

## **Catherine Keller's constructive theology, a very short introduction**

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In these paragraphs I would like to give a very short presentation of the theology of Catherine Keller, born 1953, working at Drew university near New York. Keller comes from a background in process-theology and feminist theology, and in this perspective she picked up and integrated many insights from the postmodern or post-theistic discussions 'after God'. Especially in her latest book, *Cloud of the Impossible* from 2015, she elaborated on the theme of a negative or apophatic theology. This type of theology seems to fit in a postmodern agenda, rather than in a feminist or process-theological program. In fact, I think she built a negative theology into process-theological thought. Inversely, she gave a process-theological twist to many typical postmodern topics. To my mind she picks up a postmodern, post-theistic strain of thought, which is manifested in the work of John Caputo, Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Luc Nancy, for example (theologians we have discussed in this PThU-Pretoria exchange), but she does so in a new key, which, as I see it, improves on some shortcomings of postmodern theology.

### *Beginning and End*

Let me just start somewhere *in medias res* and see where it takes us. There is no beginning and there is no end, so there is only us in the middle of many processes to start with. That is an important point. Like the process theologians before her, Keller denies a creation from nothing. Creation is not from nothing, but from *tehom*, from the deep, as she reads in Genesis 1:2. "Darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters, when God created heavens and earth". So there was no nothing, out which almighty God called forth what he wanted to be according to his sovereign wishes, but there was the deep, from which God created. Why have male theologians always been so afraid of the deep, to such an extent that they almost always smuggled away the second verse of Genesis? Was it, because they were afraid that they would lose their autonomy, and get drowned in the deep, the oceanic, the feminine, the moist and watery regions down there? Anyway, creation is from the deep. And creation happens all the time, when something good comes from chaos; when out of the deep of our disappointments and our losses something new arises.

So, there is no pure beginning. In the beginning there is a complex. In the beginning there is a complex of the deep, the hodgepodge of what is in the deep, and God who creates from the deep. The elements or the streams or the chaos of the hodgepodge of the deep have the possibility to become something organized, something structured, when the chaotic elements or particles get related to each other, and become something by making something of each other in relation. The deep has the possibility for creation. It only becomes a creation when God gives the unstructured chaos of the deep an aim, a striving, an intention to realize themselves and each other in relation. Neither the deep, nor the hodgepodge of the deep, nor God is a single origin of the world.

Neither is there an end. The apocalypse is a book about the end of the world. But this is a very strange book. The apocalypse wants to disclose, to open up. It wants to open up a present to the present after the status quo and the power of empire are done with and have ended. Apocalypse precisely means 'disclosure'. But ironically, the book of the apocalypse in the Christian tradition functioned not as a disclosure and an opening, but as an end, a finish, which closed the book of the Bible and history. The Bible becomes a closed whole, between beginning and end, between Genesis and the Apocalypse. History becomes a closed whole, that runs from an absolute beginning to its final end and we can tell history's story as a

narrative about the linear development from the beginning to its end. The apocalypse of John itself, however, knows of no narrative and no development of events, but merely consists of a rather varied collection of visions, dreams and prophecies. How can it be that this non-linear book precisely turned the Bible and history into a closed, linear whole?

### *Process-theology, feminist theology and postmodernism*

Keller belongs to the tradition of process-theology and feminist and liberation theology, but she criticizes both. She does not give up on process-thought, however, nor on feminism, nor on the ambition to work for a better world. Still, some 'post-modern' paralysis crept in. From a post-modern perspective she is both affirmative and critical of the 'ends' towards which we strive. Then again, she is also critical of postmodern thought from the perspective of her process-theological and feminist background.

Her critical stance might be summarized as follows. She does not take side with a philosophy or theology of hope. It is not hope that characterizes our epoch, it is lost hope. In fact, she shows that Ernst Bloch and Moltmann both make use of 'apocalyptic' patterns of thought to articulate their hope. This critique looks like a postmodern deconstruction of Bloch and Moltmann. Then again, the lost hope and the fundamental critique of utopia's should not make us give up on this world in which we are entangled.

The fundamental point of her critique on postmodernism is, that postmodernism has a fascination for the unknowable other and for an inscrutable alterity. But in this way, the other is completely different and there is no relation to the other. Relation is missing here and relation is the most fundamental category to understand being. All that is, is made up of relations. We fold together previous influences that form and inform us, thus becoming someone, and we have an influence on others. The postmodern fascination for the other as other neglects the relations between us. Both process-philosophy and feminist theology underline relations.

This can be clarified by taking a closer look on the postmodern concept of the (im)possible. Derrida, Caputo and Kearny are talking about the possibility of the impossible. The impossible is what we cannot see coming, cannot expect, calculate or plan, since it is beyond our horizon. We hope for the impossible, for something new and unforeseen beyond the closure of the world, as if it were the messiah. But we can never name what we are hoping for, because naming it, would imply framing it. Our hope is aimed at we-don't-know-what, and consists in an attitude of openness without limitation. Derrida called it a messianism without messiah. Keller argues that in this way, talk of 'the possible' is far too thin and airy, abstracted from the real possibilities of this world. Novelty does not come in from some indeterminate future event, from the outside, from the unknown other, you might call it 'God'. Novelty comes up and arises out of the infinite, indeterminate, enriching, traumatic and complicated relations of which our world and we are made up.

The God we do not know is not 'nowhere', beyond or besides the calculable world, like an impossible, but God is connected to the whole of our infinite relations. The God we do not know (negative theology, therefore) is made up of the unknowable and complicated whole of our relationships.

### *Negative theology*

From these rather wild and simplified sketches, the central thesis of Keller's latest book, *Cloud of the Impossible*, comes up. We should 'acknowledge the possibility of the impossibility of religious belief'. To put it simply: there may be no God, there may be no salvation at the end of the day, there may be no glorious state of victory at the end of history. But there may be new possibilities if we accept this.

As I understand Keller, the point she makes is as follows: God is the name for our relation to everything including God. But we cannot oversee nor grasp nor understand the relations of which we are made up, in which we are entangled. Therefore we should speak about our relations and God by means of a *docta ignorantia* and a negative theology. We just don't know what our relations are all about and neither do we know whether 'God' is nominal or real. It makes sense to use 'God', because that it is a way to denote the whole and to protect the inseparable differences between us.

The *Cloud of the Impossible* is the incomprehensible and opaque cloud of our relations. From these relations new possibilities may arise, that are impossible (as in Derrida/Caputo: unforeseen, unexpected, beyond our horizon). The Cloud is our relations and God. Just like: the world is both what we realize and the body of God.

So, negative theology is paramount in *Cloud of the Impossible*. But Keller's thesis runs: a negative theology enhances our relationships. Negative theology has nothing to do with a flight from the world, with a God disconnected from the world, or with 'the logic of the One', in which unity and uniformity prevail over differences and plurality. Negative theology is deeply concerned about our relations in the world. Keller expands on this thesis in an impressive way (read the *Cloud*), but she can also be very pointed. If God is the sum-total of our relations, including our relation with God, what *is* God? The divinization of our relations? This is what Keller says at the end of her book. 'After all, still, the God question. With one last gasp of theological authority, let me therefore say unto you – that for which God is a nickname cares not whether you believe in God. Doesn't give a damn. Isn't in the damning business. What matters, what might matter endlessly, is what we earth-dweller now together embody. Not what we say *about* God but how we *do* God.'