8 Origen, *Per Archon*, II,1,5.
 - 9 Bible, New International Version.
 - 10 Mcintosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 82.
 - 11 The aspect of embodied, methodical acquisition of knowledge is fully set out in the tradition of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*. Cf. Van den Bossche, “Experience and Knowledge of God.”
 - 12 Mcintosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 249.
 - 13 For example, Cassian’s *Conferences* shows a deep-going instruction of abbot Moses on ‘the grace of discretion’; *Conference I,xx-xxii* and *Conference II*.

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- ¹⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*.
- 15 The *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité* even devotes a separate lemma to ‘discretion’, next to ‘Discernment’, with an overlap of materials: Pegon, “Discernement,” and Cabassut, “Discrétion,” 1967.
- 16 So for Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae q. 51,4 on the virtue of judging, over against discernment of spirits as a gift of grace in ST IaIIae q. 111,4.
- 17 Liebert, “Discernment For Our Times.”
- 18 Fink, *Engaging the Powers*.
- 19 Macintosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 196.
- 20 Cf. Molendijk, “Pursuit Postsecular,” and Beckford, “Critical Reflections.” Source untraceable.
- 21 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 44-47.
- 22 Kearney, *Anatheism*, xv.
- 23 Kearney, *Anatheism*, xiv.
- 24 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 40.
- 25 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 45.
- 26 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 46. The ‘depth of a cave’ and the ‘thin small voice’ refer to the appearance of God to Elisha in a wind breeze, as told in 1 Kings 19,12.
- 27 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 64.
- 28 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 46.
- 29 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 47.
- 30 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 47.
- 31 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 198.
- 32 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 184.
- 33 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 47.
- 34 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 46.
- 35 Similar questions could be asked over against John Caputo, *The Insistence of God*.

