Towards an Intercultural Hermeneutics of Post-'9/11' Reconciliation

Comments on Richard Kearney's 'Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge'

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Working at the forefront of hermeneutical philosophy, widely known, *inter alia*, as mediator in seminal round tables on the gift and on forgiveness around Derrida and Marion, and combining a professorial position in Ireland with one in Boston, U.S.A., Professor Kearney is particularly well situated to reflect on the way out from the aporia generated by the attack on various locations on the eastern U.S.A. seaboard on 11 September 2001, commonly known as '9/11'. With the article under discussion here (Kearney 2005), he does so in a journal published in South Asia yet electronically circulating world-wide, which adds another element of potentially global relevance to his argument. However, for such potential to materialise, a number of further conditions need to be fulfilled:

1. the attempt to adopt a truly global perspective;
2. the avoidance, therefore, of parochial myopias of a denominational and geopolitical nature;
3. and closer reflection on the practical mechanisms of reconciliation.

My comments explore how these themes may illuminate and render even more effective Richard Kearney's thoughtful and sympathetic argument.

Early in his argument, our author takes for granted that '9/11' is to have an effect on inter-*religious* dialogue. But why should this be so? Must we assume that '9/11' was part of a primarily *religious* conflictive interaction? The victims cannot all be taken to have been Christians, or even religious people, at all. The same holds for the U.S.A. at large, to which the victims largely belonged. And although the perpetrators may have justified their deeds in terms of their particular version of Islam, they did not in the least act with the mandate of all, or most, Muslims in the present world. I doubt whether '9/11' can be legitimately construed to constitute a *religious* event. And if it cannot, what then is the place of religion in this context of a non-religious event? What is it in religions that suggests they have a role to play in the aftermath of

events like '9/11'? Kearney sees the problem (for he speaks of *misappropriation* of religion, implying that this is what the perpetrators were guilty of in addition to their heinous physical violence and the violation of common human combative codes), but does not offer an answer.

With rather a poetical or homiletic turn that is not supported by explicit discursive reasoning either, Kearney suggests that the perpetrators' misappropriation of religion ought to be countered by a corresponding re-appropriation of non-violence among the other camp – loosely but significantly identified as 'us', 'we'. But who is re-appropriating what, here? The vision of non-violence has formed a widespread code governing intimate face-to-face relations in the sphere of kinship and co-residence in the majority of human societies throughout known human history (cf. van Binsbergen 2001a), – long before it became a precept for the relations between non-kin and strangers, in the wider public space, in formal codes of law, ethical philosophies, and world religions. The vision of non-violence is nobody's and everybody's property. It calls for application, re-dedication, revival, rather than re-appropriation.

However, the operative word here is 'we', rather than 'non-violence'. If such re-dedication to non-violence, also in the public sphere, even in intercultural, interethnic, interreligious and intercontinental relations, is to provide 'the solution' to the '9/11' aftermath, as Kearney suggests, this presupposes that there is one and only one problem: that there is a unanimous set of people (the unidentified 'we' featuring in Kearney's argument) who are evaluating the events of '9/11' (and the chain of events leading up to and following the '9/11' drama) from a shared perspective, groping for one interpretation common to them all. However, the fundamental fact to face in the context of '9/11' is that there are a number (at least two, probably several more) of distinct positions, from which very different evaluations will be attached to recent intercontinental history, including '9/11'.

When – as in the case of ' 9/11' – a small set of humans are brought to violate widespread and fundamental codes such as the respect for human lives, for civilians, for the latter's beloved ones, for other people's property and the fruits of human labour (in the form of buildings and airplanes), for the orderly conduct of armed conflict, and even turn out to be prepared to sacrifice their own lives in the process, then, in principle, the whole of humanity qualifies as victims – materially, by association, vicariously, and by implication; and this even includes the perpetrators themselves, whose sense of historical injury and dehumanising hatred we, the other humans, can only begin to fathom inside ourselves. This implies the possibility of a 'we' that encompasses the whole of mankind, and that contains in itself the conditions for all suffering and for all reconciliation.

Yet, unmistakably, Kearney's 'we' means mainly 'U.S.A. citizens and others identifying with them', including himself. Admittedly, and somewhat courageously if considered from a mainstream U.S.A. standpoint, he qualifies the 'we' perspective in several ways: it should not imply condoning the torture of Iraqi and Guantanamo Bay prisoners; it should not imply the mutual demonisation in which not only the perpetrators but also the U.S.A. leadership have publicly engaged; it should combine a Christian inspiration with a Buddhist, Hinduist, and Graeco-Roman classical one, and even have some room for Muslim mysticism; it should not be entrapped in a naïve 'we'/'them' dichotomy; it should not fall into the Huntington (1996) trap of conceptualising the conflict in terms of a clash of civilisations (but neither overstress

pardon at the expense of justice, i.e. trial and punishment). Yet despite all these qualifications, the 'we' in Kearney's argument remains a North Atlantic 'we' that is loyal to U.S.A. concerns. It does not shun from criticism of the U.S.A. leadership, it does acknowledge the existence (but scarcely the contents) of a highly critical assessment of the U.S.A. performance like Virilio's (2002), yet carefully matches such criticism with ample attention for no-nonsense patriotic statements of such hawks as Dooley and Hitchens, who are cited in (apparent?) approval. Even for an Irish intellectual there are, apparently, limits to what one can write if one has a part-time professorship at Boston, which is from whose airport the '9/11' airplanes took off on their way to destruction.

However, given his practical commitment to U.S.A. society Kearney probably needs to wrap up his unmistakable criticism in this way. He needs to create a context of mainstream credibility in which he can yet pose his question 'How do we even begin to imagine pardoning Bin Laden?' without immediately disqualifying this question as rhetorical, as implying 'such pardon is impossible to imagine under whatever circumstances'.

Kearney claims that inhabitants of the North Atlantic (or rather, by implication, their intellectual, journalistic and political spokespersons) tend to look at contemporary wars 'uniquely in terms of politics, economics and sociology'. Again he skips one step, failing to argue why sudden violent attacks on civil targets, without prior declaration of war and without being immediately claimed by a particular nation or political movement, qualify as 'war'.[1] Somewhat uncritically, he adopts the naïve definition of the situation as offered by the U.S.A. leadership, in terms of 'War of Terror'.

Probably Kearney's hermeneutical position is primarily responsible for his seeing '9/11', legitimately, as a religious event: he is merely representing the protagonists' own views of the matter. The demonising idioms, the emotional repertoire of images, employed by the leadership on both sides suggest that one is not dealing here with a secular conflict but with one saturated with religious overtones, on both sides. 'Axis of Evil' (in the idiom employed by the U.S.A. leadership) is not a secular but a religious term. Yet I suggest we must go beyond what Kearney advocates: we must not only discover the religious imagery here which we may at first have risked to ignore, – we must also analyze that religious imagery and see what implications it has for understanding, controlling, and resolving this intercontinental conflict that has already claimed many thousands of lives and that threatens to endanger world peace for decades to come. The gain of empathy and representation inherent in the hermeneutical position, may also be its loss: it allows us the identification and exegesis of the protagonists' public pronouncements, but does not allow us to speak of their hidden or dissimilated agenda's, let alone to analyse, distantly and objectifyingly, the political economy and other structural constraints to which the protagonists may be argued to be subjected even without them consciously, explicitly

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[1] Are we not all trying to interpret '9/11'? In a collection I edited recently, von Trotha (2003) insightfully argues that so-called 'terrorist' attacks constitute a totally new category of warfare in their own right, characterised *inter alia* by the fact that one derives one's weapons not from the arms trade but from among the technological complexity and vulnerability of North Atlantic urban mass society itself: the Internet, civil aviation, postal services, the convergence of large numbers of people around train stations, etc.

realising so – or without us having evidence that they do. In terms of an established usage in cultural anthropology (cf. Headland *et al.* 1990), hermeneutics allows us an *emic* analysis but not an *etic* one. The dilemma also reminds us of the classic Gadamer/Habermas debate of the 1960s-1970s – of which Ricoeur has been a major commentator. If, complementary to a hermeneutical perspective, we would feel free to adopt a distancing analytical perspective, we would ask ourselves whether the '9/11' confrontation between the (dominant elites of the) North Atlantic region and the world of militant Islam, in addition to the emic religious overtones, is not also a rational conflict over scarce resources in the political and economic domain (on the U.S.A. side: solidarity with Israel, a new phase of geopolitical expansion into the Middle East, and reliance – for industry and for highly-valued individual mobility – on cheap mineral oil; on the side of the militant Islamists: acknowledgment of historical wrongs done to Muslims in recent global history, and recognition of the validity of the view that Islam as a path through modernity and globalisation offers a valid alternative to dominant North Atlantic patterns). Such an analytical perspective would do something very important that is utterly beyond the hermeneutical approach: it would allow us to view '9/11' in terms of global hegemony and counter-hegemony. In more practical terms, it would make it possible to contemplate the extent to which the U.S.A. leadership themselves may have been partly responsible for the escalation leading to '9/11', so that the firm rhetorical distinction between perpetrators and victims begins to dissolve, and one obvious (if only partial) way out after '9/11' would become discernable: trying to undo, on *both* sides, the conditions that led to such escalation.

If Kearney insists on the religious dimension yet takes his distance from Huntington, this makes sense. For Kearney the fact that the '9/11' conflict has profound religious aspects, means not that it is unsolvable (Huntington), but, quite to the contrary, enables Kearney to point at the potential of religion to cross or overcome boundaries and to move towards reconciliation. In that respect his approach is far more sympathetic than Huntington's. Yet it is similarly myopic in failing to explore – given the non-religious aspects of the conflict I have just indicated –non-religious roads to conflict resolution. Remarkably, Kearney insists – and this makes up most of his article – that religion has a great conflict-resolving potential, but

1. without offering an explicit argument as to why this should be so – and
2. while apparently glossing over the contradiction that both parties in the '9/11' conflict articulate only their irreconcilable enmity, but not their preparedness towards reconciliation, in terms of the world religion they respectively adhere to. It is as if Kearney is saying:

> 'you who are casting your post-''9-11'' enmity in a religious idiom, and who are capitalising on the perennial association between religion and violence,[2] please realise that the same idiom contains such elements as

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[2] Kearney acknowledges the intellectual movement (Freud, Girard etc.) that sees religion as essentially a product of violence. I have no quarrel with Kearney's rendering of that movement, however succinct, but I think the idea behind the movement is utterly one-sided. Both Kearney (2001) and I (van Binsbergen 1981, van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985, and many later publications, largely available

would allow you to overcome your enmity – and, incidentally, the same elements also appear in other religions and worldviews, e.g. in those of South Asia'.

This is profoundly meaningful, yet two crucial conditions continue to inform the situation and render Kearney's recommendations rather ineffective:

1. The overall appeal to wisdom traditions' hermeneutical tolerance fails to identify *the specific social, political and communicative conditions under which the parties involved may reject, or may be prepared to adopt, the proposed shift from a conflictive and boundary-emphasising to a boundary-crossing and reconciliatory selection from among the repertoire of their respective religion*, as exponents of the long history of wisdom traditions in the world. Kearney's strategy in his argument – even though it is published in a South Asian venue – is to address those in the North Atlantic with Christian, Buddhist and Hinduist identifications or sympathies, and show them – with considerable erudition and eloquence – how here a road to hermeneutic tolerance may be found which would allow them ('us') to forgive the perpetrators (but see above) of '9/11'. It is somewhat unfortunate that Kearney's hermeneutical perspective does not extend beyond the dominant groups in the North Atlantic region, especially not to Muslims in general (including those many millions of Muslims currently residing in the North Atlantic), let alone the militant Islamists behind the '9/11' attacks. Only towards the end of his argument there is a passing admittance that also Islamic spirituality provides examples of the hermeneutic tolerance that Kearney advocates as the way out. His argument would have been much more impressive if he would have explicitly addressed the crucial question as to what kind of perspective (religious, political, economic) one would have to offer to Muslims, and to militant Islamists particularly, in order to bring them to the point where reconciliation becomes possible and past deeds may be brought to redressive and reintegrative trial in mutual recognition of their unacceptability. Moreover, it would have been an impressive display of intercultural sensitivity if Kearney had acknowledged traditions of reconciliation world-wide, including those outside the established literate world religions, e.g. in the African and Native American context.[3] Kearney's plea to let the world's wisdom traditions do the work of reconciliation would have been much more effective, and convincing, if this plea had not stressed the North Atlantic region, philosophical and Christian/ theological tradition so

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at http://www.shikanda.net) have written extensive theoretical arguments on religion, and this is not the place for a debate on this point. Let me merely say this. In my opinion religion is not just about the transmutation or sublimation of violence. It is an (apparently almost inevitable) by-product of human thought organised into patterned action and relatively stable metaphors. It is risky to make presuppositions about an undocumented distant past (the Middle Palaeolithic) when we have evidence of interhuman violence but not of articulate speech. Yet under contemporary, literate conditions it is safe to say that violence may be as much a product of discursive thought (*inter alia*, religious thought), as that discursive thought (*inter alia*, religious thought) is a product of violence.

[3] On Africa, cf. Ngwane 1996; van Binsbergen 2003a.

ethnocentrically – which is where his short excursion into South Asian wisdom traditions soon takes Kearney. If he mentions mysticism, why miss the golden opportunity of exploring Islamic mysticism (al-DJili, ibn al-'Arabi, al-Hallaj, al-GHazzali, etc.) as a possible source of a wisdom that could well be persuasive to militant Islamists. If he mentions Aristotle, why not exploit the fact that Aristotle was transmitted to the North Atlantic through Islamic thinkers and left traces in Islamic thought even after al-Ghazzali had concluded the victory of theology over philosophy, in the world of Islam? The existence of an extensive and enduring Islamic wisdom tradition (Sufism, associated with its exponents' woollen – Arab. *suf* – garments according to some popular etymology, but in fact the pursuit of (Greek) *sophia*, 'wisdom') is largely ignored by Kearney. This is all the more regrettable, because Sufism, much more than the formal conceptual and confrontational thought of militant Islamism, has been the popular Islam of the Middle Eastern and North African masses for almost a millennium now.[4]

2. *The public underpinning of either side's post-'9/11' position by reference to a religious idiom may be only a minority option.* Kearney seems to preach for his own parish, which not only is limited to dominant groups in the North Atlantic region, but among the latter, to those with a Christian or South Asian religious identity or at least sympathy. Given high levels of secularisation, the set thus defined only comprises a minority of the current population of the North Atlantic region. How are the secularised others to be involved,[5] including those who prefer to see the Christian idiom employed by the U.S.A. leadership as mere rhetoric? How are Muslims to be involved, without first being blackmailed into having to publicly denounce the militant Islamists and the, admittedly totally unacceptable, extremes to which the latter went in the context of '9/11'? Surely it would be an interreligious naivety, not to say insult, to expect Muslims to let other religious orientations than Islam inspire them towards an attitude of reconciliation that is, in the most literal sense, at the very heart of Islam. Are we seriously to consider the polysemy of the Judaeo-Christian *Bible*'s Song of Songs, to which Kearney refers, as an argument that is going to win Muslims over towards reconciliation? Moreover

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[4] This is not an idle claim, but one based on my years of historical and ethnographical research on North African popular Islam, around 1970 – basis for a two-volume scholarly study now being finalised for publication.

[5] Failure to appreciate how the vast majority of the North Atlantic population is no longer actively committed to Christianity or Judaism also affects other parts of Kearney's argument. Thus he claims that the tolerance between adversaries is to be increased by the realisation that they both belong to the Abrahamic tradition (but so do the opponents in the Northern Ireland conflict, and in most conflicts that have waged in Europe in the course of the last thousand years, including Christians' treatment of Jews throughout that period), and also (Ricoeur) by reading each others' sacred scripture. Again, the latter recommendation is correct in principle, but how is it going to have a genuine impact on the North Atlantic region today, and on North Atlantic / Muslim relations, if due to secularisation only a minority of North Atlantic inhabitants identify as active adherents of the Christian and Jewish faith any more, while Islam is establishing itself, in the same region, rapidly and self-confidently? Christianity may be the rhetorical and performative idiom of the U.S.A. leadership, but it is no longer the worldview of all U.S.A. citizens, let alone of all citizens of the rest of the North Atlantic region.

(contrary to some of the examples Kearney gives: Griffith, Makransky, Tolstoy), the sensitivity politics of interreligious and intercultural hermeneutics would certainly abhor a situation where outsiders, strangers, to one's own religious tradition are claimed to occupy a privileged vantage point from where to interpret one's own religious tradition; such a claim smacks of condescension and hegemony (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b). How are Muslims to be involved in the post-'9/11' reconciliation process, on the basis of *their own* spiritual traditions? This is for Muslims to say; and all non-Muslims need to do is to reserve seats for Muslims around the table, far more explicitly and generously than Kearney has managed to do in his argument, even though his argument was clearly written in the same spirit as my recommendation on this point.

Kearney's plea for hermeneutical tolerance is sympathetic, timely and well-taken, but we need to be far more specific if we want it to work. The hermeneutical recognition of polysemy alone is not the answer to '9-11'. The point is not that words can be interpreted in so many ways at the same time. The point is, for instance, that, in the modern world, hardened positions of exclusion and enmity represent a violence of words simultaneous with – often even preceding – the physical violence of deeds, while state-of-the-art technologies lend to these violent words an unprecedented new power by diffusing them all over the globe, at the same time lending the technological means to bring them into violent practice. And the point is to recognise militant Islamism, not as an inevitable and perennial core of Islam, but as a recent and relatively deviant ideological product of *the very same* globalisation of our times[6] as has lend, to militant Islamism, its singularly widespread appeal (through globalised media) and (in the sense of von Trotha's 2003 argument cited above) its singularly material destructiveness. Militant Islamism, as a performative and thus deliberately atavistic revival of jihadist tendencies of the times of the Prophet Muḥammad, is not the intrinsic nor the inevitable format of contemporary Islam, but a re-invention, the result of the marriage between Islam and recent globalisation.

Anyway, given the links between words and violence, one place where reconciliation may be found is in the interstices between words and between messages, in *silence*.

But that is not the only place.

As Kearney suggests, a legal framework ensuring fair trial may also be a way to bring about ultimate reconciliation, and would certainly not stand in the latter's way. I do agree on this point, and I am reminded of a case where the emphatic insistence on non-violent patterns of confession, forgiving and reconciliation, rather than on lawful punishment, may have prevented the catharsis that is needed for a true overcoming of the violence of the past: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.[7] But, much like I myself in the latter work cited, Kearney does not give the reasons

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[6] In other words, I propose to analyse today's contemporary militant Islamism from the same perspective as that which I applied elsewhere to Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy and to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission; cf. van Binsbergen 2001b, 2004. My approach has however generated considerable controversy, cf. Bewaji & Ramose 2003.

[7] 1994-1998; cf. Salazar *et al.* 2004 with references to the extensive literature; van Binsbergen 2004.

why pardon should be complemented by justice – he simply tells us that this is what Ricoeur posits.[8]

Another passage makes us wonder just how convincing Kearney's discourse on law – or on Christianity – may be. When he refers in passing to 'those discreet words [of Jesus] in the sand that resisted murder' (cf. the book of John 8: 6 in the Christian *New Testament*) a number of points may be made. This passage is generally considered, among *New Testament* scholars, to be corrupt, a late insertion. The original Greek text has 'earth', not 'sand' (a significant distinction in a time when working out mathematical problems on sand was standard academic practice), and speaks of 'writing' but not of 'words' – it may have been magical or divinatory signs, or – as many commentators would have it – mere doodles to buy time. Most important, I am puzzled that Kearney accuses Jesus' interlocutors in that situation of *murderous* intentions. In ways certainly to be abhorred from our present-day standpoint,[9] but legal at the time (the beginning of the Common Era), they were about to administer the standard communal punishment (death by collective stoning) for an individual act of transgression (adultery). In principle, murder is the infringement, not the implementation, of the law of the land. Theologically, Jesus' reconciliatory action in this narrative illustrates how he offsets the New Law, which from a Christian standpoint he embodies (that of an accommodating love), against the Old Law, which from a Christian standpoint he is considered to render obsolete: that of formal strictness and retaliation. Kearney's ethnocentric misreading of this passage (i.e. his projection, across time and space, of current North Atlantic notions of the lawful versus the unlawful termination of human life) *shows how difficult it is, even for a hermeneutic philosopher of the first ranks and of long standing, to develop an intercultural hermeneutics of sufficient sophistication to cope with a situation like '9/11'.* Undeniably, by North Atlantic national versions of public law, and by the human rights code adopted by the great majority of states in the hope of thus rendering it universal, the perpetrators of '9/11' acted criminally; yet in their own eyes they must have considered themselves legitimated by reference to some higher law, and in the process they were prepared to sacrifice not only other peoples' lives but also their own. Reconciliation is only possible if we do not deny this conflict of perceptions of legality, but if, instead, we actively invent a discourse (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b, especially the introduction) in which, through creative symbolic sleight-of-hand, both perspectives may be recognised, accommodated and overcome.

Thus it is only *in principle* that Kearney is right in his claim that hermeneutic tolerance may be the way out of protracted violent conflicts such as in Palestine/ Israel, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia. As an instance of hermeneutic tolerance, the

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[8] The obvious reason, not likely to be found with Ricoeur, is that the opponents on both sides bring to the conflict and its subsequent reconciliation general notions of justice, punishment and retaliation which may be creatively addressed and negotiated in the course of reconciliation (especially by a skilful outsider), but hardly so creatively as to totally eclipse or obliterate these notions; therefore, any reconciliation that does not take such particularistic notions of justice into account, risks to remain on performative, unable to prevent that the conflict simmers on underneath as a form of resentment still demanding satisfaction.

[9] Informed as this standpoint is by the explicit formulation, canonisation, and globalisation, of 'human rights', cf. the 1948 United Nations Declaration, after the 1789 model of the French revolution.

founding of Christianity in the formal, collective acceptance, by Jesus' earliest followers, of Paul's universalism has only limited applicability to such situations, *pace* Kearney. For although that foundation situation may have considerable appeal to Christians as a model for emulation, it was very small-scale, and it particularly lacked the history of accumulated collective violent trauma in a conscious, identity-constructing historic process, which characterises all such protracted modern conflicts including that leading on to, and following, '9/11'. *It is the historicity of identity formation through violence*, which we have to deal with in the context of '9/11', on both sides; and that has no parallels in the *New Testament* except perhaps (obliquely and in largely unarticulated form) in the confrontation between Jews and Romans (which, more than Paul's universalism, may well have been the prime factor in the emergence of Christianity). Moreover, the subsequent two millennia of Christian-Jewish relations (which, without much exaggeration, may be summarised as a long chain of intolerance, exclusion and violence inflicted upon Jews by Christians) has shown that Paul's universalism has seldom allowed his spiritual heirs, the Christians, to effectively mobilise a similar hermeneutic tolerance towards the co-religionists of the founder of Christianity, the Jew Yoshua bar Miriam. Nor has the appeal to such hermeneutic tolerance, however admittedly foundational to Christianity (Badiou's idea (2003) as cited by Kearney is correct but far from new), inspired the proclaimedly Christian U.S.A. leadership to employ that attitude in its stance vis-à-vis the perpetrators of '9-11'.

Therefore, after identifying this kind of hermeneutical tolerance as one of the ways out, Kearney would have been expected to spell out how it can be practically deployed in the present situation, by Christians not automatically practicing it, and by Muslims not likely to be impressed by it as long as it is presented in specifically Christian trappings. Of course Kearney far from suggests that such hermeneutical tolerance is specifically Christian: indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2003a), any conflict resolution involving reconciliation depends on it, and it is particularly small-scale African societies that can be shown to have developed this socio-communicative technology to high levels of perfection. In my argument cited, I also explore the inner mechanisms of such reconciliation. These turn out to involve, *inter alia*:

1. the recognition that both sides in the conflict are, by their own standards and perceptions, right, and act in rational integrity;
2. secondly, the only way to reconcile two such positions is by a hermeneutics that is not only tolerant, but that is to be emphatically inventive and innovative: a new overarching discourse needs to be invented that, in the eyes of both parties, dissolves their irreconcilable positions of incompatible rightness into compromise – which requires a skilful and inspired, charismatic act of social communicative sleight-of-hand;
3. this can only be done by virtue of both parties recognising and affirming each other's common humanity which they share – putting an end to all earlier rhetoric of mutual demonisation.

Following Ricoeur, and in a way remarkably similar to mine yet somewhat less concrete and practical, Kearney sees four benefits to come from an hermeneutics of tolerance:

1. an ethic of narrative hospitality (cf. my 'recognition of a shared humanity');
2. an ethic of narrative flexibility (cf. my 'sleight-of-hand');
3. narrative plurality (cf. my recognition that both parties are right and endowed with rational integrity);
4. the transfiguring of the past (cf. my 'creative and innovative'); and is to ultimately lead on to
5. 'exceptional moments (...) where an ethics of justice is touched by a poetics of pardon'.

I could not agree more. Yet my opening question remains: What is it in organised religion, that would privilege it to bring about these five stages, over and above other communicative and performative repertoires available in the modern world, despite the fact that the latter is by and large involved in a process of secularisation? Kearney tells us that the *poetics of pardon* is usually of a spiritual or religious nature, but does not argue his case. The extent to which, and the reason why, the process of reconciliation should have religious overtones, remains the crucial question behind his argument. It needs to be answered, especially in the light of the fact that both opposing parties so far have cast their demonising idiom in the terms of the world religion they claim to adhere to. And again, in Kearney's concluding passage, there is the ominous 'we': for 'us', it is difficult to forgive the perpetrators of '9/11' – but where is the empathic argument that makes their position at least understandable, and would allow 'them' to forgive 'us', or would allow humanity ('history') to forgive both 'them' and 'us'?

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