

How to respond to ‘the stranger’?

What does it mean to be ‘hospitable’ to ‘the other’, to the ‘unfamiliar’?

Drew University Hosts Re-Imagining the Human: Images, Humans, Worlds

June 2023 - Drew’s [Caspersen School of Graduate Studies Medical & Health Humanities program](#), led by Dr. Merel Visse, hosted Re-Imagining the Human: Images, Human, Worlds, with professors Richard Kearney and Laurens ten Kate.

The colloquium was featured as part of the Re-Imagining the Human summer course, led by guest professor Laurens ten Kate, endowed professor of liberal religion and humanism and associate professor of philosophy and religious studies at the University of Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands. He is also the director of [Simagine: an the international research consortium Social Imaginaries between Secularity and Religion in a Globalizing World](#).

Being part of the long-term collaboration of Laurens ten Kate and Merel Visse on Re-Imagining the Human, philosopher and author professor Richard Kearney traveled from Boston to join the conversation as a guest speaker. Professor Kearney is the Charles Seelig Professor in Philosophy at Boston College and has taught at University College Dublin, the Sorbonne, the University of Nice, and the Australian Catholic University. Two of Kearney’s books, *Re-imagining the Sacred*, and *Anatheism, Returning to God After God*, were included in the course curriculum and discussed during the event.

Together with a hybrid group of students and faculty from Caspersen and Drew Theological School they discussed and analyzed the importance of images and the imaginary in how we respond to ‘the stranger’. Ten Kate introduced cutting-edge theories of imagination related to religion in the secular age and its impact for well-being. “We need a theory of imagination to grasp secular religious relations in our complex times,” he said, referring to Charles Taylor’s work. “Imagination has to be put on our scientific, philosophical, and intellectual agendas.” Images are not innocent: they offer us a virtual home, but we can also be swept away by them. And words can function like images:

“Certain words work like images—freedom, growth, progress, prospect—along with metaphors like enlightenment. Images are neither objects nor ideas, but spaces that we create.”

Kearney illustrated and expanded on this with intricate and eloquent stories about well-known images like Botticelli’s Annunciation.



In Botticelli's work, for example, a young woman meets a stranger while she is reading in a room, alone. When someone appears, she is in shock and doesn't quite understand who this is and how she should respond. She is afraid and wonders if this is a trickster or a friend. The colloquium attendees discuss if this isn't a rather common response of many of us to the stranger? And they learn that in another story, Mary, also afraid of a stranger, bowed her head and attends carefully to a voice that whispers "Do Not Be Afraid," and trusts in the promise. But we all know the 'stranger' is not always recognized as host or guest. Lines can be blurred.

Kearney continues with other images and discusses how these individual examples also construct a social imagery, specifically the perception and experience of a stranger, and connects it with viewpoints of philosophers Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur, both his former professors and mentors, as well as linguistic and religious interpretations and nuances.

These insights are highly relevant to the Medical and Health Humanities, as illness and disease can also be unwelcome and unfamiliar 'strangers'. How to respond to that 'unhomelike' feeling in the world, as illness is often described. When our bodies refuse or are overtaken by strange sensations or symptoms? How can we perceive ourselves as a friendly, hospitable host when we meet misfortune? How to respond to that 'otherness'? The colloquium was just a start to reflect on these and other philosophical questions, but meaningful to everyday situations in care and life in general.