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The Cloud of the Impossible: Theology as Apophatic Panentheism

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Thank you all for instituting this new series of liberal lectures; and thank you Rick Benjamins in particular for the great honor of inviting me to initiate the series. And of course I am thrilled to carry home this first full monograph on my work by prof. Benjamins; skimming it I almost feel I speak Dutch already.

Thank you all also for dealing with my English. And at this moment in history I also as a US citizen apologize for what this linguistic condition means. Derrida called it the Anglobalization of the world: and now you are trapped in the strange irony of this language of the anti-continental Brexit, and much worse, of the anticosmic tweeter.

But in whatever language, I do not imagine there is anything much more important for our world than such conversations. These are conversations that cross between the secular and the religious in experimental ways. Our thinking together then works to heal the deep schizophrenia of western civilization — its split between our spiritual depths and our secularizing scientific talents; on the one hand, the deep source of our motivations for a just and flourishing earth; on the other, not only modern technology but the forms of democratic freedom and pluralism that define ‘liberalism’. Liberalism, as a term political, economic and religious, is full of problems and ambiguities, at least in my context. Of course my context is right now exploding with problems that liberalism has failed to prevent; even my casual reference to democratic freedom and pluralism may

be a symptom of a liberal complacency that has in this election cycle failed the US — and failed the world.

My point right now is to express respect for the concept of this event. Liberalism in my political and religious context at least is faltering, even collapsing — the liberal institutions of the old mainline churches and of the secular state. In my Christian *left* context, we frequently dismiss liberalism as not radical enough. But the problems that liberalism has failed to solve only get worse when we merely react — with a righteous progressive impatience — against liberalism.

Here would be my starting claim: if liberalism is not radical enough, that means it needs to be reconnected to its own dynamism of liberation. I think you are as accustomed as I am to traditions of liberation-, feminist- and ecological theology. But I will attempt to persuade you that oddly enough, a certain mystical tradition of cloudy unknowing is also necessary – necessary to mobilizing liberating *knowledge* and therefore wise action. Why? Because such liberation is so radically relational that it implicates us in a world that always exceeds what we can know. We are part of something much larger than ourselves. Liberation always takes us beyond what we already know and are. It therefore requires a knowing beyond knowledge and a becoming beyond being.

What secular liberalism routinely forgets is that liberation, of course, has the deepest of spiritual ancestries, going right back to Exodus. So why do we — if now I speak of a ‘we’ that identifies with a Christian context – need the *secular* liberal version, with all of its antagonism to religion? Secularism finds in religion, particularly in Christianity, only irrational supernaturalism, false afterlife hopes, patriarchal, theocratic, racist, Christocentric power drives, and endless ethical contradictions of its love-

claim. Of course liberal Christians acknowledge how much truth there is in all of these criticisms. Without the secular liberal heritage, we lack the needed critical capacities to keep religion honest. We fall into reactionary unifications against the multiplying diversity of the world. We vs. — particularly right now — the Muslim. In other words: religion in the west can no longer deliver its liberating message without close linkage to secular liberalism, to its critical rationality, its science, its pluralism. And its honest doubts and real uncertainties.

And yet the converse is also true: secular liberalism disavows its own liberative ethics if it erases/forgets its own religious background. It gets tense and bureaucratic. Secularism may proclaim a pluralism of truth-voice, but it just does not want to include *religious* voices — because they are so non-inclusive. So secularism and religion both build up walls of exclusion against each other's exclusivism.

The schizophrenia then deepens between our secular liberal sense of a factual universe and the religious heritage of a liberating social ethics. Facts cut off from any sense of value and meaning, the whole material world is severed from mind or spirit, on the one hand. And on the other, religion goes reactionary and antiscientific, with its catastrophic US climate science denial, on the right; and on the left, liberal religion — oriented to the social good — stays private. Mute. Impotent. Immaterial. Perhaps this is largely an American problem: but I will put it this way: out of respect for the democratic process, we often withhold our theological resources and leave all public language of faith, spirituality and morality to the anti-democratic right. And among ourselves, among religious liberals, we may stay as secular as possible — which means, we disavow the prophetic force and the spiritual depth of Christianity. But what if we thereby defeat our own

liberating gifts — gifts for both self-liberation and for liberation from social and ecological oppression?

Contradictions are proliferating. Not just the kind you can solve by simply choosing one side against the other. I mean the kind that confronts you with some sense of the impossible. So you see we have already plunged into a certain cloudy zone.

Nicholas Cusanus

It is from a brilliant 15th century thinker of the early Renaissance that I received the metaphor of the cloud of the impossible. The cloud appears to Nicholas of Cusa as he is contemplating deep contradictions between his experience and his Catholic scholastic orthodoxy. Here is how he writes it:

Hence, I experience how necessary it is for me to enter into the cloud and to admit the coincidence of opposites, above all capacity of reason, and to seek there the truth where impossibility confronts me... [that *coincidentia oppositorum* had been the theme of his learned ignorance, the *docta ignorantia* — not willful ignorance but the practice of recognizing the limits of your knowledge]. And the more that cloud of impossibility is recognized as obscure and impossible, the more truly the necessity shines forth and the less veiled it appears and draws near.

So the more we recognize and do not flee from the tensions, the contradictions, the uncertainties that at first frighten us, that seem impossible to solve — the more we face the fear and enter into its cloud — the more what he calls the necessity — the needed answer, the truth that sets us

free — will shine forth. In a radiance right within the darkness. You have some sense of this in your personal relations and choices — we must face what Carl Gustav Jung called our shadow side and pull back its projections onto others — if we would realize our own gifts, our calling...

Yet this *coincidentia oppositorum* may seem irrelevant to wider public discourse — like secular science and politics. And yet I think you are only here because you feel and resist the contradiction between the religious and the secular.

First look at the genealogy of the image of the dark cloud! It begins explicitly in Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century as a reflection on the unknowability, the un-name-ability, of the infinite that we name with the names of God. It is the origin of the apophatic tradition that would be called negative theology, apophasis meaning saying away, or unsaying.

When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.

The text says that indeed. Ex. 20:21:

‘Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the dark cloud where God was’. The crowd stands at the foot of Mt. Sinai, which Moses mounts to keep his appointment in the cloud with the un-name-able tetragrammaton...

In other words, the entire apophatic heritage can be read as a meditation on liberation. We could say it is an interiorization. It can lead into a permanent retreat into solitary spirituality. Or it can work not to privatize

but to deepen: it can keep theology honest, not claiming the exceptional and unique truth; it has sometimes kept Christian language humble, maybe even a bit christlike, a bit Jewish, in not making what we call God an idol: a nameable objectifiable entity whose truth we Christians possess.

Of course such unsaying will remain problematic: we Protestants often just banish mystery — we have the Word. And we do with reason worry about a disembodied, discarnate mystification.

But startlingly, it is with Cusa that this cloud of the impossible made another impossible turn: into a radically interdependent material cosmology. He is the first Christian to say of the creatures: all are in all and each are in each. From this he infers that the universe is boundless and therefore has no center, or any fixed bodies —so he figured out a century before Copernicus that the earth is not the center of the universe, there is no fixed center at all. All things are relative to each other, and our observations relative to what we are observing. But here is how he formulates it: that because all are in all and each in each, so all are in God and God is in each.

And so we have here a full theo-cosmic pan-en-theism, all *in* God. Not pantheism, which does not distinguish between God and the world-all. [Such panentheism has no disrespect for that Dutch genius Spinoza.] For Cusa it is always an apophatic panentheism, in which we do not speak with dogmatic certainty about God, or world, but with conjectures; imaginative experiments at the edge of language.

We could say then that the sort of civilizational schizophrenia I mentioned at the start comes when we do not enter the dark cloud of our uncertainty and ‘admit the coincidence of opposites’. However. The direct implications of this panentheist alternative in terms of the standard paternal model of divine

power, only much later get exposed, both in terms of religion and modern science, and a political theology of sovereignty. Indeed I still find it strange that a Catholic cardinal from half a millennium ago insisted himself into my ecofeminist relational language. But the connection loops for me through process theology. It is a movement with no direct link to Cusa; and it brings panentheism into a contemporary context.

Process theology

Skip forward then to Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920's, the great mathematician. He realized that the most urgent task for the west lay in healing the dangerous split between science and religion: the scientific language of fact had perilously disconnected from value, from meaning, from social responsibility; and its religious language of value had become bourgeois and private. He gets his great clue from the new quantum physics. It helps him shift the reductionist view of matter as made of static separate fully determined substances simply located in space and time. He unfolds then a cosmology in which the world is made of events — events of interdependent becoming. From his work would develop over the second half of the century what is called process theology. This is still unfamiliar in Europe, but for the work of such thinkers as Rick Benjamins and Aurica Nutt... Indeed he was hardly read anywhere outside of theology until this century; for his philosophy was not secular enough. For Whitehead found he could not make senses of the post-Newtonian universe and of human experience without a certain return to God. But this involved a deep critique of standard Christendom — and its politics. This is from the end of *Process and Reality*:

‘When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers (...) The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly (...) But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian and Roman rulers, was retained.’ Now Whitehead mimics Jesus famous response on taxation: ‘give unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God what is God’s’. Whitehead writes: ‘The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar’ [342].

Hence the political tragedy of the church. In its imperial success Christendom betrayed its inner Galilee. Yet the messianic vision of humility continued to flicker, vibrating boldly at the radical edges of Christianity — especially in practice: from Saint Francis to Pope Francis; and can be found as the image of the Jerusalem, the new creation, at the origins of all western movements toward justice or revolution. And more recently any politics of nonviolence carries forward the eloquent secularizations of the gospel in the Civil Rights Movement. Often unrecognized.

Process thought nests its profoundly antiauthoritarian theology in an entire democratic universe: ‘we find ourselves in a democracy of fellow creatures’. This radically ecological vision does not diminish difference: nor does any vibrant democracy; I use the phrase ‘entangled difference’ to amplify interdependence between differences — which actually enhances diversity. A pluralistic universe [James] of multiple interlinked events of becoming is pronounced always in resistance to the divine autocracy, with its bully God and exclusionary de-judaized Christ, its patriarchal privilege and its anthropocentric disregard of its fellow creatures, indeed of its living earth context in the creation.

Process theology constructs instead the theology not of coercive omnipotence but of the persuasive lure —Of course Christians often understandably wonder: is the God of process theology really just impotent? I respond: no, not impotent or omnipotent but omnipotential. God envisions all possibilities and desires fresh actualizations in each of us, moment by moment. But does not micromanage us. The divine is a call to us — a lure — of possibility, not an imposition of sovereignty.

That sovereign God of top-down power, with His interventionist omnipotence, promises His followers the reward now and above all in a supernatural heaven.

This is of course a liberal secularized stereotype of Christianity; unfortunately it has truth — which is why there is liberal theology! And so let me say that what is called process theology has been called the major living school of liberal theology by Gary Dorrien, who wrote the recent three volume history of liberal and progressive theology in America. With its strong support of liberation in gender, ecology and economics, it is what kept me a Christian and made me a theologian. My teacher John Cobb has been the major theological critic of 30 years of the neoliberal global economy and its destruction of ecology and community. [He is still impossibly active, currently influencing Chinese policy, at 93]. And process theology has pursued constant dialogue with natural science and with the other world religions. So it pursues what Isabelle Stengers calls an ecology of practices. It does not fit in the orthodox Christian or orthodox secularist model of strict division of disciplines and of worldviews.

Usually we would call process theology a genre of constructive theology — that is, rather than understanding our propositions to be systematic deductions from divine revelation, we take responsibility for the

imaginative construction of all human language: for its experiential, experimental and always to some degree uncertain truth claims. There is always an apophatic element. So constructive theology is always also *deconstructive* — and therefore not *destructive* of competing claims. I have found that the apophatic infinity of a pre-modern mystical panentheism actually energizes the postmodern panentheism of open-ended process.

If you can tolerate some more English, we will now consider this briefly across the full spectrum of theological doctrines, from creation to apocalypse. But constructive theology is first of all contextual. Located in entanglement in its living world.

And the context now suggests that the persuasive force of an antiauthoritarian, pluralist, Christian eco-theology may be more important than ever as a model of power. It energizes an alternative to the divine top-down sovereignty that always trumps the gospel. Let us consider how a liberating constructive theology — in its full, quite systematic compass — may work as political theology. For this panentheism does not escape the *coincidentia oppositorum* of apophatic mysticism and planetary political self-organization.

Political theology

Political theology reflects on how all theology is already political, and politics already theological. This was more obvious with prior forms of the US political right. But even with this unprecedented melding of our fundamentalist Christian right with what the new atheist Sam Harris ironically tweeted: ‘congratulations, religious right. You have elected the United States’ first truly atheist president’. The religious right traded its

votes for the guarantee of the defeat of women's right to choose. Patriarchal theology needs control of women's bodies in the name of 'life', even as its climate change denial may abort the life of the human species. Control of women's bodies and of all the exploitable earth bodies powers up a quite consistent white male supremacist theology of creation and its end.

Think with me about the creation in relation to apocalypse. The ways we tell the story of the beginning and the story of the end will mirror each other in terms of divine power — and therefore of human power. If the end is conceived as a final reward for the exceptional few, then it renders the creation, the universe, a mere means to that disembodied and anthropocentric end. Often this means: Heaven for the Christian winners; for others, hell is the final solution.

As an example of the political theology of this tradition, it was interesting that the nation's largest annual gathering of right-wing activists, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), announced a lecture on Feb. 22 called: 'If Heaven has a Gate, a Wall and Extreme Vetting, Why Can't America?' [vetting means the selectivity that is imposed on immigrants.]

The wall thereby neatly walls out — as above so below — those troublesome foreigners. It doesn't just wall out Mt. 25 and the gospel 'least', but of course Deuteronomy 10:17: 'You are to love those who are foreigners for you yourselves were foreigner in Egypt'. The exodus tradition of liberation and justice is therefore shoved back into a dark cloud with no luminosity, and locked behind the wall.

So: *The wall thereby replaces the all*; the biblical all in God. This is the pan-en-theos that is found so clearly in the apostle Paul's anticipation of our interdependence as bodies — as members one of another in the body of

Christ and all enfolded in the divine. For Paul *all* creatures live and move and have our being in God — so that God may be all in all. We might call this an **eschatological panentheism**; not a supernatural exceptionalism but a fulfillment, pleroma, of the panentheism of all **creation**.

It has little in common with the right wing US apocalypticisms I had tracked in *Apocalypse Now and Then* in the last millennium. I was worried about the religio-political right's use of the biblical Apocalypse. They dredged up John of Patmos' bitter misogyny. And with it Hal Lindsay was scripting Reagan's belief in an imminent thermonuclear end of the world. Now I will write *Apocalypse After All?* Not to predict the trumping of the earth — by nuclear or climate catastrophe. Yes, the author of the Book of Revelation was a bitter dualist; but the text is also a prophetic warning of the ultimate self-destruction of the oppressive global economic and political empire, the whore of Babylon system. And what we must teach and preach is that apokalypsis means dis/closure, not closure; the bible writes no 'end of the world'. Apocalypse is an intensification of the liberation tradition of the new Jerusalem, the prophetic hope of the new heaven and earth. These signify transformations of our planetary assemblage that only happen by way of catastrophe. The ecological and human crisis is real but is not final. Catastrophe becomes catalyst. Not to a supernatural new creation but to the renewal of the face of the earth. *De profundis*.

But eschatology does not just get secularized in walls and top-down bully power; as Ernst Bloch, the Marxist philosopher of hope, showed, in the Christian social utopias and progressive messianism that morphed into all the western revolutionary movements – for democracy, socialism, emancipation of slaves, women's rights – all translate into secular hope the vision of a new heaven and earth. Not the supernatural heaven with its

walled-in community but the earthly egalitarian utopia. Very different ideas, very different political theologies.

In terms of systematic theology what happens is this: when one deconstructs top down sovereign power, one undoes the notion of an absolute end of time — and of an absolute beginning as well. Panentheism is usually argued as a doctrine of **creation**. God has been traditionally considered the creator and the terminator of the timeline of history — with Christ coming more or less at the climactic center. And the process theological point is this: time is not a line with a beginning and an end but a process of interconnected events. The mystery that we call God needs no longer be read as an absolute creator of everything from nothing. *Creatio ex nihilo* often presumes a straight controlling patriarchal omnipotence. The radical alternative — of the power that calls, that lures, that invites — exhibits a different kind of creation. You can call it *creatio ex profundis*.

The power of the creation in Genesis is to ‘let it be’ [Beatles!] – ‘let there be’ light. The Elohim of Genesis invites, calls forth —and then asks the waters and the earth themselves to ‘bring forth’ — God here does not force results but invites cooperation — and in each case enjoys the outcome. At least in Genesis 1! My book on the creation, *Face of the Deep*, explores the metaphor of the deep, the Hebrew *tehom*, the oceanic chaos waters, which are already there, not first created — in a womb-like potentiality from which all things are born.

This creative potentiality is not a chaos of mere disorder but something more like what chaos and complexity theory in the natural sciences have demonstrated: an iterative, fractal unfolding with unpredictable variables. Complexity in life-systems happens at the edge of chaos: not too much order and not too much chaos, but the edge of

interactive indeterminacy. The physical constants that make life in the universe and in every organism possible come finely tuned — shockingly fine-tuned to scientists, accustomed to a simple atheism of creation by accident. That fine-tuning does not prove intelligent design; it does resonate with the ancient symbolism of creation from a logos or principle.

And the indeterminacy, the open-endedness that is evident and so precarious in complex systems like us and our civilization is also built in from the bottom up. Hence process thought's interest in the quantum indeterminacy that Niels Bohr realized was not merely epistemic uncertainty — uncertainty as to our own predictions — but ontological indeterminacy: an indeterminate interactivity in the basic units of matter. This is an 'Agential intra-activity', as the physicist and new-materialist theorist Karen Barad puts it — speaking in the light of quantum entanglement of how matter matters. She offers a full ontological relationalism. You hear there the uncertainty, the apophatic, the unknowable, built into the elemental fabric of the universe — in a kind of an apophatic entanglement. From below, from the microcosm.

So might we theologically discern in the mattering of the world — micro and macro — a deep mystery of divinity — who is continuously calling forth but not determining, from the indeterminate. And then? This God takes the results in, experiences, suffers and enjoys, all the cosmic materializations. Bonhoeffer and Moltmann contributed importantly to the suffering God. She/he/it feels — with us — com/passion. That counts as a heresy, when the Christian God is the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover — pure Act, incapable of being affected because changeless being, eternally self- same. [You hear the masculine stereotype.] The process God is the *Most Moved Mover* — consistently relational and therefore becoming in response to each and all

becomings. They live and move and have their being, their bodily becoming, in God — and so they in/fluence, they flow into, God. What we call God then appears as an infinite mystery of incarnational relation.

As Nicholas of Cusa put it: because all are in all and each in each, God is in all and all are in God. Indeed he had recognized that God can be conceived as both moved and moving, creatable and creator – and felt this as a deep contradiction — that pushed him into the cloud. In the Cloud perspective none of these propositions is quite true, or quite untrue, because our finite language cannot master the infinite. The apophatic entanglement works at the level of the quantum infinitesimal and the divine infinity. It calls us to speak more humbly and poetically, even theopoetically, of our God and of our world.

Yet the way of an apophatic panentheism is not always nice and gentle: it involves deep struggle, inward as well as outward. In Cusa's vision he comes in the cloud upon the gate of paradise. He describes himself as breaking in — pushing right past the angelic guard. So much for the wall! The wall will not contain the space of the all — the pan-en-theos.

In current constructive theologies the struggle for truth does not rest with spiritual insight but twists into the struggle for eco-social justice. In this it follows the way of the cloud of the impossible, the ancient way of liberative process, of covenantal relationship contracted in the dark cloud.

I have suggested that in both alpha and omega, creation and apocalypse, there is at work a process of new creation — an invitation to that impossible dream – and to the realization of new possibilities. Like many of us here I will continue to nickname the source of that new creation 'God'. But then we do not forget that this potentiality, this potentia, is *not an omnipotent power* that will finally step in and fix things, that will protect us

from the worst outcomes — if He is not determining the future providentially from the start, from creation to apocalypse. The panentheist alternative is only in an ironic sense a power of sovereignty. In the second testament this becomes clear: the kingdom of God is a deconstruction of the kingdoms of this world, it is a kin-dom of the least, the poor, the prisoners, the immigrants, the lgbtq folk — our brothers and sisters.

What if the power of God is not a matter of control at all? What if liberal theology works to practice not the love of power but the power of love? Is there perhaps a new political and ecological solidarity possible, locally and planetarily, in such democratically supercharged energy? Did we get a glimpse of it in the unprecedented world-wide demonstrations of January 21? Not a reactive antagonism but an amorous agonism? Not mere opposition to the hatred — but an immense loving struggle together for our world.

The embrace of this love-force is very broad. the universe unfolds with adventurous spontaneity and our planetary experiment — which may be singular or may be one among countless other highly evolved technologically precarious civilizations around the universe — can fail. But there is no good reason that it should.

The outcome remains up to us. Us — not as helpless and hopeless individuals but as entangled together in complex communities human and nonhuman, as citizens of our nations and our planet, indeed as members in what some of us call the body of christ; in what some us call the God who is becoming all in all. Or as the Latina novelist Octavia Butler put it in the mouth of a 16 year old African American spiritual leader in the future: What is the universe for? To shape God. What is God for? To shape the universe.

I hope that this meditation on apophatic panentheism is one modest contribution to the meditative space we need — the space of a social and spiritual necessity: It remains close to Cusa's necessity — found only in the dark cloud, where we gain our courage in the face of whatever in our different and our shared lives seems impossible. Courage, from the French *coeur*, of the heart — an amorous struggle in which we take heart. It is there where chaos can open into creation, apokalypse into new creation, and the cloud of the impossible into unpredictable, sometimes still unspeakable, possibility.

I hope you feel that such possibility already comes entangled in the liberating history and future of liberal theology right here in the Netherlands.