promotor: prof.dr. W.L. van der Merwe
copromotor: prof.dr. M. Moyaert
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

*Isaiah 43:19*
Abstract

This dissertation explores the potential of the “theopoetics” of Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller for Christian theological reflection on religious difference and interreligious encounter. It suggests religious difference appears marked by an unruliness or “anarchy,” which theopoetics may lead us to embrace rather than repress.

The first chapter thus sketches the main issues in Christian theology of religions in recent decades, tracing this unruliness of religious difference in deepening layers. Taken together, what emerges is a growing understanding of the groundlessness of Christianity, especially its assumptions of superiority, the unavailability of a comprehensive neutral viewpoint or unifying schema, the unsettling and unfinished nature of interreligious encounters, and the need for critique of the most central categories through which Christianity has viewed religious difference.

With this debate established, the next chapters turn to Kearney, Caputo, and Keller in a dedicated chapter for each author. While their direct writings on religious difference are of varying depth, resources may be found especially in Kearney’s understanding of narrative collective identity and imagination, in Caputo’s deconstructive wariness of systematization, and Keller’s relational apophasis and her reading of Genesis 1 as the Divine calling forth creation from an unruly tehôm or Deep. Taken together, theopoetics offers a way to figure the groundlessness of religious attachments, the non-privileged place of Christianity, its indelible relatedness to others, and an embrace of critique, challenge, and negation, without falling into silence or neglecting the communal, traditional, and indeed political nature of religion. Further, theopoetics seeks to resist stabilizing these insights into a comprehensive schema or renewed privileged vantage point.

Drawing on these resources, the final chapter explores a direction a more intentional theopoetics of the interreligious might take. Drawing on insights from religious studies and related fields, it argues religious difference historically appears to always already insist itself into the formation of religious identity, thus at the same time constituting and destabilizing religious traditions. This leads into a more (quasi-)ontological investigation of difference and its unruliness, proposing to think it as a in proximity to différence, khôra, and tehôm, and suggesting interreligious translatability can be seen as opening religion up to an aporetic relatedness, perhaps already divine. Finally, a theopoetics of religious difference will seek, in these aporetic conditions, to not only envision but also evoke a sense of community as interreligious solidarity, calling forth relationship from the depths of difference.
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This dissertation would not have come into existence without the support and encouragement of my partner Hannah. Without your presence and our regular walks through the city, I certainly would not have spoken to another mortal or left the house for days on end, and presumably would have lost my mind.

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It seems to go without saying that this study would have remained but a collection of loose ideas without the cordial supervision of Willie van der Merwe and Marianne Moyaert. Your advice was always timely, wise, and encouraging and I am deeply grateful to you both.

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And finally, my gratitude belongs to God, always and unconditionally.
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Introduction

This study found its beginning on a morning run. My short running route through our Berlin neighborhood of Neukölln, a microcosm of ambiguous conviviality, always reminds me of both the hopeful diversity of today and the tremendous suffering of the recent past. It takes me past expensive cafés as well as migrant-run shops and eateries, struggling to survive amidst ongoing gentrification. It takes me past an impressive mosque and a bright Hindu temple, but also a former synagogue, standing as an eerie reminder of how much Jewish life there once was in this city. Before returning home, I pass a number of Stolpersteine: commemorative metal cobblestones in front of the dwellings of those murdered by the Nazi regime.

The Hindu temple, dedicated to Sri Ganesha and perpetually under construction, borders the Neue Welt, now a concert venue but once a popular gathering place for subversive workers’ meetings calling for an end to World War I, which decimated this working-class borough through famine more than fighting. The Şehitlik mosque, though the main building is recent, forms a Muslim presence in this city significantly older than the German state. It still deals with xenophobic attacks on a regular basis. It stands at the edge of the Tempelhof airport, which was built by the national socialist regime, became a lifeline for West Berlin after the war, and has now been reborn as a large green space where people fly kites, practice urban gardening, fire up barbecues and play football. The terminal building houses refugees.

This is a borough, and a city, at once old and new, heavy yet light, perpetually in mourning yet alive with an impossible hope. Over the past decades, this working-class neighborhood with understaffed schools, high unemployment, and low air quality became a breeding ground for an unlikely togetherness. At the time, I was working for the Mennonite Church, building interreligious relations, among other things. As I met with activists, faith leaders, social workers, and local politicians, we marveled at the unanticipated newness of our work and life together, of all this new life that continuously emerged in the midst of the grave history of this city. It is a history in which the arbitrary constructedness of borders has become as vividly clear as their lethal materiality, in which difference has been celebrated, ignored, and mercilessly crushed. The historicity of this difference, as well as its ambiguity, between letting-be and anonymity, between vio-
lent suppression, persistent distrust and emerging relations, forms the root experiential background of this study.

For this is a study of faith rooted in experience seeking understanding. As I turned to theology to sharpen my understanding of our interreligious work, I found an appreciation for this unruly ambiguity of religious difference oddly lacking.\(^1\) Many typical approaches simply took for granted that categories of self and other, of “religions” as delineated and stable entities, make sense, and that the study of the “interreligious” can be undertaken without a great appreciation for the historical mess of borrowings, togetherness, and violence that have always accompanied religious life.

Where my experience was one of dynamic relationality, nourished by a recognition of my own ignorance and a willingness to listen and be challenged, theology of religions appeared to offer only two options: sweeping affirmations of commonality or rigid affirmations of particularity. Even in its most benign versions, neither seemed to quite address my experience. For in our interreligious conversation group, many of us had grown as tired of hearing that all religions were ways up the same mountain as we had of the (often more combative) assertion that Muslims, always especially Muslims, were fundamentally different from Christians. We had quickly discarded the search for universally shared affirmations, preferring to listen to each other intently and to allow the witness of the other to challenge us in our own faith.\(^2\) But as we did so, assertions of clear-cut difference also vacillated, as we realized the Christians and Muslims in the group never formed homogeneous bodies, often disagreeing with their “fellows” a lot more vehemently than with the others. As difference opened up and shifted during a single conversation, a kind of relationship grew that cannot accurately be described as agreement or commonality, but that I as yet did not have the words to describe. Something was going on—something, I know not what.

In short, in theological approaches to the interreligious, I found missing an appreciation for the way the interreligious can unsettle Christianity, for how this difference resists being grasped, and for how hope and relationship arise precisely from, not against, this unruliness. But as I continued reading, I found that I was not alone in noticing this deficit. Indeed, a line could be

\(^1\)Generally, I will refer to religious “diversity” to denote the least theoretically informed \textit{prima facie} observation that there are various religious ways. With religious “difference” I will refer to a more specific understanding of those fault lines and differentiations “between” religions, understood to be malleable, historically contingent, and ambiguous between life-giving and lethal. “The interreligious” will refer to those occurrences and analyses where the boundaries of religious difference are thematized and crossed, not limited to intentional interreligious dialogue. “Pluralism” will refer to one specific strand of theological answers to the fact of diversity (See I.2.).

traced through recent theological debates, connecting rising tremors around this very intuition. Perhaps it could even be said that each prominent contribution to the debate in the last thirty-odd years started with this intuition of difficulty, of messiness, of ambiguous unruliness. I will draw this line in Chapter I.

During one particular run, I was listening to a podcast hosted by Tripp Fuller, with John D. Caputo as his guest. I forget most of the conversation, now, but as Caputo said that faith, for him, is always about something I know not what, I stopped in my tracks. Could this be what I was looking for? And indeed, in the theopoetics of Caputo, and, as I started reading “around” him, of Richard Kearney and Catherine Keller, I found a resistance to comprehensive schemata combined with an embrace of unknowing, a willingness to be challenged, and an affirmation of hope as arising from precisely these uncertain conditions. This, I thought, speaks to my experience.

And yet. While their work offers significant resources for the interreligious, their direct discussions of religious diversity represented more of a mixed bag. Especially Kearney and Caputo, it appeared, had not given the matter serious thought, offering readings of religious difference that were underdeveloped or equivocal. It appeared theology of religions and theopoetics had serendipitously matching blind spots.

In the following, I will thus attempt to bring these two academic discourses into conversation. They share much in common: Each seeks to think through the relevance of otherness, difference and diversity for Christian theology. Each considers otherness to be profoundly significant to understanding and living Christianity in the twenty-first century. And each attempts to trace the consequences of this significance while doing justice to the other. However, they have not been seriously related to each other, and their respective thinkers have, as will become clear, at most dipped their toes in the questions animating the other discourse.

The first of these two is the academic debate in Christian theology on the status and relevance of other religions, which I will refer to as “theology of religions.” Here, central questions traditionally include whether and how Christians can affirm that adherents of other religions partake in salvation and truth, but also, more significantly in recent years, on what basis such judgments can be made, what happens when adherents of different religions encounter and strive to understand each other, and how power disparities are intertwined with the way Christianity has viewed and treated its religious others.

The second of these two discourses is an emerging collection of progressive theologies informed by different strands of twentieth-century European

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3The “Homebrewed Christianity” podcast comes highly recommended, especially for those readers that can stomach Fuller’s distinct US-Americanness.

philosophy, in particular hermeneutics, deconstruction, and process philosophy, which I will refer to as “theopoetics.” L. Callid Keefe-Perry describes theopoetics as

an acceptance of cognitive uncertainty regarding the Divine, an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty, and an emphasis on action and creative articulation regardless. It also suggests that when the dust has settled after things have been said and done in the name of God, the reflection and interpretation to be done ought to be grounded in dialogue and enacted with a hermeneutic of hospitality and humility.5

Although theopoetics also names a broader movement, I will focus on the three inflections represented by Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller.6 Each draws on a different strand of philosophy to make their argument: hermeneutics for Kearney, deconstruction for Caputo, and process thought for Keller. While each thus presents a distinct rendition of theopoetics, a shared concern is found in the effort to think a progressive Christianity, sensitive to its historical complicity in domination, and the intuition that their respective philosophical conversation partners offer ways of thinking the Divine beyond or after “ontotheology” or the theology of God as a supreme being. Further concerns of theopoetics include an emphasis on the role of imagination in addressing the Divine (as “poetics”), an emphasis on divine becoming in the world that remains unfinished and invites our participation (as “poiesis”), and the sense that a poetics offers a way of displacing the logic of theology (as an evocative, not denotative, discourse). In the words of Caputo, theopoetics is “a deployment of multiple discursive resources meant to give words to the event, . . . without asserting that one knows the secret, the code, the rule that governs events.”7 As Keller puts it, theopoetics “marks its God-talk with its proper im/possibility.”8

6According to Keefe-Perry, Amos Wilder and Rubem Alves form the strongest early voices for theopoetics. In its contemporary revival, he gives Kearney, Caputo, and Keller a prominent place in his introduction, each as a representative of one current or flavor of theopoetics: Kearney is thus presented alongside Karmen MacKendrick as offering theopoetics as “the roughing up of our ideas of God through an enticing wager on God” (ibid., p. 129), Caputo alongside Peter Rollins offering theopoetics as deconstructive resistance to closure and an embrace of the new, and Keller alongside Roland Faber as looking for divine becoming (theo-poiesis) with process theology. In addition, Keefe-Perry also includes the embodied theologies of Melanie Duguid-May and Scott Holland, who maintain that “faith must be fleshly and imaginative before it becomes propositional and dogmatic” and see theopoetics as “an affirmation of the body, which functions as a means of radical egalitarianism, allowing voices to speak and be encouraged that might otherwise be kept pressed into silence” (ibid., p. 10).
7Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 95.
Methodologically, in bringing together theology of religions and theopoetics, the task cannot simply be the application of one to the other, as a framework to a content or as an answer to a question. Instead, as will become clear, questioning the thinkers of theopoetics on the interreligious also reveals something noteworthy about their work. In the following, I will thus seek to trace what happens when these two discourses come into contact with each other, devoting my first chapter to drawing a line through the debate in theology of religions, and then a dedicated chapter for Kearney, Caputo, and Keller, respectively. In the final chapter, I will become more speculative and attempt to tie the various strands of this study together into something like a comprehensive approach.

In Chapter I, I will thus sketch the main issues and questions of the debate in theology of religions as it has played out in recent decades. Throughout this chapter, I will trace what I will call the “anarchy” of religious difference: It appears to destabilize both Christian assumptions of superiority and the boundaries differentiating it from its “others.” Religious difference also appears itself unstable, resistant to efforts to bring it under control or to think it from a first principle (arché). This unruliness or instability is recognized in deepening layers throughout the chapter. Taken together, what emerges is the groundlessness of Christianity, especially its assumptions of superiority, the unavailability of a comprehensive neutral viewpoint or unifying schema, the unsettling and unfinished nature of interreligious encounters, and the need for critique of the most central categories through which Christianity has viewed religious difference, including “religion” and “difference.” Instead of constraining this anarchy, repressing it, or seeking its pacification, I will propose its embrace: a pact with this unruly difference, intuiting that it may present a particular kind of good news. While at the end of the chapter, theology of religions dips its toes into the profound philosophical questions precipitated by these rising tremors, ultimately, I will argue, a turn towards more philosophically inflected theopoetics allows us to take the full dive.

With this debate and the heuristic tool of “anarchy” established, I will turn to Kearney, Caputo, and Keller in Chapters II–IV. In a dedicated chapter for each author, I will start by looking for resources in their work for thinking Christian faith in the context of this anarchy. In each chapter, at least three common angles of approach will appear, if not necessarily in this

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9In so doing, it will not be my goal to give an exhaustive study of their work, but to discuss them always in light of the stakes established in Chapter I. This means that some aspects of their work will receive less attention than they would in a comprehensive review or summary. Notably, this includes each author’s discussions with psychoanalysis—sometimes amenable, sometimes more antagonistic. This is, in part at least, because psychoanalysis evokes an alterity marked by a certain structural necessity, as well as anonymity and interiority, which do not appear to me helpful in addressing religious difference. See also note 78 on p. 83.
order: an embrace of *negation* or *critique* as constitutive for affirmation, an understanding of faith as conditioned by *groundlessness*, and an understanding of *community* or *tradition* as plural and unfinished. In the second part of each chapter, I will investigate what each author has written about religious diversity and the interreligious more directly.

I start this journey with Richard Kearney in Chapter II. While Kearney is an influential contemporary thinker on religion, I will argue his earlier work, not expressly addressing religion, is his most insightful. I will thus start there, with a discussion of questions of narrative imagination as constitutive of collective narrative identity. A shared identity, Kearney argues, is not given by a shared origin or present homogeneity, but by what opens up in front of the irreducibly plural and agonistic stories we tell. Imaging our own place in the world is indelibly caught up with the way we imagine, and potentially reimagine, the other: Neither autonomy, nor heteronomy, take the decisive upper hand. In two shorter sections, I will then trace Kearney’s more explicitly religious arguments: that Christianity can rediscover itself “after” atheistic critique, especially as embodied by the failure of divine providence in the horrors of the twentieth century, and that this “anatheist” Christianity should take the form of a wager on hospitality for the divine stranger. Compared with the erudite scholarship of his earlier work, Kearney’s direct statements on religious diversity and interreligious encounter remain, I will argue in the second part of the chapter, undertheorized and at times problematic. Nevertheless, his reflections on imagination, collective narrative identity, and otherness will play a crucial role in my concluding chapter.

In Chapter III, I discuss the work of John D. Caputo, who draws primarily on Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction. I discuss Caputo’s argument that deconstruction is alive with a deeper affirmation or hope that can be called religious, and that the deconstruction of religious certainties can thus open up a deeper faith. Faith is most faithful, Caputo argues, when it does not rely on solid grounds but recognizes its own groundlessness. I argue this does not lead to a faith without religion, but to a subversive loyalty within the religious community and tradition. Caputo’s statements on the interreligious, while sparse, radicalize its unsettling nature and read interreligious encounter as deconstructive, revealing a fluctuation and difference at work at the very heart of our religious vocabularies. I also discuss Caputo’s use of apparently universalist language, which at times appears to lapse into a comprehensive unifying schema, seemingly at odds with his general deconstructive distrust of such schemata.

In Chapter IV, finally, I turn to Catherine Keller’s blend of relational theologies, feminism, poststructuralism, and process theology. I start with Keller’s reading of a groundlessness in the divine process of creation: Not out of a founding principle, but out of an ambiguous Deep, newness is perpetually called forth in a co-production between creator and creation. In
her readings of negative theology, Keller further sees a negation or unknowing as central to our relation to the Divine, not because it is transcendent, but because God is immanent in the becoming of all the relations of the universe. This “panentheist” understanding of the Divine has consequences for political theology, offering a vision of a distributed sovereignty, vigilant towards domination and closure, instead thinking community as a constant process of gathering. Keller’s thought on the interreligious is the most developed of the three, offering a biblically rooted non-exclusive understanding of the truth of Christianity, a critical view towards the political theology of Islamophobia, and a relational pluralism which seeks not a unifying schema but a valuation of relations in persistent difference.

If “anarchy” has mostly been a heuristic device for the majority of this study, in Chapter V, I attempt a more speculative and constructive elaboration of the consequences of the three middle chapters for questions of the interreligious. Difference, I will suggest, is both constitutive and destabilizing, seeping into principles and identities as an unruly indeterminacy. However, it can also be read as the groundless depths out of which relationship and togetherness are continuously emerging. A theopoetics of the interreligious might not only envision but also evoke such a togetherness, calling forth relationship from the depths of difference.

Before starting, I should note that this study is primarily concerned with a debate that is not only intra-Christian but also intra-progressive. Few of the authors I will cite represent bona fide conservative, orthodox, evangelical, or fundamentalist positions. Though the awareness of those more conservative brothers and sisters in Christ is never far off, this choice of direction reflects both the reality in the debates on the interreligious and my personal faith position. I hope, however, that I will not have taken this progressive position as given. Here I stand, but it could always have been otherwise. So help me God.
Chapter I

Theologies of Religions

I.1 Introduction

In the following, I will sketch the main lines of the debate in Christian theology around the meaning and relevance of non-Christian religious traditions, and, secondarily, of interreligious encounter. Most theologians frame this debate along a typology of “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” and “pluralism.” In brief, exclusivism is taken to mean that non-Christian religions offer no truth or, alternatively, no salvation. Inclusivism typically means that although there may be some truth or an option for salvation in non-Christian traditions, the fullness of either is reserved for Christianity. Pluralism finally refers to various attempts to come to a comprehensive schema in which all religions mediate truth or salvation, but in which no one religion has privileged access. Paul Knitter, Paul Hedges, Marianne Moyaert, and some others, add a fourth they call “particularism.”

I will not comprehensively recapitulate this debate as it has played out throughout history. Instead, I want to enter the debate at the point of

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2For good overviews, see the works cited under note 1. Though I have written this dissertation while living and working in Germany, it does not expressly address the German-language discourse in theology of religions. This absence does not imply a valuation, but is simply due to temporal and spatial constraints. For good overviews of German-language debates in theology of religions, which generally discusses the same issues, see e.g. Reinhold Bernhardt and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, eds. *Interreligiöse Theologie: Chancen und Probleme*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013; Reinhold Bernhardt and Klaus von Stosch, eds. *Komparative Theologie: Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religions-
the introduction of pluralism and subsequently discuss a number of the responses it has engendered: Trinitarian particularism, comparative theology, and feminist and postcolonial approaches. One reason I start with pluralism is that, in the words of Paul Knitter, pluralism “seems to occupy the center of the storm that is disturbing Christians” as they wrestle with the fact of religious diversity.\textsuperscript{3} Pluralism is the current that makes much of the debate possible, giving it a focus and setting the major terms.

It must be said that this is very much an ongoing debate and a dynamic field. Authors tend to know each other, and respond to each other at relatively high speed by academic standards. In the following, I will only be able to hint at these interactions. For the sake of argument, my presentation will therefore rely on some schematization. This means some of the critiques I will formulate will already have been picked up by a next generation of theologians. My critique of comparative theology is a case in point, as will become clear below (see section I.4. and pp. 60ff.).

I will thus begin my discussion with the way pluralism attempts to come to a comprehensive schema in which all religions mediate truth or salvation, and are thus grounded by an underlying unity, in relation to which no one religion is privileged. Second, I will discuss two particularist critiques I will describe as Trinitarianism, as they argue that Christians should not seek an underlying unity but rather should look towards the Trinity to conceptualize and assess religious diversity. Third, I will discuss comparative theology, an interreligious reading practice which is skeptical of either of these schemata, and fourth, I will discuss feminist and postcolonial critiques, which ask whether typical conceptualizations of religious difference do not rely on problematic assumptions rooted in power and violence.

In their own ways, each of the arguments I discuss begins with the recognition of religious difference as something more complex and unsettling than had previously been recognized. Although each ultimately also falls short of thinking this through to its radical consequences, each of them on some level recognizes religious difference as destabilizing, in the sense that it effects a wavering in the ground on which religious attachments are founded.

\footnote{Knitter, \textit{Introducing Theologies of Religions}, p. 112.}
I.1. INTRODUCTION

As we move through the chapter, each next critique will show the blind spots and simplifications on which the previous position relied to still the wavering created by this recognition. Towards the end of the chapter, an additional dimension will also become more important: Religious difference is also itself unstable, in the sense that it questions the bounds or borders of religion.

This is the growing intuition or suspicion I attempt to pursue in this chapter: that there is an unruliness to religious difference, both destabilizing and itself unstable. I will call this the “anarchy” of religious difference, as a shorthand for the ways it resists being grasped, explained from a first principle, or brought under control (arché). In each section, an additional layer of this anarchy is brought to light, deepening and broadening the suspicion that religious difference, when taken seriously, also undoes or unsettles both the grounds and the bounds of Christian confessional theology. Instead of seeking to bring this anarchy under control, I will propose a pact with it—which will be the starting point of the core chapters of this study.

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4For most of this study, “anarchy” will be a shorthand and a heuristic device more than a working concept. I endeavor a greater conceptual explication in Chapter V. Throughout this study, the use of “anarchy” must be distinguished from its meaning as a political utopia animating anarchist movements, as well as from its function in Emmanuel Levinas’ Otherwise than Being, where it names the unmediatedness of the call of the Other. See eg. Emmanuel Levinas. Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence. Trans. by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Gazelle Book Services, 1999, pp. 99–102.
I.2 Pluralism

In its simplest, most straightforward formulation, pluralism asserts that different, most, or even all religions share a common essence, origin, or goal. It is a centerpiece of contemporary debate and it reveals a first layer of the unsettling effect of taking religious difference seriously. For it argues first of all that religious diversity presents itself as a contradiction: There are various religions, all of which claim to be true. This makes simple claims of the superiority of one’s own tradition profoundly complicated, if not impossible. Pluralism responds to this contradiction with an affirmation of a deeper commonality, arguing the contradiction is only an apparent one and giving each religion a place as equal among equals.

The pluralist effort to affirm a fundamental or essential commonality across religious difference comes from an authentic attempt to de-center Christian privilege and affirm (the possibility of) truth in other religions as fully as in Christianity, an attempt that, despite a few philosophical difficulties, can largely be deemed successful. However, I will argue that pluralism achieves this by re-centering and stabilizing religious difference into a problematic kind of universalist unity which covers over the more radical aspects of the ungrounding and unsettling consequences of pluralism’s core concern. Pluralism thus appears less as a way forward to live with difference, instead apparently desiring a systematization of it—less a reconciliation than a pacification.

Paul Hedges describes pluralism as “radical openness to religious others,” and elsewhere sums it up as “the belief that all religions may be true.” Paul Knitter, himself a prominent proponent, calls pluralism “the mutuality model,” and sums it up as “many true religions called to dialogue.” According to Knitter, if relationship and dialogue between communities are possible, which they clearly are, this means “there’s got to be something that the religions have in common that makes the game of dialogue possible in the first place. . . . The religions have to have something in common that enables them to reach across the apparent chasm of their differences.”

It has become somewhat fashionable to criticize pluralism, and there is, for the author of a dissertation, a great risk of turning it into a straw man from which to launch my own inquiries. I want to stress, therefore, that countless activists for interreligious reconciliation continue to rely on pluralism to explain and inspire their work. In contrast to the annoyance it sometimes evokes among theologians, pluralism appears to make intuitive

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6Ibid., p. 2.
7Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, pp. 108ff.
8Ibid., p. 111.
sense for those navigating the tensions of commonality and difference on a practical level.

When referring to pluralism, most theologians implicitly or explicitly refer to Hick. Together with Paul Knitter, Hick edited an early congealing point for pluralist theology titled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, which set off a series of responses and counter-responses in similarly titled volumes. Although Hick is certainly not the only prominent representative of pluralism, I will focus on his work in this section, as this will help lay out the central themes, arguments and concerns of pluralism as a broader movement.

### I.2.1 Religious Ambiguity

Hick’s main argument revolves around a simple core intuition. What if not only Christianity, but the great majority of world religions, had something true and meaningful to say about the way the universe works? How could we square these apparently contradictory religious “data” with each other?

The universe, according to Hick, is “religiously ambiguous”: There is no sure theoretical or epistemological foundation to choose any one religious or non-religious world-view over the others. “It permits both a religious and a naturalistic faith, but haunted in each case by a contrary possibility that can never be exorcised.” There is no one religious tradition, further, that is clearly better at producing good people—the only observable measure available—than the others. The possibility that all the other religions are simply wrong whereas Christianity is right is thus, Hick argues, an “implausibly arbitrary dogma.”

This means the apparently conflicting claims of religions present themselves as a problem: On the one hand, they appear as equally valid, but on the other hand, they cannot all simply be true. The diversity of the realm of religious experience, therefore, “must preclude any simple and straight-

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There is a need for a theory that can explain how different religions can be valid responses to the divine alongside each other, without contradiction or conflict.

Such a theory would need to start with diminishing Christianity as a superior, privileged revelation, and give it a more humble place among the religions as one of many equally valid options. It is this abandonment of Christian superiority Hick considers the main revolution in his thought compared to his conversation partners: While both exclusivists and inclusivists attempt to assess religious diversity with Christianity or Christ as a central measure, thus leaving Christianity safe and superior even while granting others salvation or elements of truth, Hick proposes switching our point of view to be centered on God or even something “behind” God—something regarding which Christianity is not uniquely privileged.

The theological conviction of Christian superiority over other religions “supported and sanctified the Western imperialistic exploitation” of large parts of the world, “establishing white hegemony over vast brown and black populations.” In Hick’s view, Christianity has not taken the violent consequences of its own assumed superiority seriously enough. Although he notes a move towards something of an inclusivist consensus in most of the Catholic and Protestant churches around the 1960s, this consensus retains “the traditional claim to the unique finality of the Christian gospel . . . expressed in less blatant and less offensive ways.” Although it has “moved discreetly into the background . . . the decisive superiority of Christ/the gospel/the church . . . was delicately and indirectly implied.” Something more radical is necessary.

### I.2.2 The Pluralist Hypothesis

Hick’s alternative is to suggest a comprehensive explanatory hypothesis: Perhaps all of these religions may be responding to the same transcendent reality in different ways. Different religions, then, are not mutually exclusive truth-claims, but rather mutually complementary perspectives on the final, transcendent, ineffable truth. Instead of a zero-sum game where one religion will turn out correct, interreligious encounter and dialogue thus becomes a matter of growing towards truth together. Hick calls this the “pluralist hypothesis,” which, at its most concise formulation, proposes that different religions “constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied versions of it.”

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17Ibid., pp. 18-19.
18Ibid., p. 21.
All the great religious traditions, Hick proposes, offer ways towards “salvation/liberation” in the light of this Reality, which he formulates generically as the moral “transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” or a “recentring [sic] in the Divine, the Ultimate, the Real.”

While this may not be precisely what Christians traditionally mean by salvation, Hick argues that the “fundamental generic aim” of reality-centeredness lies beneath the Christian understanding, the same aim that is given different expression in many different religions. Such salvation or reality-centeredness constitutes the shared “inner” or spiritual dimension of religion, which is primary, while its “outer” or institutional dimension is secondary.

In distinguishing between the Real in itself and its various, clearly different, experiences in the religions, Hick takes inspiration from the Kantian epistemological distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, between the thing-in-itself and the object of perception as it appears to the perceiving mind. In Kant’s understanding, the contribution of the perceiving mind to perception is not merely one of passive reception or active grasping but is productive: Perception happens at the intersection of the human categories of perception and the thing-in-itself. Human consciousness thus contributes actively and positively to the world as it experiences it.

In parallel to such Kantian epistemology, Hick postulates a noumenal
Real, “whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience.” Hick sees support for this suggestion in the doctrine of divine ineffability found in many religious traditions. All experience and knowledge of the Real are thus interpreted, indeed made possible by particular tradition.

All awareness . . . is accordingly formed in terms of conceptual systems embodied in the language of particular societies and traditions. We can therefore only experience the Real as its presence affects our distinctively human modes of consciousness, varying as these do in their apperceptive resources and habits from culture to culture and from individual to individual.

Hick’s hypothesis is thus an attempt to come to terms with the way all knowledge of the divine is always already mediated and interpreted by traditional particularity: No one religion has pure, unmediated access to the truth.

God, Brahman, Sunyata, and so on, might then be the various “personae and impersonae,” the various personal and impersonal phenomenal manifestations of the same noumenal Reality. Faith in one or more of these manifestations is thus not strictly speaking faith in the Real itself, but enables some kind of appropriate response to the “ultimate mystery.” We can only ever speak of, or relate to, these manifestations: The Real itself only allows “purely formal” expressions, which only logic can generate.

Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that

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30Ibid., p. 350.
31Hick cites among others Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, the Qur’an, and the Upanishads. Ibid., pp. 238-39.
32Ibid., p. 173.
33Ibid., p. 12. Hick is something of an inclusivist when it comes to non-religious world-views: Those who are not religious may be said to be responding to the Real without knowing it. “They feel the presence of the Real in the call of conscience to work against exploitation, against racism, against poverty and starvation, and to work for the creation of justice and peace on earth.” When his conversation partner retorts that this makes him a kind of inclusivist after all, he simply says “why not?” Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, pp. 80–81.
I.2. PLURALISM

realm. All that we can say is that we postulate the Real an sich as the ultimate ground of the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience. Nevertheless perhaps we can speak about the Real indirectly and mythologically. For insofar as these gods and absolutes are indeed manifestations of the ultimately Real, an appropriate human response to any of them will also be an appropriate response to the Real.  

Hick’s Real, in Paul Knitter’s words, is not a name but a pointer, “a term that would indicate not what’s at the center but that there is a center, even though humans will never know clearly and fully what it contains.” The Real in itself, then, cannot be said to have or do anything; it is not even what is worshiped in the religions. It is simply a “necessary postulate” to account for religious plurality while also taking seriously religious experience. It is the “most comprehensive and economical theory, from a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic point of view.”

I.2.3 Consequences

Before moving on to Hick’s critics in the next sections, it is important to note at this point what the pluralist hypothesis means and what it does not. First, the pluralist hypothesis does not mean that all the religions worship the same God or that they are in principle the same. It does mean, however, that all religious practices of worship and contemplation, although they do not address the same deity, share the same ground. This ground, the Real, is not what is worshiped in the religions: We worship its personae or impersonae, its manifestations, with whom and which the Real is “not identical.” Second, this means the ultimate and absolute Real remains, in a sense, empty: As a logically necessary postulate, it cannot even be said to be “good,” and, besides its manifestations in the traditions, it can only be approached through purely formal logical statements. This “downgrades” the religious traditions considerably, for on the pluralist hypothesis their endeavor to in some sense approach, or relate to, or speak about what is ultimate and absolute necessarily fails. The religions can do no more than offer a belief that may structure an “appropriate response” to what is ultimately real.

40Hick, The Rainbow of Faiths, p. 68.
41Ibid., p. 74.
42See also Hick, “The Next Step beyond Dialogue,” p. 11.
44Ibid., p. 43.
45For Hick, the above forms reason to reexamine the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. In Hick’s view, incarnation “has occurred and is occurring in many different ways and degrees in many different persons. Whether it happened more fully in the case of
Third, this leads to a certain tension within the pluralist argument: while it sets out as an effort to come to terms with the limited nature of all human knowledge of the divine, and thus to take seriously the way Christianity is not uniquely privileged among the religions, one of its consequences is that pluralists appear to consider themselves uniquely privileged. In intuiting the Real beneath or behind all religious figures, pluralists know the other religions better than they know themselves, as they are enlightened enough to know that there is an underlying, deeper ground to the deities they worship. So Christianity is assigned a more humble place among the religions, but this is achieved through the adoption of an alternative privileged position, “our privileged twentieth-century vantage point,” in Hick’s words. On the one hand, pluralism is an admission that no perspective is privileged and all human knowledge of the divine is deeply particular and limited—but on the other hand, it responds to this admission by asserting a universal explanatory theory.

While pluralism unsettles Christianity, questioning if there is really any ground to its presumed superiority in the face of a religiously ambiguous universe, it thus appears to me it largely undercuts its own radicalism: The postulation of a Real functions largely to still the wavering that is created by this unsettling, asserting an underlying unity to the universe and reducing its ambiguity to appearances only.

I.2.4 Fin

Pluralism is concerned with finding a way to overcome Christian superiority. In this, they are largely guided by both its theoretical unjustifiability and its moral consequences. However, they achieve this through emphasizing a deeper, or higher, unity and commonality. Even if it remains ultimately ineffable, a resort to such a higher unity or commonality can be understood as an attempt to close down the radical consequences of the religious ambiguity pluralism had identified. In pluralism, religious difference is thus suspended or transcended for the sake of a higher unity or commonality. Things begin to waver—but they are brought back under control through the assertion that Jesus than in that of any other human being, or even perhaps absolutely in Jesus, cannot properly be settled a priori.” The Trinity must be thought of as “three distinguishable ways in which the one God is experienced” (Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” p. 32). So Hick seeks to rethink Christian superiority, not only in its location vis-a-vis the other religions or in the modality of its expressions, but also in the content of its most central articles of faith: Any Christian dogma that would present Christ or Christianity as unique or absolute must be opened up and rethought. Knitter, citing Rosemary Radford Ruether, remarks that “[i]f Jesus is understood to be the replacement or fulfillment of Judaism – and of all other religions – then all those who have not yet known him, and certainly all those who turn their backs and adhere to their ‘old’ testaments and ways, are underdeveloped to say the least – or, in the words of the old Good Friday Catholic liturgy, ‘perfidious.'” Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, p. 136.

Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, p. 164.
I.2. PLURALISM

of the Real. There remains a tension between, on the one hand, pluralism’s embrace of the limitations of all human knowledge of the Divine, and, on the other hand, its own comprehensiveness—between the de-centering of Christian superiority and the re-centering into an Enlightenment universalism.\(^\text{47}\)

What pluralism gets right, in my view, is its basic intuition that the experience of religious diversity can teach us that Christianity is not clearly privileged among the religions, and that philosophical and theological work needs to be done to overcome Christianity’s own assumptions of its superiority. This intuition points towards a first layer of the anarchy of religious difference: It starts to make visible that religious diversity is not so easily brought under control, and that taking religious diversity seriously appears to unsettle claims of superiority and privilege. However, pluralism’s effort to de-center Christian supremacy is achieved by a re-centering into a form of Enlightenment universalism. This not only means it withdraws into a stable certainty in the face of the unsettling character of religious difference, but also that it reasserts a different kind of privileged position, even appearing to claim to know other religions better than they know themselves.

As we will see in the next section, the universalist nature of the pluralist argument has become a focal point for criticism. In the next sections, I will investigate a number of these critiques, starting with what may be called “Trinitarian” critiques: those that wonder if, for a Christian, the search for an underlying “unity” to religious diversity should not be replaced with the search for an underlying “Trinity.”

\(^{47}\)This is also S. Mark Heim’s argument in S. Mark Heim. *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 213: Pluralism argues that “because we are radically conditioned knowers/experiencers, it must be an object/experience separate from such conditioning that is the true referent in religion. The two halves of this assertion are at war with each other.” See also pp. 27ff., below.
CHAPTER I. THEOLOGIES OF RELIGIONS

I.3 Trinitarianisms

Some of the most incisive critiques of the pluralist argument come from what has been called “particularism” or “particularity”: the rejection of the meta-analysis pluralism attempts for the sake of a more traditionally particular approach. According to Paul Knitter, the main thrust of the particularist argument is that “the particular trumps the universal. Or: the dominance of diversity obstructs the possibility of commonality.”

Knitter describes the particularist argument as a social constructivism: “[W]hen we appeal to the ‘facts, nothing but the facts,’ we have to remind ourselves that those facts never come naked; they are never ‘nothing but,’ for they are always dressed in, or interpreted by, our cultural attitudes and presuppositions.”

In Knitter’s view, particularism can mean religions are merely “ships passing in the night,” that can hope for no more than a “good neighbor policy.”

According to Marianne Moyaert, particularist theologians are often inspired by the work of George Lindbeck, especially his *The Nature of Doctrine*. There, Lindbeck argues that religious experience is so shaped by religious particularity—like learning a language—that it cannot be said to precede religious expression, and thus can also not be said to be the “same” as in other religions.

The particularist argument thus heightens an intuition already instrumental to the pluralist argument: If pluralism argues that the conditioned nature of all knowledge and experience opens the way to different experiences of the same Reality, particularism argues instead that there is no way out of this conditionedness, certainly not into a privileged pluralist position asserting a universal commonality.

I will here investigate two sets of arguments that rely on a rejection of pluralism’s meta-level analysis and favor a more particular approach. First, in this section, I will discuss Gavin D’Costa’s and S. Mark Heim’s arguments that favor a turn to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a resource in understanding and evaluating religious difference. In the next section, I will discuss the practice of cross-reading known as Comparative Theology.

As will become clear, while they argue for a general appreciation for the particularity of religious life, D’Costa and Heim are especially interested in doing justice to the specific particularity of the Christ event. What D’Costa

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49 Ibid., p. 136.
50 Ibid., p. 137.
51 Ibid., p. 138.
and Heim share is not so much a philosophical understanding of the way religions operate (e.g. as linguistic worlds), but rather the root intuition that Christian theologians discussing religious plurality must do so in a manner intrinsically related to the Trinity, and that the Trinity provides a vocabulary and conceptual framework both more appropriate and indeed better suited to understand the tensive relation of the singular Christ event to an irreducibly plural world.

I.3.1 Gavin D’Costa

Gavin D’Costa started his academic career with a dissertation critiquing John Hick’s pluralist theology of religions, and in the thirty years since has largely continued on this path. But D’Costa does not only criticize pluralism—he also presents an own view he initially says is “inclusivist” and then later develops into an “exclusivism,” which he calls “unashamedly Roman Catholic,” but which remains open towards the presence of truth in other religions, at least to a certain extent.

D’Costa’s argument against pluralism

According to D’Costa, one of Hick’s main arguments is the tension between, on the one hand, the universal love or saving will of God, and, on the other hand, the doctrine that there is no salvation outside the Church or outside Christ (“extra ecclesiam nulla salus”). However, D’Costa argues, this is, at least for Roman Catholic theology, a misrepresentation: Neither the extra ecclesiam doctrine, nor the Catholic teaching position, condemn the majority of humankind to damnation, instead affirming that salvation for non-Christians is entirely possible. On D’Costa’s reading, the extra ecclesiam doctrine simply means the belief that all salvation must somehow have something to do with the Church—that “all saving grace is God’s grace,” meaning the grace of the Triune God of Christianity, and therefore related to God’s Church, meaning the Roman Catholic Church. According to D’Costa, in the Roman Catholic view, “God, Christ and the Church” are “indivisibly related.” If we affirm truth in another religion, therefore, this necessarily implies affirming some relation of that religion to Christ and the Church.

56 Ibid., p. 99.
57 D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, pp. 41-45.
58 Ibid., 77. D’Costa largely focuses his argument on Roman Catholic theology.
59 Ibid., p. 77.
60 Ibid., p. 90.
D’Costa therefore concludes that Hick’s reading of the *extra ecclesiam* doctrine as damning all non-Catholics is “literal and unhistorical,” a “hermeneutical insensitivity to the Christian tradition.”⁶¹ God’s universal saving will and God’s definite revelation in Christ are, in D’Costa’s view, not a contradiction at all, as Hick had argued, but rather two guiding premises for discussion: God *both* wants all mankind to be saved, and *has* mediated salvation exclusively through Christ and the Church.⁶²

D’Costa further argues that the idea of a God of universal love, a central piece of Hick’s argument, “in terms of his presuppositions, is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. . . . To sever and abstract this view of God from the particulars that disclose such a view is untenable.” While Hick attempts to find an explanatory theory that can take in all or most religious “data,” for this project he “fails to find a non-particularist grounding.”⁶³

While D’Costa continues to argue that Hick’s project is covertly “tradition-specific,”⁶⁴ he later comes to argue no longer that it is specifically Christian but that it is specifically liberal, modern, Enlightenment universalist. In *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, he thus contends pluralism is “a species of Enlightenment modernity,”⁶⁵ from which other religions are “a priori domesticated”⁶⁶ into a pluralist schema. Its supposed comprehensiveness belies a necessary particularity, necessary for any possible position held by anyone. Radicalizing the pluralist intuition that all knowledge and experience is mediated, D’Costa argues that “all positions, religious or otherwise, are historically contingent tradition-specific forms of enquiry [sic] and practice that are therefore irreducibly different.”⁶⁷

If his earlier argument was open to an inclusivist interpretation of Catholic dogma, D’Costa later comes to argue that religions are “totalities,” which cannot be affirmed in parts, as inclusivism does. It prizes only the reflection of itself in others.⁶⁸ D’Costa now also broadens his critique to attack the basic premise of much of the debate: the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, a typology he earlier defended.⁶⁹ He now believes it is not logically coherent, as “all forms of pluralism inevitably collapse into different tradition-specific forms of exclusivism.”⁷⁰ Each of the three positions, as indeed any possible position in any field, is held at a contingent time by a contingent and epistemically limited human being, and indeed cannot do

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⁶² Ibid., p. 84.
⁶³ Ibid., p. 117.
⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 1.
⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 2.
⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 3.
⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 23.
⁷⁰ D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, p. 3.
otherwise. This leaves exclusivism as the only logical option.

Exclusivism is more honest about differences, D’Costa argues: In pluralism, “harmony is arrived at through the destruction and neutralizing of the Other.” It “seems to ignore or deny the really difficult conflicting truth claims by, in effect, reducing them to sameness.”\(^71\) Pluralism is “western liberal modernity’s exclusivism,” which “stifle[s] religious differences.”\(^72\) Further, pluralism in effect denies truth to all religions, as it “severs any ontological connection between our human language and the divine reality.”\(^73\) Hick’s pluralism relies on an “implicit epistemology” which assumes that God cannot reveal Godself,\(^74\) meaning it in effect “amounts to agnosticism.”\(^75\)

**D’Costa’s constructive approach**

After a dissertation focusing mostly on a critique of Hick, D’Costa significantly expands the constructive aspect of his reasoning in his contribution to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*,\(^76\) a work edited by himself in response to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.\(^77\) In his contribution, D’Costa argues “the concerns of many of the pluralist contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* are better met by an appropriate doctrine of the Trinity” than by pluralist theologies of religions.\(^78\) It allows Christians to hold on to the universal claim that Christ discloses God normatively, if not exclusively.

> [T]he doctrine [of the Trinity] seeks to affirm that God has disclosed himself in the contingencies and particularity of the person Jesus. But the Trinity also affirms, by means of the two other persons, that God is constantly revealing himself through history by means of the Holy Spirit. . . . The Father, therefore, is never fully and exhaustively known “face to face” until the final times which some Christians call the beatific vision. . . . Such a Christocentric Trinitarianism thereby facilitates an openness to the world religions, for the activity of the Spirit cannot be confined to Christianity. This frees us from the a priori tendencies in pluralism and exclusivism: the a priori’s of affirmation and denial, respectively.\(^79\)

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\(^{71}\)Ibid., p. 27.
\(^{72}\)Ibid., p. 22.
\(^{73}\)Ibid., p. 26.
\(^{74}\)Ibid., p. 27.
\(^{75}\)Ibid., p. 28.
\(^{76}\)D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*.
\(^{77}\)Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.
\(^{79}\)Ibid., p. 17.
D’Costa thus proposes five ways an appeal to the Trinity can help navigate in between the a priori of exclusivism and that of pluralism. First, addressing the main tension between God’s universal love and the particular Christ event, the Trinity relates these two “dialectically” in a way neither exclusivism, as typically understood, nor pluralism can do. As Jesus is wholly God, but not the whole of God, He can be said to be “normative, not exclusive or absolute in revealing God.”

Second, the Holy Spirit, active in history, must be understood as active in non-Christian religions. Although the biblical testimony is largely related to Jewish-Christian tradition, there are “no good theological reasons” to limit the work of the Spirit there. “[G]iven the universal salvific will of the Father revealed in Christ, we can have every expectation that God’s activity in history is ongoing and certainly not historically limited to Christianity.”

Because this is the case, any revelation of God (“herself,” D’Costa adds, as if to make clear he is not simply offering a conservative rebuttal) in other religions or elsewhere is a revelation of that same God who is disclosed in Christ. Learning from other religions is therefore a theologically highly relevant task, a task for which D’Costa argues there needs to be a “narrative space within Christian theology and practice” in order to bring those stories and histories in, to hear them “without distortion.”

Listening to non-Christian narrative is “an openness to God,” and D’Costa notes it is not up to him to specify what the non-Christian has to say, teach, or share (or indeed learn).

Third, a Trinitarianism stands normatively for loving relationship, which is therefore the appropriate relation to non-Christian neighbors as well. This includes a structural dimension and calls all Christians towards interreligious dialogue, “in proportion to our sensitivity to the interrelatedness of all histories and stories.” Fourth, through the Crucifixion we learn that this must be “self-giving and suffering love, where vulnerability rather than worldly strength and success, suffering service rather than manipulation and coercion, and fidelity to God’s will at whatever cost are important.”

In this sense, Christ is normative for Christians in their relationship to non-Christians, in their cooperation for liberation from oppression and suffering as it heralds God’s Kingdom. As D’Costa argues, recognizing the Kingdom at work in other religions poses a radical challenge to Christians’ restricted understanding of what that kingdom is. “This is not a paternalistic affirmation, but the willingness to be radically judged and questioned by the other.” The Trinitarian schema, in a sense, brings this challenge closer to

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81 Ibid., p. 19.
82 Ibid., p. 19.
83 Ibid., p. 20.
84 Ibid., p. 21.
85 Ibid., p. 22.
home than pluralism: In learning from, being questioned by, and discerning truth in other religions, what is at stake is not merely an understanding of the other or an ineffable Real, but Christ and the Kingdom of God.

Fifth, “if the church stands under the judgment of the Holy Spirit, and if the Spirit is active in the world religions, then the world religions are vital to Christian faithfulness.” God’s Spirit is at work through history, through which “Christ, the universal Logos, is more fully translated and universalized.” So while Christ and the Father remain the guiding norm, their explication and interpretation through non-Christian or otherwise unexpected disclosure also draws our understanding of them out of center, a tension which remains unresolved “until the eschaton.” In a Trinitarian view, religious multiplicity thus takes on a special theological significance. To close ourselves to the world religions would be to close ourselves off to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit “provides the narrative space in which the testimonies of people from the world religions, in their own words and lives, can unmask the false ideologies and distorted narrative practices within Christian communities.” Christianity itself is as yet incomplete and in need of fulfillment.

Above, I noted that D’Costa’s later critique of pluralism comes to encompass inclusivism and propose exclusivism as the only reasonable option. The same is true for his constructive approach. It appears to me D’Costa comes to severely restrict the radicality of some of his earlier suggestions. Instead of arguing for a willingness to be radically questioned and challenged by the other, he now argues rather more placidly that “the Other is always interesting in their difference and may be the possible face of God, or the face of violence, greed, and death. Furthermore, the other may teach Christians to know and worship their own trinitarian God more truthfully and richly.”

Although it is possible to approach other religions with a “radical openness” which “affirms the saving work of God within other religions,” D’Costa now argues non-Christian religious traditions cannot be said to be salvific structures in their own right, and the work of the Holy Spirit within them cannot be named “revelation.” Instead, the work of the Spirit in other religions means the non-Christian is “associated with Christ’s redemp-

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86Ibid., p. 22.
87Ibid., p. 23.
88Ibid., p. 23.
89Ibid., p. 16.
90Ibid., p. 23.
92D’Costa, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity, p. 9.
93Ibid., p. 100.
94Ibid., p. 99.
95Ibid., p. 128.
tive death.”96 Affirming God’s activity in other religious thus always serves to emphasize the truth of the Christian tradition, to “make Christ known more fully.”97 While D’Costa still argues that it is “also Christianity itself that is fulfilled in receiving the gift of God that the other might bear,”98 this fulfillment is now achieved most successfully through conversion—which may even signal the “destruction” of the convert’s previous context of faith.99

While D’Costa’s later schema thus continues to give space for the challenge the religious other might pose to Christianity, this space is also limited: The presence of God in non-Christian traditions merely serves to underline and perhaps broaden our understanding of Christ, and is most relevant when the religious other converts. In the words D’Costa had himself leveled against pluralism, the religious other is “a priori domesticated.”100 Though the religious other may change and challenge Christianity, they do not change and challenge Christianity’s unique normativity and privilege. It thus seems this change and challenge is fairly limited in scope—much more limited than he indicated in his 1990 essay.

Before we move on to the work of S. Mark Heim, it is important to note one tension that has so far emerged and that, in my view, remains unresolved within D’Costa’s argument. As I noted above, D’Costa’s particularist critique radicalizes the pluralist argument from historical contingency and the mediatedness of all knowledge and experience. D’Costa employs this as an argument for his in- and later exclusivism. In doing so, he seems to imply that, simply because all thought is “tradition-specific,” there is nothing to do but accept the particular version of power, patriarchy and episteme of the Roman Catholic church. It is not clear to me why this is cogent. It is clearly true that hermeneutically any position comes from a finite historical location and is formulated by contingent human beings,101 but this is at most an argument for the ultimate failure of any comprehensive explanatory systems to escape this contingency in a definite manner. A protestant, or marxist, or new-age spiritual perspective might simply admit it is “specific” in the way all thinking inevitably is (which, if it is inevitable, is hardly an admission) and be on its way. Indeed, a pluralist view might well admit the same.

It may be that this implication is a suggestion only: that D’Costa does not argue that a traditionalist Roman Catholicism follows from the argument from contingency, but that this argument merely gives him the liberty to affirm such a Catholicism. However, if that is the case, his argument

97 Ibid., p. 129.
98 Ibid., p. 114.
99 Ibid., p. 131.
100 Ibid., p. 2.
101 Cf. ibid., p. 3.
against pluralism is weakened, as well, as pluralism would likewise be simply one of the contingent and specific positions one is free to affirm. While I, too, criticized pluralism for implicitly presuming a privileged position and a re-centered Enlightenment universalism, I worry a too careless use of this argument may make a straw man of pluralism. For pluralists readily admit, even argue, the contingency of all perspectives and the ultimate impossibility of knowing the Real in itself.

It thus appears to me that there is something peculiar going on with D’Costa’s use of this “postmodern” argument of inevitable historical-cultural contingency, which remains limited to its rhetorical use against pluralism. He accuses the pluralists of attempting to escape this contingency, radicalizing their own argument and turning it around on them. It appears, however, that this argument now only affects pluralism, leaving his own traditionalist version of Roman Catholicism high and dry. Since a universal perspective is impossible, he appears to argue, one is at liberty to affirm a traditionalist version of Roman Catholicism indeed is allowed to do so “unashamedly,” but this is odd: Either one is also at liberty to affirm an “unashamedly” pluralist position, or D’Costa’s own Roman Catholicism is equally weakened by the argument from historical contingency. This does not appear to be the case. While D’Costa thus rightly argues against pluralism’s desire to offer a comprehensive, universal schema, he appears to have no problem with a comprehensive schema of his own. While he rightly de-centers pluralism’s Enlightenment universalism, this is achieved by a re-centering into what appears to be a Roman Catholic universalism.

I.3.2 S. Mark Heim

Further removed from D’Costa’s discussions of Catholic dogma, Baptist deacon and theologian S. Mark Heim offers a view that may seem, at first, odd or unusual. But it is also a kind of Christian theology that, it appears to me, is profoundly guided by pastoral concerns over the fate of non-Christian friends and neighbors, a question Heim broadens and deepens to address not narrowly their salvation, but the fulfillment of what they hoped and worked for during their religious life. They did not hope for salvation in the Christian sense, after all—would it be just to give it to them regardless?

That seems to be the core intuition of Heim’s books *Salvations* and *The Depth of the Riches*. What if, both in death and in life, religions do

102 John Caputo argues against what he calls a “Kantian” or “abridged version of postmodernism,” which he argues only employs postmodern suspicion to make space for classical theology. It “comes down to saying that the ‘perhaps’ allows the God of classical theology to still stand and such faith to be still possible,” keeping God and the tradition “safe from trouble” (Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 103). See Chapter III, below.

not all strive towards the same thing, but offer different but real options? According to Heim, all parties in the above debate ascribe a negative value to religious difference: They all assume that what is different cannot be valid. Conservative Christians see difference primarily as error, and liberals assume that what is different must be superficial to a deeper commonality. This “general assumption is shared by exclusivists and pluralists, who both expect to see their truth unveiled irresistibly to all and adopted by all. Clearly that is not what happens in this life. Nor is it clear why it would happen definitively in the next.”\textsuperscript{104}

Heim’s critique of pluralism is by now familiar: It misses the deeply particular nature of religious experience and religious life, and hypothesizes a unity where this is not called for. “There seems to be some sleight of hand,” Heim argues, “in co-opting the specific accounts of varied religious ends as evidence for belief in one mysterious and virtually unspecified goal as the reality referred to in each case.”\textsuperscript{105} There may be reason to presume these various experiences are all somehow valid or real, but not really to conclude that they are therefore the same. To do so “drastically undercuts confidence in any connection between the perceptions and reality.”\textsuperscript{106} Pluralism takes “all the accounts as illusory,” and reduces “its referential value to near zero.”\textsuperscript{107} While Hick maintains both “personal” and “impersonal” are possible descriptions of the Real, this is only possible “because one can call God literally anything, to equal lack of effect.”\textsuperscript{108}

But where D’Costa argued the supposed inevitability of a “tradition-specific” position, Heim adds another pole to this dilemma of theorizing: certainly, there is “no ‘metatheory,’ no neutral place that allows us to judge from above the religions rather than among them.”\textsuperscript{109} But, at least when doing theology, every perspective is also itself a comprehensive metatheory. Hick made much of his attempt to integrate many insights from many religions. Heim, on the other hand, argues that “the religions themselves are just such efforts at integration. . . . It is rare for religious traditions to exalt one extremely narrow aspect of divine encounter and to totally ignore the existence of any other religious phenomena.”\textsuperscript{110}

Heim’s own constructive effort at such integration is, simply put, that

\textsuperscript{104}Heim, \textit{The Depth of the Riches}, p. 285.
\textsuperscript{105}Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{106}Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{107}Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{108}Ibid., 40n34. Heim estimates that Hick actually “seems to take impersonality as a baseline” (ibid., 41n34). However, he suggests, it makes much more sense to take personality as a baseline: “[A] personal absolute can have a real impersonal dimension that is not at all extrinsic. . . . We need not leave behind the notion that [human] persons have bodies that follow physical laws, for instance, in order to believe persons are not only physiological.” Ibid., p. 178.
\textsuperscript{109}Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{110}Ibid., p. 129.
other religions might offer something real and good that is not (yet) salvation. With this suggestion, Heim aims to embrace both the validity of non-Christian religious ends, as distinct from the Christian religious end, and the necessary assertion that salvation, strictly speaking, is uniquely attained through Christ alone. Instead of suggesting differing ways to the same goal, then, Heim argues there may be “different, real religious ends that are not Christian salvation at all.” In a sense, he argues, we might take other religious traditions at their word: Perhaps, instead of claiming they all secretly offer the same thing, or only one is right and the others all inevitably lead to damnation, we might presume that they really do offer what they promise, and that these multiple ends might exist as multiple options alongside each other. Each of these ends can serve either as a “threshold point toward salvation,” allowing the deceased person to make a post-mortem jump towards the Christian end, or as final in itself. If pluralism says there are many good ways up the same mountain, and exclusivism holds that there is only one, Heim suggests that maybe there are many good mountains.

There is a single objective character to the world, and religious “preferences” must all work themselves out within that one common reality. This is an important truth. But one world can have more than one mountain. In our middle realm there are several peaks, for the obvious reason that diverse religious fulfillments stand at their own summits, set so within the texture of their own religious traditions and practices. Each of these peaks represents two options: it can be a penultimate stage in relation to salvation or a final end in its own right. . . . Below each summit lies a spur or ridge from which those who taste this fulfillment may yet pursue another connection. All the summits are linked by such ridges to the Christian mountain. The Christian mountain is one among others.

Heim argues this view “affirms the value of confessional witness, [but] it also relativizes any one tradition’s claim to have an absolute monopoly on truth.” Christianity can boast of being the only way to salvation, but it has to admit that it might not be so bad to achieve Nirvana instead. “Nirvana and communion with God are contradictory only if we assume that one or the other must be the sole fate for all human beings. . . . But for different people, or the same person at different times, they could both be true.” This relativization of Christian superiority is not achieved through

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111Ibid., p. 3.
112Ibid., p. 276. Heim argues salvation is “theosis, divinization, or sharing in the divine nature” of communion in relation and difference with the trinity. Ibid., pp. 49–77, 176.
113Ibid., pp. 287–279.
114Ibid., p. 30.
115Ibid., p. 43.
“the dubious claim to impose a philosophical interpretation from an absolute vantage point above that possible for any actual religion, but precisely by the actual validity of other religious traditions themselves.”

This interpretation is made possible by an appreciation of the Trinity, which Heim calls “Christianity’s ‘pluralistic theology.’” Heim notes, remarking that this is not merely a projection but expresses “something of God’s true nature.” The Trinity means ultimate reality is an embrace of relation and difference; “there is no being without both difference and communion.”

Trinity provides a particular ground for affirming the truth and reality of what is different. Trinitarian conviction rules out the view that among all the possible claimed manifestations of God, one narrow strand alone is authentic. Trinitarian conviction would rule out as well the view that all or most of these manifestations could be reduced to a single pure type underlying them. A simple exclusivism and a simple pluralism are untenable. There is an irreducible variety in what is ultimately true or of greatest significance.

While religious diversity does not need to be condemned, “alternative ways of integrating difference are regarded as penultimate at best in comparison with the trinitarian option.”

Various religions, then, might grasp one aspect of the Trinity, or more, but to a limited extent, making it an “authentic revelation of the triune God, but not revelation of God as triune.” Where D’Costa had suggested different religions might grasp one person of the Trinity, namely the Spirit, Heim rather suggests they might grasp one or some aspects of the Trinity as a whole, arguing that the separation of the persons is not strictly speaking possible. Drawing on work by Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, Heim notes that the communion of the three persons of the Trinity is expressed in three aspects, which arise from the “shared life of the three persons together.”

The three aspects each indicate a different kind of unity: The first is “the infinity of the divine life as it circulates through the three persons.”

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117 Ibid., p. 133.
118 Ibid., p. 124.
119 Ibid., p. 126.
120 Ibid., p. 175.
121 Ibid., p. 127.
122 Ibid., p. 128.
123 Ibid., p. 275.
125 Ibid., p. 157.
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which is a more processual interpretation of the traditional single substance. The second is plurality and relation between “three distinct centers of consciousness,” 126 a kind of social unity. And third is the unity of purpose, that the Triune God acts with a single will, as a single center of consciousness. “The distinctive religious ends of various traditions correspond to relations with God constituted by limitation or intensification within a particular dimension” of these three. 127

As the earlier D’Costa had also emphasized, the Trinity means there is more going on than Christianity grasps. There is “a very real sense in which the church does not know what it is talking about, does not begin to fathom the one in whom it puts its trust.” 128 Interreligious and intercultural encounter, including conversion, constitute de-centering processes of transformative translation which aim “also at the transformation and enlightenment of the existing church and of Christians.” 129 The church does not only have a mission to the world—“the world has a mission to the church” as well, and Christ “out of and through” 130 the world and the world religions.

This entanglement means religion is always caught up in incomplete translations and transformative shifts in meaning. “It is more accurate to say that all of us in the various parts of the church are only partially ‘christian speaking’ (or living). We are at best rather pidgin practitioners. The whole language as yet escapes us all.” 131

Heim thus formulates a vision of a decidedly Christian theology that can affirm religious diversity and the reality and validity of non-Christian traditions. Although different religions may not be after “the same thing,” as pluralism had hoped, Heim argues this does not mean that the difference between them is insurmountable, or even that the others are decidedly inferior. For from any summit, “all others surely appear lower”: 132 Each religion will consider its own religious end to be ultimate. Considering salvation or communion with the Triune God as ultimate is simply the Christian view. Everyone will see their own religious end as the best, leading to a kind of mutual praeparatio: “Each regards the other’s ultimate as penultimate, leaving open the further possibility of transformation.” 133

While affirming the viability of non-Christian religious ends, Heim’s is also a specifically Christian account: It is a Trinitarian ontology that holds the whole together, and Heim believes salvation is, quite simply, better than the other options. There is thus a peculiar tension in Heim’s work, which I

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126 Ibid., p. 157.
127 Ibid., pp. 167–168.
128 Ibid., p. 140.
129 Ibid., p. 145.
130 Ibid., p. 147.
131 Ibid., p. 144.
132 Ibid., p. 283.
133 Ibid., p. 32.
think is profoundly valuable for approaching religious difference: On the one hand, it is possible, even necessary, to admit that we are all limited in our knowledge, and that if we were of another religion, we would consider that one the best. On the other hand, however, this does not decisively overcome religious attachments: If there is no privileged access, this leaves space also for an affirmation of Christian teachings, appropriately humbled. In a very real sense, Heim argues, all of us at best only partially know what we are talking about—which invites to encounter, translation, and transformative shifts in meaning.

I.3.3 Fin

Heim and D’Costa turn to the Trinity in order to do justice to the particular nature of religious faith and to make sense of religious diversity in a way that is decidedly Christian. While doing so, both also give a place to a certain unruliness or de-centering they find at work in religious difference. A Trinitarian ontology, as opposed to a monism or more strict monotheism, means that there is an irreducible plurality and difference to the world that cannot be subsumed into a higher, more final unity. Unity and plurality, or relation and difference, are, in a sense, co-eternal. Neither has the final say. While maintaining a decidedly Christian vocabulary, the Trinitarian can emphasize that Christianity does not have a monopoly on truth, that it does not yet fully know what it is about and requires interreligious and intercultural encounter (and conversion) to become more fully Church. In a way, religious difference thus resists being thought of from a unitary first principle and, to some extent, eludes Christian control.

In my view, D’Costa and Heim’s arguments are most powerful when they show how unsettling the consequence of their schema is: that the very God we believe in may have reached out to others, that indeed He wants to teach us the meaning of Christ through them. This unsettling challenge hits closer to home than in pluralism, in my view. Learning about, being challenged by, and discerning truth in other religious traditions does not simply teach us something about them or about an unavailable ineffable Real, but about Christ and the Kingdom of God.

In D’Costa’s and Heim’s arguments, however, this elusive unruliness comes immediately restricted as it is given an assigned place within a clearly Christian perspective. And it is here, it appears to me, that the Trinitarians are so successful at going halfway, for the schemata they present largely serve to contain this intuition, to reassure that although we cannot find a completely certain footing, we still have pretty sure footing, that although Christ is not the only revelation, He is normative and decisive. Or, in Heim’s schema, while Christianity might not be the only way, the Christian may continue to affirm it is the best way, and the only way to salvation. Christianity may not have a monopoly on religious ends, for Heim, but it
does retain the monopoly on *its own* religious end, leaving the other “good mountains” at a reasonably safe distance after all.

Ultimately, the argument for preferring the Christian tradition—Roman Catholic for D’Costa, more ecumenical for Heim—can only be circular: In the end we can offer no greater reason for preferring or privileging a Christian perspective than that we are Christians ourselves. The irreducible particularity and conditionedness of all experience is not in itself a reason to prefer one particular tradition over the others, but at most gives us the intellectual liberty to afford a position we cherish for other reasons. In the end, when we take the radicalization of the pluralist argument from particular conditionedness seriously, we must all admit we are of the religion we are, and thus prefer such a perspective over others, *because that’s where we are*—because that is where “it” gripped us. Ultimately, religious commitment does not find completely solid argumentative footing, but remains grounded in biography, community and tradition.

This “postmodern condition” seems to cut both ways: Pluralists employ it against religious superiority, but particularists can turn it around and employ it against pluralists’ presumptions of their own. It appears, thus, that *neither* one religion’s superiority, *nor* a metaperspective, find sufficient ground. It is this I will pick up in the next section, where Francis X. Clooney argues the particulars of interreligious learning do not merit either sweeping conclusion.
I.4 Comparative Theology

In this section, I will discuss comparative theology, adding a further layer to this “anarchy” of religious difference I am pursuing. Comparative theologians argue the “interreligious” is rather more complex and unsettling than the previously discussed approaches presume. On closer inspection, the interreligious does not give enough of itself to found the sweeping assessments of pluralism or Trinitarian particularism. While comparative theologians presume and find that there is *something* going on outside their own tradition, what they find resists being schematized into comprehensive assessments. They can ultimately only assess the specific aspects that they have studied in depth, and even there, a profound ambiguity remains.

Comparative theology is, at root, a reading practice. As James L. Fredericks puts it, it is “a constructive project in which theologians interpret the meaning and truth of one tradition by making critical correlations with the classics of another religious tradition.”  

It proceeds “dialectically” through the study of foreign traditions and the return to one’s own. Fredericks argues comparative theology should be considered an “alternative” to “the attempt to understand the theological meaning of the diversity of religions in keeping with the doctrinal requirements of a home tradition.” It “seeks to resist” the “construction of comprehensive theological interpretations of other religions.” Christian theology of religions typically leads to “distortions” in the perception of the other, which contribute to a “domestication” in which the “threat of the Other, as well as its transformative power, are muted.” In line with my assessment above, he argues the *a priori* nature of theology of religions can “function ideologically by protecting Christians from the necessity of changing their minds . . . in response to the encounter with the other.” I will explore this below through a discussion of the work of Francis X. Clooney and Marianne Moyaert.

I.4.1 Francis X. Clooney

Francis X. Clooney, SJ, is arguably the most prominent proponent of comparative theology. He summarizes his work and thought in this field in a 2010 book called *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious* ...

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135 Ibid., p. xi.
136 Ibid., pp. xiii–xiv.
137 Ibid., p. xiv.
138 Ibid., p. xiv.
139 Ibid., p. xv.
Borders, on which I will here rely to discuss his work.

Clooney starts by noting that the religious diversity that is “increasingly affecting and changing everything around us” can be “an unsettling phenomenon for people who actually are religious.” It “raises doubts about whether any particular wisdom is really absolutely superior to other ways of living spiritually and well,” doubts which, Clooney argues, must not be answered by “easy confidences that keep the other at a distance.” What is direly needed, Clooney argues, is “the cultivation of a more interconnected sense of traditions, read together with sensitivity to both faith and reason, [which] grounds a deeper validation and intensification of each tradition.”

This is what comparative theology sets out to do, “a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and tradition, openness and truth, allowing neither to decide the meaning of our religious situation without recourse to the other.” Clooney defines it thus:

Comparative Theology — comparative and theological beginning to end — marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.

Simply put, comparative theology involves theologians from one religion studying (elements of) another tradition with the presumption that this can teach them something not just about the studied tradition but also about their own tradition and ultimately about God. “Comparative” refers not so much to an effort to rank or judge traditions as to “a reflective and contemplative endeavour [sic] by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other.” Though this may involve evaluation in “some instances,” it is generally more about “the dynamics of back-and-forth learning.” “Theology” refers to the way the theologian both remains committed to their own tradition, and studies the other for the sake of finding something of God—driving one “deeper, into the world of commitment, faith, and encounter with God.”

Reading the sacred texts

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141 Ibid., p. 3.
142 Ibid., p. 7.
143 Ibid., p. 7.
144 Ibid., p. 4.
145 Ibid., p. 8.
146 Ibid., p. 10.
147 Ibid., p. 11.
148 Ibid., p. 11.
149 Ibid., p. 57.
of another tradition is a “humble practice,” Clooney explains, by which the reader is “drawn into the worlds brought to life in their reading.” This constitutes a “risk”: The reader needs to take seriously the faith that animates the foreign text, “without attempting to render the text safe and ineffectual.”

Clooney has thus undertaken many such readings, typically reading elements of Hindu and Christian tradition alongside each other. To name just a few examples, Clooney reads the Christian understanding of *imago Dei*, particularly in Thomas Aquinas, alongside Vedanta Desika’s understanding that “upon final liberation the self attains ‘full likeness’ with God”\(^{152}\) he studies the worship of Narayana, “a particular name of God that is revered in the Srivaishnava Hindu tradition,”\(^{153}\) concluding that the Christian must admit that it is possible to worship God under this name; and he brings the worship of Hindu goddesses into conversation with the Catholic reverence of the Virgin Mary.\(^{154}\)

It is not my purpose to go into the details of these studies here, but rather to point out three conclusions Clooney draws from them for the wider discussion on religious difference. First, Clooney finds that it is actually rather difficult to draw general conclusions out of particular comparative studies. After discussing his study on *imago Dei*, for instance, he notes that “[r]eflection on this material tells us much about how certain pre-modern thinkers understood the divine-human resemblance, and not very much about the large issues of religious pluralism.”\(^{155}\) Close and detailed comparative study does not appear to lend itself to sweeping statements about which religion is superior, or how it all fits together, merely offering some illumination of our own understandings—in this case *imago Dei*.

The closer the study, the more difficult it becomes to draw from it a general assessment of religions and religious diversity. “Once traditions are recognized as theologically complex, they are less easily categorized, and it becomes much more difficult to decide their meaning and assign them a particular theological slot.”\(^{156}\) Comparative Theology “leaves to others the large judgments about religions. It is faithful . . . but has little faith in easy

\(^{150}\)Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, p. 58.
\(^{151}\)Ibid., p. 63.
\(^{155}\)Ibid., *Comparative Theology*, p. 120.
\(^{156}\)Ibid., p. 14.
I.4. COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

vindications of doctrinal positions.” Comparative theology, then, is “not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith.”

Second, Clooney comes upon something we might call “interchangeability” or “translatability”: Upon close study of the texts of another religious tradition, the comparative theologian may be forced to admit that what goes on in that tradition is not inferior to his own. After his discussion of Narayana, for example, Clooney concludes that there is “almost nothing . . . that could not be accepted by the Christian.” The Christian must admit it is possible to worship God under this name, they may even invoke it in Christian prayer. “To say that we may be able to use this particular name of this particular Hindu deity in Christian prayer is not to state a general principle, as if to hold that all divine names are interchangeable,” he hastens to add, stressing such interchangeability needs to be “discerned in particular.” But it does reveal a more modest general principle, namely that such interchangeability is possible in principle, that apparently Christianity is not uniquely capable of saying what it intends to bring to speech.

As such the reader must be open to “the possibility even of meeting God through careful reading.”

As we learn honestly, extrinsic or simplistic reasons for staying in our own religion may evaporate. We find that our tradition is not the only one that is reasonable, committed, or open to God, that we have real choices about religious belonging, because the other traditions are neither foolish nor inaccessible. Even if we choose to remain in our original tradition, remaining is now a real choice made in light of real alternatives.

It thus becomes apparent that one’s home tradition is not privileged in expressing the truth, not even in expressing its own — “most theological expressions of truth have in some form appeared elsewhere too.”

And third, Clooney at times simply finds that the studied material does not merit a conclusion at all, leaving the comparative theologian caught between loyalty to his own religion and the feasibility and depth of the other. Regarding his study of Goddess worship, he thus remarks that “[t]o celebrate and glorify a supreme Goddess is more specific and unsettling than

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157 Ibid., p. 41.
158 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
159 Ibid., p. 122.
160 Ibid., p. 122.
162 Clooney, Comparative Theology, p. 62.
163 Ibid., p. 156.
164 Ibid., p. 113.
simply pondering God’s presence in other religions.” While the devotion of Mary offered “by way of resemblance a mirror in which I could envision the wisdom of the goddess traditions,” which in turn makes Marian devotion “different, richer, and more captivating,” he finds he must leave open how it all might fit together. Finding himself unable to either affirm or deny the existence of Goddesses, “the doors are left open.”

Comparative Theology thus entails the willingness or even necessity to live with persistent open-endedness. If this is sometimes the case after the study, it is always the case before it. As Clooney writes, comparative theology “cannot be undertaken merely to get to results known already, before the reading.” Comparative theology is “not a process leading to closure.” In cross-reading, “[t]he double reading is never done with, and no synthesis . . . emerges.” It is “a spiritual event that will keep overflowing our expectations.”

The presumption that God can be encountered at all through the study of other traditions is one that seems—as the previous section has shown—relatively uncontroversial among the theologians I am discussing. Clooney formulates “several rather general (theistic) insights” or presuppositions to this extent: among others, that “God chooses to be known . . . through religious traditions as complex religious wholes,” and “can speak to us in and through a tradition other than our own, even if we do not, cannot, embrace as our own the whole of that tradition.”

In contrast to D’Costa’s approach, which significantly limited God’s activity in other religions through his Trinitarian schema, in Clooney’s understanding God’s speech remains in an important sense the subject of an unresolvable tension: On the one hand, comparative study may lead us to affirm that God speaks through that other tradition, yet on the other hand, this does not mean that we ought to embrace that tradition. It may even merit a situation where we are gripped by the depth of faith in the other text, yet still find ourselves unable to embrace it. This remains a “creative tension,” untidy but in the long run fruitful, meaning that “[i]f we do our work well, grounding scholarly commitments in faith, we will always be on the edge of failing in scholarship or failing in faith. Then we will be properly conflicted theologians, comparative theologians.” This means interreligious learning has a tensive unpredictability to it in a way that neither

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165 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, p. 123.
166 Ibid., p. 125.
167 Ibid., p. 61.
168 Ibid., p. 66.
169 Ibid., p. 127.
170 Ibid., p. 152.
171 Ibid., p. 115.
172 Ibid., p. 11.
173 Ibid., p. 57.
174 Ibid., p. 30.
pluralism nor Trinitarianism had: The comparative theologian remains “responsible to their home community, and in a different but real way to the other community whose texts they have been studying.”

We thus see in Clooney’s assessment an increasing appreciation for the tensions and unpredictability that mark detailed interreligious learning. On closer study, the interreligious resists being understood comprehensively, it does not allow itself to be thought from a priori principles. Religious difference, it appears, does not give enough of itself to merit the sweeping conclusions of either pluralism or Trinitarianism. While Clooney agrees with the basic observations of both—that Christianity does not appear uniquely privileged among the religions, and that a neutral ground for such an assessment is not available—he resists both of their schemata, embracing instead persistent tension and open-endedness.

I.4.2 Marianne Moyaert

These themes are brought into conversation with philosophical hermeneutics, most notably the work of Paul Ricoeur, by Marianne Moyaert. She formulates her work on interreligious hermeneutics as a response to the “impasse” in academic debate between pluralists and “postliberal particularists,” for whom she takes the work of George Lindbeck as foundational (see above). Her approach is marked by an emphasis on the fragile nature of religious identity, and the concurrent potentially distressing nature of encounters with the religious other, “for it is especially in the encounter with the other that the human person becomes aware of his/her own strangeness and vulnerability.”

Before we may turn to an assessment of other religions, as pluralists and Trinitarians have done, Moyaert notes it is crucial to attend to the difficulty of interreligious understanding:

[T]he first requirement of interreligious learning is the willingness to understand the other in his or her otherness and to avoid reading one’s own presuppositions into the religious world of the other. This turns interreligious dialogue into a hermeneutical challenge, involving the question of mutual understanding or the degree to which individuals belonging to one religion can grasp the meaning of symbols, teachings, and practices of another. This hermeneutical question of if and to what extent one can understand the otherness of the religious other has priority over

175 Ibid., p. 112.
176 Moyaert, In Response to the Religious Other, p. 120.
177 Ibid., p. 121.
theological question concerning the soteriological value of other religions.\textsuperscript{179}

Neither pluralism nor Lindbeckian particularism, Moyaert argues, formulate appropriate responses to this fragility, or to the tension between the foreign and the familiar, as both exhibit “a nostalgic longing after purity and unity.”\textsuperscript{180} Where pluralism overemphasizes similarity, particularism overemphasizes difference. Both emerge from a desire for a “definitive solution—the correct theological interpretation of religious plurality,”\textsuperscript{181} which is at the same time “a desire to be redeemed from restlessness.”\textsuperscript{182} In contrast, Moyaert stresses that “interreligious encounters are far more messy than often supposed.”\textsuperscript{183}

Moyaert agrees in principle with Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic” view of religions, which holds that religions can be understood as somewhat like languages, rather than collections of propositional expressions. However, she disagrees with his claim that this would make them incommensurable.\textsuperscript{184} If religions are somewhat like languages, then interreligious dialogue could be somewhat like translation. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur,\textsuperscript{185} she notes a translator’s work is “a constant mediation between the strange and the familiar,”\textsuperscript{186} marked by “the pragmatic tension between faithfulness and betrayal.”\textsuperscript{187} Interreligious understanding is “won on the battlefield of a secret resistance motivated by fear, indeed, by hatred of the foreign, perceived as a threat against our own linguistic [or religious] identity.”\textsuperscript{188} Lacking a third, neutral, “pure” language that could assimilate all of both languages and create fully transparent understanding, the only answer to an imperfect translation is another translation. The work is never finished, the problem is never solved. This is cause for mourning, but it also means that “what drives the foreign and the familiar apart also drives them toward each other.”\textsuperscript{189}

Interreligious translation means, then, letting go of the dream of perfect, transparent understanding, as well as of our fear of the strange.\textsuperscript{190} This is a stance she describes as “the ethical posture of hermeneutical hospitality

\textsuperscript{179}Moyaert, \textit{In Response to the Religious Other}, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{180}Ibid., p. 150.
\textsuperscript{181}Moyaert, \textit{Fragile Identities}, p. 298.
\textsuperscript{182}Ibid., p. 298.
\textsuperscript{183}Moyaert, \textit{In Response to the Religious Other}, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{184}Cf. Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{186}Moyaert, \textit{Fragile Identities}, p. 228.
\textsuperscript{187}Ibid., p. 229.
\textsuperscript{188}Ricoeur, \textit{On Translation}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{189}Moyaert, \textit{In Response to the Religious Other}, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{190}Moyaert subjects this dream of transparency to an eschatological suspension. Vulnerability in interreligious encounters thus also opens us up to a foretaste of what is yet to come. She describes such a foretaste as a feast. “The generosity of understanding, we could say, presupposes the generosity of festive hospitality. This ritual framing is thus not secondary to interreligious dialogue but shows precisely that, despite the real differences,
for the religious other.”

It is a willingness to make space in one’s own tradition to welcome the other in their otherness; this openness is accompanied by a willingness to accept such hospitality in turn, to become guests, to become strangers ourselves. Such openness and hospitality are described in terms of hermeneutics: It is less a certain theological estimation or judgment Moyaert is after, but rather an attitude or approach that makes it possible to even understand the other at all.

Indeed, Moyaert does not have such a problem with negative estimations, or at least not with what she describes as being disturbed or unsettled in the encounter. Such responses are not signs of a lack of openness; rather, the difficulty is a necessary part of genuine engagement: “A hermeneutics that is intended to bridge the distance between the familiar and the other, without being disturbed, challenged, or interrupted by the other, is suspicious.” To reject the a priori answers of theology of religions is a way of holding back the violent imposition of an encompassing metaphysical framework, of engaging nonviolently with an other who is allowed to speak with her own voice, as a subject.

In interreligious encounter, people of faith are not there to reach consensus, or to debate, but rather to give testimony, to witness to a fragile certainty. Faith, when expressed as testimony, recognizes that it cannot present a cogent argument for itself. Its witness is at the same time a recognition of its own groundlessness. It is “fragile because there are no irrefutable criteria to decide its truth, fragile because of the risk of rejection.” The question of truth does not find sure footing for its adjudication, but coincides with the truthfulness of the speaker’s faith commitment.

Moyaert follows Ricoeur’s understanding of faith as essentially groundless, in which religion, which “can never exist in the singular,” is about the misunderstandings, possible injuries, and the non-recognition of the religious other, a choice is made for solidarity in the hopeful expectation of final reconciliation. Making room for the religious other is not simply a question of the understanding. Only when the adherent of another religion is recognized as a table companion is hermeneutical openness also theologically meaningful. . . . In the feast people acknowledge their fragility on the one hand and, on the other, draw the strength to enter the fragile hermeneutical space in which interreligious dialogue occurs in the hope of the final reconciliation.”

Moyaert, Fragile Identities, pp. 313–314.

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191 Moyaert, In Response to the Religious Other, p. 122.
192 Moyaert, Fragile Identities, p. 314.
194 Moyaert, Fragile Identities, p. 234.
195 Ibid., p. 293.
196 Ibid., p. 294.
responding to the “groundless ground” of existence, which “eludes any attempt to master it. The religious attitude presumes the relinquishment of control. Deep down, it is a vulnerable outlook.”\textsuperscript{198} This groundless ground is “excessive and generous,” a superabundance that cannot be contained by human cognition.\textsuperscript{199} “To be religious is to open up to a call that comes from elsewhere, from beyond and higher than myself.”\textsuperscript{200}

While there is no peeking “beyond” the particular way religious tradition receives, points to, and responds to this groundlessness—Moyaert follows Ricoeur in his skepticism towards appeals to a supposedly universal religious experience\textsuperscript{201}—the capacity of text and tradition to figure the groundless ground must also not be overstated. According to Moyaert, such “humility” “invites all believers to accept the possibility that there might be some truth conveyed in another tradition that is lacking in one’s own.”\textsuperscript{202} Responding to the call from beyond remains “a risk and a wager,”\textsuperscript{203} committing to a religious tradition remains fragile and impossible to firmly ground. The tension between the all-encompassing nature of religious commitment and the inevitably relative and particular nature of tradition remains, and it gives rise not to blind faith but to reflection and critique,\textsuperscript{204} even to a call for the death of the God of metaphysics\textsuperscript{205}—about which we will read much more with Richard Kearney in the next chapter.

In general, Moyaert finds in interreligious encounters a sense of difficulty, fragility, even restlessness that typical theologies of religions either do not recognize or actively try to contain. In Moyaert’s analysis, interreligious encounter and understanding are sites of a persistent tension that does not get resolved. But she also stresses that difficulty is a sign of genuine engagement: If interreligious encounters do not somehow unsettle or trouble, they are not really worth their salt. Her use of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy provides a helpful start to my discussion of Kearney’s work, who also stays close to Ricoeur, in the next chapter.

\textbf{I.4.3 Fin}

Comparative theology, one could say, has a heart for trouble. Clooney seems to agree with the pluralist argument, that there is no obvious reason to assume one religion is superior to another. However, he also agrees with the argument of the Trinitarians, that there is no neutral ground from which to assess religions, and that every understanding of religious diversity is

\textsuperscript{198}Moyaert, \textit{In Response to the Religious Other}, p. 47.\textsuperscript{199}Ibid., p. 47.\textsuperscript{200}Ibid., p. 48.\textsuperscript{201}Ibid., p. 51.\textsuperscript{202}Ibid., p. 48.\textsuperscript{203}Ibid., p. 50.\textsuperscript{204}Ibid., p. 51.\textsuperscript{205}Ibid., p. 61.
irreducibly particular. At the same time, he is skeptical of the grand conclusions drawn by either: While we must humbly admit that Christianity is not privileged among the religions, and that a more objective perspective is equally denied to us, religious difference does not appear to give enough of itself to merit the grand schemata of pluralism or Trinitarianism. It thus remains an open-ended, unpredictable, tensive affair.

Moyaert takes these conclusions further, bringing them into conversation with the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. In so doing, it becomes apparent that the interreligious raises a host of questions, questions that often go beyond, or precede, the questions on which theologies of religions have focused. In attempting to understand the foreign, translating between its language and our own, underlying philosophical difficulties become apparent. These difficulties cannot be resolved—interreligious encounter remains processual, dynamic, and messy. Theology has often tried to contain this unruliness, but Moyaert argues that is the wrong strategy, as it is the unsettling dynamism that makes interreligious encounter come alive and open up.

The interreligious starts to come into view as a dynamic, unstable, and unsettling affair—what I have called its “anarchy.” The irreducible particularity of religious commitments further means there is no objective, neutral site from which to adjudicate. When we encounter the religious other, and are, as Clooney was, forced to admit that their tradition is alive with a depth of faith that is not inferior to our own, a sense of an ultimate groundlessness of our religious commitments insists itself.

While these insights already have profound consequences for theology of religions, a further layer of anarchy remains. For the basic schema of comparative theology as Fredericks described it above—the dialectic movement through the study of a foreign tradition and the return to one’s own—continues to work from an assumption that has also begun to be questioned: the assumption there are such things as “religions,” relatively homogeneous entities that can be delineated, represented, and assessed at all. In the comparative theologians’ emphasis on the particularity and difficulty of their assessments, the first tremors of this radical questioning can already be felt. Comparative theologians sympathetic to feminist and postcolonial concerns have taken this questioning further, as we will see in the next section.

Paradoxically, comparative theology’s reluctance to enter into more comprehensive assessments, one of its most radical insights, may also be precisely what restricts its radicality. Above (p. 37), I discussed how Clooney stresses that the translatability of some divine names does not imply a general translatability of all divine names. But in so doing, I wonder whether he does not also protect the tradition from the realization that such such translation is possible in principle, which may already be profoundly un-
settling. This apparent self-restriction is repeated in comparative theology’s self-characterization as “marginal” in the discipline of theology, which seems to inoculate the core of confessional theology against many of its insights. In Judith Gruber’s words, “[t]his ultimately neutralizes the most profoundly unsettling impact comparative theological work can have on its home tradition: an exposure of its constitutive ambivalence and internal diversity.” Though Clooney and Moyaert may be reluctant to enter into comprehensive assessments, their findings do have profound theoretical consequences and lead directly into the territory I will explore in the core chapters of this study.

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207 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, pp. 157f.
I.5 Feminisms

The concerns of women, or more specifically feminist concerns, have been largely absent from the above discussion. Most of the authors I have discussed were men and none discussed themes of gender or women’s issues to any significant degree. As Kate McCarthy observes in 1996, “the effort to define a Christian theology of religions remains almost completely a Western, and masculine, academic enterprise.” 209 This is peculiar, because any cursory observer of interfaith conflict will note that women, women’s bodies, and women’s sexuality all feature prominently in public discourse on religion and religious difference. According to some authors, this indicates not just a missing dimension in the theology but also in the practice of interreligious dialogue, which focuses too much on typically male concerns and sidelines women. 210 Writing in 2006, Helene Egnell observes that “[i]nterfaith dialogue is mostly, at least on the official level, carried out by men, and gender issues have rarely been on the agenda.” 211

Many of those who have criticized this absence have argued that women’s experience and women’s voices could seriously challenge the main assumptions of the debate and offer promising new ways forward. McCarthy thus argues that

[w]hen women’s experience, diverse and complex as it is, is made the point of departure for theological reflection on religious pluralism, new resources emerge for a theology of religions that can genuinely encounter the otherness of the non-Christian without either subsuming that otherness or sacrificing the specific content that enlivens Christian community. 212

For McCarthy, this includes women’s own experience of being “others” and their plural social location.

Anne-Hege Grung, however, wonders if feminism and interreligious dialogue are natural allies. This is a sentiment expressed by Paul Hedges, for example, in his introduction to theologies of religions, arguing they share an interest in subverting “imperialist hegemonic principles.” 213 However, Grung

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argues, the application of “religion” as the primary category of difference in the very premise of interreligious dialogue reduces the significance of other axes of difference, such as sex or race, making oppression or inequality on those points invisible. Interreligious dialogue can thus serve to conserve or even strengthen and legitimize patriarchy. “[I]nterreligious dialogue is always seen as an encounter between representatives of religious traditions deeply marked by patriarchy . . . If this is not challenged, the dialogue can confirm and strengthen the traditions and respective practices.”

In this section, I hope to show that a shift in focus towards women’s and feminist concerns is not just an add-on towards “regular” theologies of religions, nor is it simply the addition of a number of themes and participants that interreligious dialogue had been missing. Rather, it reveals something more essential about the way religious difference works, adding a final layer to the “anarchy” of religious difference I am tracing. I will attempt to sketch a number of interrelated issues that come into view with this shift: Some have argued women might do dialogue differently, presenting different issues and handling differences in a different way. Others have presented feminist theology as a self-evident solution to issues of religious difference, while feminist theology, in turn, has been criticized for not being interreligious enough. Further, a number of theologians have looked to feminist thought more broadly to better understand the way difference and identity function in “hybridity.” This leads me to a discussion of a number of concerns of postcolonial feminisms, in which the interdependence of the construction of religious and sexual difference is brought to light.

I.5.1 Women’s Dialogue

Writing in 2007, Maura O’Neill charges that interreligious dialogue is (still) “not inclusive enough.” In part, this is because women and women’s issues are largely missing or marginal. But, according to O’Neill, interreligious dialogue is also prone to leaving out more conservative voices. If the former can be redressed, the latter might be overcome as well, as “women view their world and their beliefs differently than men do.”


217 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

218 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

219 Ibid., p. 5.
between progressives and conservatives to be overcome, as they are likely to express emotions, tell personal stories, and engage in active listening. In addition, they would introduce some issues into interreligious dialogue on which reaching some form of understanding is important.

O’Neill’s book is not primarily a theoretical study. On the question if hers is not a rather essentialist and stereotypical view of women, for instance, she simply responds that “our purpose here is not to philosophize on the whys and wherefores but rather to acknowledge that expressing emotions and communicating on a personal level are more commonly seen in women than in men and are important tools to a successful dialogue.” Women and men simply are different, she maintains, and women’s more personal and practical approach is simply better capable of bridging gaps between religious factions. I wonder whether such characterizations do not relegate the female or feminist perspective on dialogue to areas women are already stereotypically relegated to: interpersonal relations, emotional expression, and practice over theory. Helene Egnell, writing in 2006, also argues that “O’Neill has essentialist leanings in her view on gender” and “uncritically uses the term ‘women’s ways of thinking and being.’”

Egnell agrees with O’Neill, however, on a pragmatic level that “women’s ability to build and sustain relations is an asset in interfaith dialogue.” Through a number of case studies, Egnell makes visible how a focus on women’s dialogue can challenge typical approaches to the interreligious. In one of these studies, about a series of women’s interfaith travel groups, Egnell notes the women she studied “almost perceive that there is an opposition between dialogue and relationship, dialogue being understood as something very theoretical and formal.” Relationality is one of five insights she draws from this particular case study (though she hesitates to generalize these to a feminine perspective on dialogue):

acknowledgement of “messiness,” stress on building relationships, the ambiguity of religion, a quest for a spirituality that transcends religious boundaries and the insistence that religion cannot be seen separately from other issues in a society.

On a more theoretical level than O’Neill, Egnell suggests that the reality of patriarchy means women have a greater freedom in interreligious dialogue: They “have less ‘vested interests’ in their religious institutions, and thus

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221 Ibid., pp. 114-125.
222 Ibid., p. 7.
223 Ibid., p. xiii.
224 Egnell, Other Voices, p. 275.
225 Ibid., p. 35.
226 Ibid., p. 65.
227 Ibid., p. 89.
[might] be able to articulate more freely their personal feelings and opinions.”  

This shared experience of oppression can serve as a gathering site rather different than the one pluralists typically look for:

[W]omen’s shared experiences of oppression within their religious traditions are a common denominator, which gives a different basis for the dialogue. Together, they seek to identify the sources of oppression, as well as the means to change the traditions. At the same time, they share what they find liberating and life-giving in their religious traditions, things that might not be counted as central to the traditional interpretations. 

Egnell suggests

the image of the margins as borders between countries. Those who live close to the borders often have more in common in terms of living conditions, language and culture with those living on the other side of the border than with those who live in the capital of one’s own country. All kinds of exchanges, legal or otherwise, take place in the borderland.

In another of her case studies of women in dialogue, Egnell remarks that “messiness” is a recurring term. Religious boundaries and categories were often experienced as boxes that do not always quite fit—the marginality of women in their own tradition meant “interreligious dialogue,” understood as “entities sitting neatly in their religious ‘boxes,’” was far away from the experience of the women Egnell studied. “[A]wareness of ‘messiness,’ that ‘things do not fit’ [could be] understood as knowledge that is accessible to those who are at the bottom of the hierarchical struture, or at the margins of a tradition.”

However, the advantage or opportunity marginality represents, as both a gathering site and a source of knowledge, remains ambivalent: “[I]n this positive assessment of marginality, there might also be a risk of reifying...”

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228 Egnell, Other Voices, p. 13.
229 Ibid., p. 13.
230 Ibid., p. 166.
231 Ibid., p. 63.
232 Ibid., p. 63.
233 Ibid., p. 89.
234 Egnell rightly asks the question “whether the women who took part in these traditions were really on the margins of their traditions or of society,” as they were typically “persons who held positions in the academy” or within their religious institutions. However, she concludes that they had gotten to those positions from a position of marginality, that they had “moved from the margins towards the centre [sic],” which put them in “a place where the tradition did not suppose them to be. All had experiences of marginalization and exclusion.” Ibid., p. 165.
women’s marginality. If women keep doing different things at the margins . . . will they ever influence the center?”

In another case study, on women’s interfaith conferences, Egnell notes that in one case “follow-up . . . fell between the stools of the Dialogue and Women’s units.” In the World Council of Churches, she notes, women and interfaith dialogue both represent marginal as well as contentious issues, leading to a “lack of institutional backing” for work that combines the two.

In Egnell’s observation, this means “the women in my material are not only excluded from the ‘field’ of malestream interfaith dialogue, they have rejected it and created their own field.”

In a number of case studies, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, too, asks, “[w]hat difference does it make when women’s voices and experiences are taken as the point of departure for theological investigation?” She largely agrees with Egnell’s findings:

I suggest several aspects of a distinctive approach to encountering our religious “others”: an approach that is fundamentally relational, grounded in friendship and the messiness of actual human lives; an approach that resists compartmentalizing “sacred”/“religious” over against “secular”/“nonreligious”; an approach that insists that our religious orientations must be accountable to the practical, material, and social outcomes that they engender.

Hill Fletcher notes a “crucial intersection” between Christian marginalization of women and “resistance to the presence of religious others.” The experience of women in dialogue suggests that the subjugation of women within a tradition and the exclusion of the religious other as outside the tradition appear to be interrelated. However, as will become clear in the next pages, this has not always meant that feminist theology has been open to the challenge of the religious other.

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235 Ibid., p. 170.
236 Ibid., p. 154.
237 Ibid., p. 168.
238 Jeannine Hill Fletcher. *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, p. xii; to avoid connecting this insight too strongly to gender essentialism, consider that the dialogue practice of scriptural reasoning, mostly done by men, also places a great value on friendship. According to David Cheetham, “[w]hat emerges again and again out of the writings within this movement is an emphasis on the importance of the sense of friendship that is sustained despite possible disagreements and the improvised or spontaneous nature of the triadic discussions that take place.” David Cheetham. *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions*. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013, p. 180; see also David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (eds.). *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.
239 Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor*, p. 186.
I.5.2 Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity

Complementarily to the absence of women in interreligious dialogue, Egnell also notes that interreligious dialogue “has not played a great part in the development of feminist theology. Feminist theology has not dealt explicitly with interfaith issues to a great extent,” and Christian feminists have not been open enough to dialogue with feminists of other faiths. Particularly Rita Gross, a Buddhist feminist theologian, has used her position within feminist theology to voice this critique. In Egnell’s words, Gross is “the principal spokeswoman for an interreligious feminist theology.” Although feminist theology once was a broad and multi-religious movement, Gross charges, it has lost this diversity and become predominantly Christian when Christian feminist theologians became more interested in issues of race.

For Gross, it is obvious that a feminist theology of religions should be pluralist, indeed so obvious she does not consider it necessary to argue it: “It is inconceivable that a feminist theologian would go through all the heartache of being excluded from her own religion . . . only to turn around and make exclusive or inclusive truth claims about the religion that excluded her!” Although “religious diversity is more theologically challenging to monotheisms,” religiously particular approaches to religious difference are not necessary: Gross does not believe “an adequate theology of religions would differ significantly from one tradition to another.” Gross’s argument thus remains rather simple and universalist: Egnell notes, for one, that Gross’s “claim that feminist theology must be pluralist is not self-evident.”

I want to give space here to one particularly critical response directly to Gross’s paper from Muslim theologian Amina Wadud, as it will prefigure some critiques that will follow in this section and the next. Wadud criticizes Gross, who was white, for her disinterest in issues of race and her prioritization of religious diversity among white women over the concerns of black Christian women. Although religious diversity is certainly important, Wadud argues, “like my sex, I have worn my black skin since birth. When I am marginalized for the most important decision of my life—surrender to the embrace of Islam—I do not feel the alienation as deeply as I do with the continual inability of ‘progressive’ women and men . . . to deconstruct their own positions of privilege.” According to Wadud, an

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240 Egnell, Other Voices, p. 12.
242 Egnell, Other Voices, p. 176.
243 Gross, “Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions,” p. 86.
244 Ibid., p. 89.
245 Ibid., p. 89.
246 Ibid., p. 84.
247 Ibid., p. 88.
248 Egnell, Other Voices, p. 177.
249 Rita Gross et al. “Roundtable: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity: Femi-
emphasis on religious diversity without attention to issues of race can serve to obfuscate and thereby reinforce racial oppression and exclusion, especially in supposedly progressive liberal circles.\textsuperscript{250}

One axis of oppression, “race” in the case of Wadud’s and Gross’s interchange, can thus be marginalized through the emphasis of another, in this case religious difference. Above, I discussed Anne-Hege Grung’s similar argument that a focus on religious difference might also marginalize concerns about gender, in which case interreligious dialogue comes to support and reinforce patriarchy. The inverse, however, has also been the case: Christian feminist theology has been accused by Jewish feminists of failing to address its own anti-Judaism, constructing a “feminist Jesus” against a Jewish patriarchy.\textsuperscript{251} The task before “progressive women and men” to “deconstruct their own positions of privilege” (Wadud) is thus a rather complex affair, requiring careful attention to the way religious difference is itself a site of power negotiations, but is also always caught up with other such sites. We will hear more about this when discussing Kwok, below.

Writing over a decade after the debate between Gross and Wadud, Anglican theologian Jenny Daggers wonders if feminist theology, as a theoretical stance but also as a movement of women religious thinkers, is even equipped to deal with the complex interaction of sexual, racial, and religious difference. While feminist theology has retrieved much of its religious diversity in recent years, she argues “the imprint of Christianity is clear”\textsuperscript{252} even on approaches that strive to transcend Christian particularity, especially the pluralism assumed to be superior by Gross.\textsuperscript{253} Agreeing with O’Neill’s argument for the inclusion of conservative women, Daggers wonders whether religious diversity within feminist theology, as Gross envisions it, is adequate for a “deeper engagement with women’s positions within the particularity of their traditions.”\textsuperscript{254} If the engagement of feminist theology with religious difference remains an engagement of religious difference within the confines of progressive feminist theology, “the irenic potential of interreligious dialogue may be compromised.”\textsuperscript{255} Instead, Daggers proposes a Christian particularist model for theology of religions focusing on the Trinity, in which she sees “a viable means of re-centring Christian theology at a time of postcolonial disentangling from Eurocentrism.”\textsuperscript{256}
CHAPTER I. THEOLOGIES OF RELIGIONS

I.5.3 Messiness and Hybridity

While Daggers thus looks for a way to leave traditional integrity largely intact, for other authors, the complex intersection of race, religion, and gender precipitate a disturbance in the central categories of the debate thus far. The rather neat divisions of pluralists and particularists, and even the comparative theologians, in each of which religions continue to appear as more or less clearly delineated entities, are questioned by what Helene Egnell calls “the messiness of actual existence”: “Life is complicated, identities are hybrid, everything is subject to change. Theology and philosophy should not try to ‘tidy up’ the messiness, but deal with life as it is with all its contradictions and ambiguities.”

Typical “malestream” approaches to Theology of Religions “either deny or reify difference.” As I discussed above, while “the very concept of interfaith dialogue [implies] that religious traditions were clearly defined entities, ‘boxes’ from which the dialogue participants negotiated well-defined standpoints,” Egnell argues, women’s experience in dialogue is often that “they could only represent part of that tradition.”

Looking for contributions from feminist thought that would enable theology of religions to engage more seriously with this messiness, Egnell finds that a hermeneutic of suspicion is the most obvious contribution. In addition to a critique of the patriarchal and violent tendencies of Christianity, such a deconstructive autocritique would need to include the scrutiny of anti-Judaic elements in feminist theology (see above). Egnell also identifies the role of women’s bodies as “cultural and national markers” in negotiating religious difference and political and economical conflicts.

A further contribution Egnell identifies is “difference.” Through a feminist understanding of difference as not written in stone, but constructed, we may come to see religious difference as also constructed:

Feminist theology has criticised the way in which gender has been constructed through the categories of hierarchy and difference. There are parallels in the way religion has been constructed, where in triumphalist versions of Christian theology other religions have been constructed as not only different, but it “need not assert the maleness of God, and feminist reimagining[s] of Sophia, along with other reflections on gender and the Trinity, can be transformed to entirely orthodox ends.” She depicts her vision of interreligious encounter as a space “where differences of religious tradition assume a greater importance and where Christian dialogue partners, in all the multiplicity of their hybrid identities, may choose to respect the authority of the classical trinitarian rule.” Daggers, Postcolonial Theology of Religions, pp. 204, 201.

257 Egnell, Other Voices, p. 305.
258 Ibid., p. 305.
260 Ibid., p. 17.
261 Ibid., p. 18.
inferior. Therefore, theology of religions could learn from the way feminists have grappled with central concepts like “difference,” “relation” and “the other.”

A feminist theology of religious difference, in Egnell’s words, would “analyse how gender has played into the construction of Christian identity and religious difference.”

Jeannine Hill Fletcher, too, looks for what feminist theory can contribute to theology of religions. In doing so, Hill Fletcher’s basic theological framework remains close to a form of pluralism: She argues from “God’s mystery as incomprehensible overabundance,” stating that “[i]f the term ‘God’ is the Christian way of referring to the creative source and unending force within creation that is universally accessible, then people of other faiths might have a different term to refer to this same reality.” The different representations of this mystery “might be considered a way of communicating something real about the mystery of existence which nonetheless does not capture all of the reality, the ultimate reality, of this existence.”

Hill Fletcher’s pluralism is less about a comprehensive schema, however, than about “the experience of unknowing” which “opens one up to the radical complexity and infinite possibility which is God.” It is thus not anchored in a presumption to know something about the origin or essence of other religions, but rather about how we are always, in a sense, ignorant even to the origin and essence of our own. Hill Fletcher’s language on this echoes that of Catherine Keller, and I will return to this dynamic in particular in Chapter IV.

A main theoretical aspect of Hill Fletcher’s work is “hybridity.” Typical approaches in theology of religions, she argues, seek to understand religion as the sole defining factor for members of a religious community. If individuals are wholly defined by only their religious allegiance, this both maximizes sameness, silencing internal diversity, as well as difference, sharpening the distance between communities. In conventional theologies of religions, then,

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262 Ibid., p. 20.
263 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
266 Hill Fletcher, Monopoly on Salvation? p. 15.
267 Ibid., p. 135.
268 Hill Fletcher says she is a “big fan” of Keller’s work, which is “incredibly useful and resonant with much of what I am doing.” Personal correspondence, 10 March 2017.
269 Hill Fletcher, “Shifting Identity,” p. 11.
difference remains a problem to be explained (and often explained away) rather than a resource for mutual enrichment and theological exploration. One reason that religious difference has not served a positive function in these theologies is that the Christian tradition itself was assumed to be unaffected by those outside its boundaries. . . . A feminist analysis of human identity as multifaceted and intrinsically hybrid provides a framework for structuring an engagement across different religious visions that can be mutually enriching.270

Typical approaches, especially pluralism and its particularist critics, operate around the same dichotomy of sameness versus difference, leaving them with a simple choice for either one or the other.271 Hick’s pluralism, Hill Fletcher argues, comes down to an invitation “to erase the particularity of every religious tradition.”272 Heim’s alternative, however, “doesn’t seem to match the deep intertwining of persons of religious difference” people find in interfaith dialogue.273 As “neither total sameness nor radical difference works as the basis for real encounter with religious others,” this constitutes “the failure in contemporary theologies of religious pluralism.”274

Conventional theologies of religions, Hill Fletcher argues, thus ignore that people are, and Christianity has been, from its very inception profoundly marked, even constituted, by its relation to its “others.” Relation, encounter, and dialogue have always been part of Christian tradition and are always part of contemporary Christian life. Presuming that only religious difference would be theologically relevant is therefore a gross simplification. Meeting the “religious other” is thus “never just a meeting of religious others, but is embedded in social contexts where persons are informed by a diversity of concerns and a multiplicity of identities. Some of these identities are shared—like being the member of the same family, citizen of the same locale, or follower of a similar lifestyle; others of these identities are distinctive.”275 It is not always possible to say which of my identities is being represented in a particular expression or understanding. “[O]ne fundamental insight of feminist theory has been that identities are not constructed on a singular feature (e.g., gender or religion) but that persons are located in multiple spaces and that these aspects of identity are mutually informing.”276 Identities are thus “hybrid,” drawing on an important notion from

270Hill Fletcher, Monopoly on Salvation? p. ix.
271This is arguably a bit of a simplification of both positions, as Trinitarians as well as pluralists go out of their way to complicate a too simplistic schema and both relativize absolute sameness as well as radical difference.
272Hill Fletcher, Motherhood as Metaphor, p. 193.
273Ibid., p. 194.
274Hill Fletcher, Monopoly on Salvation? p. 81.
275Ibid., p. 48.
We are all hybrid. The categories do not contain all of who we are, and the dynamic elements that layer ourselves are constantly shifting, overlapping even with persons of another faith. This breaks down the duality between self and other, breaking open the conceptual space to reimagine bonds of solidarity.

For Hill Fletcher, this means, further, that the foundation for shared action is not grounded in some absolute or universal natural law, but rather arises processually from conversation and negotiation.\(^{277}\) “Difference and distinctive insights of the various faith traditions might, in fact, be the key to human fulfillment in the never-ending coming to know of God.\(^{278}\) This will also receive additional theoretical depth when we discuss Catherine Keller’s process theology, below.

In *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue*,\(^{279}\) Hill Fletcher looks at women’s interreligious dialogue to formulate a theological anthropology centered on motherhood “as a metaphor for our human condition in its multiplicity of relationality . . . a symbolic way of articulating a fundamental characteristic of all human beings.”\(^{280}\) While her work on interreligious dialogue is thus brought out of the relative marginality of theology of religions to inform theological anthropology, it is peculiar that, on a philosophical level, her approach to theology of religions more specifically seems to relapse, as in her earlier work, into a kind of pluralism: “The nearness of God and God’s ultimate mystery sustains a wide variety of economies of knowledge.”\(^{281}\) Or elsewhere, “Christians must be reminded that whatever we mean by the word ‘God,’ we mean that power that brought forth humanity, all of humanity, all of creation. We *all* are dependent on this mystery of creativity.”\(^{282}\) So she affirms that “the visions of God and the experiences of being human as they are illumined in various religions are multiple,”\(^{283}\) shortly before also affirming “a particularity that reminds us that the ‘human condition’ is that we are irreducibly particular even while inextricably relational.”\(^{284}\)

This appears to me to be a remaining tension in much of the above discussed works. While they challenge theologies of religions on a number of its philosophical presuppositions, particularly on its conceptualization of difference and identity, they largely do not follow through these challenges

\(^{277}\) Ibid., p. 109.
\(^{278}\) Ibid., p. 136.
\(^{279}\) Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor*.
\(^{280}\) Ibid., p. 45.
\(^{281}\) Ibid., p. 181.
\(^{282}\) Ibid., p. 211.
\(^{283}\) Ibid., p. 73.
\(^{284}\) Ibid., p. 74.
to their ultimate philosophical conclusions, remaining agnostic on whether they are ultimately pluralists or something else. Deepening the philosophical consequences for a theology of religious difference of the suggestions and challenges Egnell, Daggers, Hill Fletcher and Egnell have presented will be one of the major tasks of the next chapters, and of this study more generally.

I.5.4 Postcolonial Feminisms

Both Egnell and Hill Fletcher point towards postcolonial theologies as some of the most visionary and necessary contributions to the debate, particularly to the work of Kwok Pui-Lan. Before closing this chapter, I therefore turn to a number of questions and critiques coming from postcolonial feminisms. In addition to intensifying the philosophical stakes of this “anarchy” of religious difference I am pursuing, this will also, hopefully, clarify that these are not merely theoretical questions, but are indeed matters of life and death. This is particularly so in the context which has surrounded much of the West’s encounter with religious diversity: empire.

It is peculiar that the context of empire, imperialism, and hegemony plays such a small role in the debate, neither in a narrow sense of the British or French or American empires, nor in the more general sense of Western global hegemony. In fact, the non-Western context of religious plurality seems to be subject to a general case of amnesia in this regard.  

As Peter Phan and Jonathan Ray note, many studies of religious diversity assume that now, and perhaps only just now, the forces of globalization and new immigration patterns have forced awareness of religious plurality and the need to engage more actively in interreligious discourse. Such approaches, while perhaps true for the dominant Christian outlook of the West, reveal a certain naïveté about lived experiences of religious minorities around the world.

This absence is especially odd if one considers that the globalization and migration that have brought religious diversity into the heart of western societies are, significantly, the direct consequence of European expansion. Further, as postcolonial theologian Laura Donaldson notes, Christianity has in turn played a “crucial role” in the imperialist project. “While many countries occupied and dominated foreign territories,” she remarks, “only the group of nations claiming Christian identity implemented a global colo-

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285 In fairness, Hick had pointed to imperialism as one of his opening arguments (see above, p. 14), and Clooney does note that interreligious learning has “always been an inescapable dimension in the life of every religious community,” and that “[c]olonialism both enabled and disfigured the new interreligious encounters.” Clooney, Comparative Theology, pp. 24–25.

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nial system upon which the sun never set.”\(^{287}\) Donaldson further shows that religious difference in the form of the (admittedly ethnicized) notion of “infidel” “influenced the belief that God created American Indians for the specific purpose of becoming slaves to European Christians.”\(^{288}\)

The Western context of religious diversity is not the only, and certainly not the first encounter with religious diversity. Thinking about religious diversity, particularly if that thinking is theology for and in a truly global Church, must therefore strive to de-center the Western Christian assumption of interpretive authority. Further, it must take into account how the violence that has made possible our current globalized society insists itself into our assumptions when we do theology, and, vice versa, how theological assumptions have insisted themselves into the violence of empire. The aim of such a tracing of colonial entanglement would not be to come out the other end with a theology or a church that is isolated and pure, but rather, to reveal and challenge the way our concepts and understandings are always already conditioned by violence and domination, and that the call of the Divine might thus rather be in the elusive affirmation that resists such violence.

I will return to some theorists from postcolonial studies in Chapter V, so here I will focus primarily on Kwok’s work and how it challenges theology of religions, with brief excursions to other authors as the explication of Kwok’s argument merits them.

Religious Difference

Kwok starts her book on postcolonial feminist theology with a reading of the emergence of imperial Christianity, followed by colonial Christian Europe. In her analysis, violence, gender oppression, and religious exclusion mutually enable each other: Conquest is sexualized and theologically justified, the conquered territory feminized, and the conquered peoples constructed both as religiously other and sexually deviant. At the same time, exclusion and conquest go hand-in-hand with the regulation of gender and the suppression of dissent “within” Christianity.\(^{289}\)

In Kwok’s view, even Enlightenment universalism, arguably the most emancipatory intellectual moment Europe has produced, was wrought through with profoundly sexist, racist and anti-Judaic notions, with categories of people “deemed as either not fully human or exotic and primitive souls, needing the tutelage of the Man of Reason.”\(^{290}\) Imperialistic violence, “masked and


\(^{290}\)Ibid., p. 17.
reconstituted in a blatant reversal as ‘civilizing mission,’” as well as missionary activity, was justified and understood along religious, racial, and also gendered lines, with the patriarchy of supposedly primitive cultures one argument for their subjugation. While missionary women gained some degree of emancipation and freedom, this was conditioned by the inferiority of the colonized. Kwok calls this “colonialist feminism”: enlisting “feminist” ideas in the subjugation of the colonized “by propagating the impression that native women were illiterate, oppressed, and waiting for the white women to bring light to them.”

For Kwok, this is the context that needs to inform a critique of pluralist theology of religions, which has generally not considered its own role alongside empire. Kwok places pluralism under suspicion as a potential accomplice of imperialism, particularly in its twenty-first century incarnation, in which “religion is reconfigured to align with current political interests.” Most common approaches to interreligious dialogue—where typically male, university-educated speakers are taken to represent, and thereby reify, traditions—are far from a natural ally to anti-hegemonic endeavors, indeed they “can be a device used by the metropolitan centers to manage religious differences and to co-opt Third World elites in a postcolonial world.” Instead of forging alliances of resistance, dialogue can become an instrument “to preserve the status quo and camouflage the real differences between Western dominant powers and Third World societies.” The pluralist paradigm, according to Kwok, remains “operative within a cultural assumption that Western culture is the most advanced and that white people need to tolerate those who are different from them.” It thus “smacks of the patronizing tendency of white liberals,” and remains “based still too much on a Christian theistic framework.”

Kwok also criticizes theology of religions for feminist reasons. While she agrees with Ursula King that the dominant models in theology of religions are “androcentric,” she is unsatisfied with King’s critique, and finds Gross equally unsatisfying, most notably because she continues to rely on predominantly Western sources. “While their intention to include gender

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292 Ibid., p. 18.
293 Ibid., p. 197.
294 Ibid., p. 203.
295 Ibid., p. 203.
296 Ibid., p. 199. This critique in part hinges on her view that pluralism teaches that religions are “basically the same,” which, as I indicated during my discussion of pluralism above, is not a very precise characterization, though it may be true for the forms of pluralism popular among non-specialists.
297 Ibid., p. 200.
in a theology of religions is laudable, white feminists speak primarily from their white context and often ignore the contributions of feminists from other parts of the world.

As an alternative, Kwok suggests a “postcolonial theology of religious difference.” Instead of the “usual questions” of transcendental reality, universality of essence, and salvation, Kwok proposes addressing or excavating the way Western Christian theological discourse has constructed religious difference.

Theologies of religion have far too often treated religion as if it exists in a vacuum, separated from all other networks of social relations. A postcolonial theology of religious difference needs to examine how Christianity constructs difference in various historical epochs, taking into consideration the contestation of meaning, the shaping of the imagination, and the changing power relations. The issue before us is not religious diversity, but religious difference as it is constituted and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials.

Although she does not cite Homi Bhabha at this particular point, her use of “diversity” versus “difference” makes abundantly clear she relies on Bhabha’s distinction between “cultural diversity” and “cultural difference.” Bhabha, who in turn relies on Derrida’s *différence*, argues that cultural difference is not the meeting of contiguous, otherwise stable and independent identities, but rather that those identities are constituted through the negotiation of difference. Identity thus depends on difference, but this this difference itself remains an unstable and contested demarcation. By means of difference, domination is enunciated over cultural collectivities defined as “other cultures,” but on the other hand, through its resistance to being fixed and controlled, always also undercuts that domination. I will return to Homi Bhabha in Chapter V, below.

“Religion”

One aspect of the examination of constructed difference Kwok has in mind, an aspect that has come to play quite a central role in the debate recently, is the critique of the very notion of *religion*. Speaking in the 1990s, Jacques

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298 Ibid., 201-202. Note that the works in which Egnell, Grung, Daggers and Hill Fletcher, all white, draw on postcolonial theory and particularly on Kwok are all published after the work here cited.

299 Ibid., p. 205.

300 Cf. ibid., pp. 42-43.


Derrida had suggested that when we speak of religion, “we must formally take note of the fact that we are already speaking Latin.” The idea that “religion” may not be a universal element of human experience subsequently gained traction especially in religious studies, leading comparative theologian John Thatamanil to remark on a “veritable cottage industry” devoted to making this argument.

Kwok relies on the work of religious scholar Richard King to argue that what is taken as a universal—“religion”—is actually “the product of the culturally specific discursive processes of Christian history in the West.” As Kwok summarizes King,

The Christian understanding of religio has cast its influence on the contemporary conceptualization of the term . . . such as the emphasis on faithful adherence to religious doctrines and the importance attached to sacred texts as central for the religious community . . . Furthermore, Christian assumptions about “religion” and “mysticism” helped construct “the mystic East” as Europe’s Other.

Thatamanil’s phrasing of the consequence of such a deconstruction for comparative theology and theology of religions more broadly is helpful here. Thatamanil’s main concern with this is with how “the discourse of religion . . . [has] been deployed to reify and thereby to separate peoples and traditions whose complex and intertwined histories hardly permit of essentialist disjunctures.” It is this reification and separation that gives theology the illusion of purity and allows it to suppress both its internal multiplicity and the legitimacy, indeed the inescapability, of elements of the “other” within the own tradition. Indeed, Thatamanil argues, “it would be possible to craft a history of Christian thought and practice written as a series of interactions with and transmutations of movements and traditions that Christians have come to demarcate as non-Christian.” Such a history “would unearth moments of widespread anxiety,” Thatamanil continues, “among custodians of tradition at just those junctures when ‘the unbearable proximity’ of those whom Christians customarily regard as other is most keenly felt.”

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306 Kwok, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology, p. 188.
307 Thatamanil, “Comparative Theology after ‘Religion’,” p. 244.
308 Ibid., p. 238.
309 Ibid., p. 239.
Christianity, Thatamanil argues, has typically employed theology of religions to contain and suppress this anxiety, by arbitrarily limiting its interlocutors and the effect the encounter might have on theology. All conventional theology of religions “traffics in homogeneities.” Christian theology overwhelmingly “takes for granted that the world is composed of discrete and clearly demarcated religious traditions that are other to each other.” This means that for each of these religions, an essentialist understanding of their identity asserts itself, marginalizing multiplicity as aberrations.

The coercive power of the category, by constituting traditions as spaces of homogeneity, erases what should be obvious to any clear-eyed observer: religious traditions are internally marked by the widest and wildest kinds of difference, even on central questions of soteriology and eschatology.

As Hill Fletcher had also noted, this internal homogenization goes hand-in-hand with “the way in which the category generates, without anything so blatant as an assertion, the clear demarcation between the religions themselves.” Any account that seeks to think theology from a singular essence serves to “inoculate theology from having to engage all those who stand outside the tradition, all those who are othered. These others are to be repulsed as threats, and dissenters are but heretics.” When theology of religions thus presumes traditions are fixed, relatively homogeneous entities, it participates in the silencing of internal diversity.

Kwok notes that one aspect of the construction of “religion” as a universal category and “religions” as different expressions of the same human faculty is the supposed superiority of “faith” over “tradition.” Ultimately, in this discourse, the latter is mostly a vessel for the former, which is what religion in its best, most enlightened form is taken to be about.

Kwok pursues this superiority of internal faith over external tradition through a critical reading of Schleiermacher and his “notion of universal religious consciousness in human beings.” On Kwok’s reading, Schleiermacher is one of the first theologians to locate the essence of religion in a kind of internal feeling. This must be considered, Kwok submits, in the context of the German ascendancy to nationhood and its concomitant desire

\[310\] Ibid., p. 247.
\[311\] Ibid., p. 248.
\[312\] Ibid., p. 248.
\[313\] Ibid., p. 250.
\[314\] This is also Judith Gruber’s argument: When we speak of “hybridity,” this does not mean the de-stabilization of previously stable religious identities, for instance through mingling in modern multicultural societies. Instead, hybridity refers to an insistent instability against which stable religious identities are forged. “Hybridity is not the end product but the starting point of identity negotiations.” The religious “other” is not simply there, but “emerges from powerful exclusions.” Gruber, “(Un)Silencing Hybridity,” pp. 25, 26.
for, even obsession with, colonial expansion. “It was precisely in the religious feelings of the German people that Schleiermacher located their special national character.” Kwok notes this thus combines Schleiermacher’s “racial biases toward non-Europeans” with a “developmental view of religion,” in which liberal protestant Christianity’s emphasis on internal faith over external forms shows that it is further developed and therefore superior to other religions. This means an understanding of religion as a kind of internal, universal “faith”—not uncommon in pluralist theologies of religions—is of highly particular, and rather problematic, provenance.

An important proponent of such a distinction between particular tradition and universal faith is Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Writing in the 1960s, Smith had already argued that “religion” and “religions” are modern, European or Western formulations that hardly map neatly onto other contexts. With this, Smith was a significant influence to John Hick, and Kwok affirms Smith’s argument as a first step in the deconstruction of “religion.” However, it is not clear what is gained by Smith’s alternative proposition: As an alternative to “religions,” Smith proposes an “inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person” he calls “faith,” alongside “the entire mass of objective data that constitute the historical deposit . . . of the past religious life of the community” he calls “cumulative traditions.” While Kwok does not explicitly criticize Smith for what comes down to a reformulation or reinforcement of the “inner religion” she had criticized in Schleiermacher, it is clear that simply abandoning “religion” for the sake of “faith” comes with a host of further difficulties, not least the reinscription of a broadly liberal protestant bias over less “inward” religions.

**Imagination**

Kwok’s critique of theology of religions raises crucial questions with profound theoretical consequences. These will be the subject of the following chapters, but before we go there, it may be helpful to take a look at a number of Kwok’s formulations that can point us in the direction these consequences may take. One place to start may be the term “imagination,” prominent in the title of the book I am primarily drawing on: *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Imagination, Kwok explains, “means to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new

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317 Though they draw different conclusions than Kwok, this is of course also the argument D’Costa and Heim made against pluralism. See above, section I.3.
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patterns of meaning and interpretation.” Rather than unearthing universal or transcendental truth, or indeed a transcendental “I” projecting mental images, Kwok understands imagination to be an attendance to

the cracks, the fissures, and the openings, which refuse to be shaped into any framework ... that staunchly refuse to follow the set pattern, the established episteme ... have the potential to point to another path, to signal radically new possibilities.321

Imagination is thus the way humans relate to the radically new, to the unforeseeable. Imagination is an attendance to what resists naming and controlling and enables new life despite suffering and oppression.

Another, more ecologically inflected, name under which Kwok discusses an alterity is “planetarity.”322 The planet, in contrast to the “globe,” appears as an alterity which we inhabit, but do not control.323 It names alterity not so much as an external, separated otherness, but as an ineluctable relatedness of which we are part but which also exceeds us. The fullness of this relatedness is, in its own immanent way, one that we cannot fully grasp but which remains promised. In Kwok’s words, “planetarity signifies an alterity that does not derive from us, a system that is beyond us, and yet we inhabit in it [sic]. A planetary ethics thus calls for the experience of the impossible that is radically open-ended and that is ‘to come.’”324 Although it is the ground to stand on (quite literally), and although it names a whole of relations “that extend from the immediate family to the nation and ultimately to the universe as a whole,” it does not give enough of itself to solidly found a universalism. It is therefore at most a kind of quasi-universality (though this is not Kwok’s term), that “encourages a capacious imagination that encompasses all the sentient and nonsentient forms of existence. It opens up the margins and the boundaries so that we can encounter or anticipate the unfamiliar and the unexpected.”325

324Kwok, “What Has Love to Do with It?” p. 33.
325Ibid., p. 32. After a brief and more general discussion of alterity, Kwok remarks that, as “a non-European who has grown up in the Chinese culture, I do not share the intense anxiety over the Other ... because the Chinese have quite a different construction of the self and a divergent understanding of cosmology and human relationships.” She eventually settles on “the possibility of ‘deconstructive embrace,’ a gesture of ‘affirmative
This brings Kwok clearly into the vicinity of what Kearney, Caputo, and Keller have made into the centerpiece of their theopoetics, which I will discuss in the following three chapters: What truly matters about God is the unforeseeable, the promise of a messianic “to-come” that calls forth new life. God is not found in supposedly pure and stable foundations to religious identity, but rather happens in the radical questioning and breaking-open of such identities.

I.5.5 Fin

Feminist and postcolonial interventions in theology of religions make a number of vital points which strengthen a growing intuition: that the interreligious is “anarchic,” more profoundly difficult and unsettling, and therefore that solidarity and dialogue are more complex and multiplicitous, than theology typically assumes. A too simple representation of interreligious dialogue as the coming-together of representatives of contiguous, fairly homogeneous, and mutually clearly delineated religious traditions, offering a basic choice of sameness versus difference, fails to appreciate the complexity of religious difference and can serve to silence internal dissent and oppression and legitimize patriarchy or other forms of oppression. These critiques bring into view the instability and “messiness” of religious difference itself, where many of the relations, encounters, and ways of belonging that make up human existence defy a simple self-other dyad.

The upshot of this is more than simply a warning to be more careful when it comes to all-male interreligious panels (though such a warning is certainly necessary), or an encouragement to include women’s or two-thirds-world issues on the agenda (though that is certainly indispensable). What the above makes clear is that most of the central categories theology relies on to understand religious diversity—including “religion” and “diversity”—must be opened up, in order to critically examine how theology has come to reify and thereby separate traditions and peoples. It undermines some of the most central theoretical assumptions of the theological debate on religious diversity: that there are such things as religions, clearly delineated and internally homogeneous, that religious identity is basically stable and takes theological precedence over other aspects of identity, and that religious difference offers the theologian a choice between sameness and difference.

But something else also becomes visible in these feminist and postcolonial critiques, an intuition that already began to take hold in the previous section on comparative theology: A sense that typical theologies are not only missing something, but that they actively attempt to contain, or inoculate against, this radical disturbance at the heart of the interreligious. The critique thus takes an ethical turn, in a sense: In Egnell’s words, theology and deconstruction, “in which the Other is embraced, while the differences are affirmed.” Kwok, “What Has Love to Do with It?” pp. 37, 42.
philosophy “should not try to ‘tidy up’ the messiness.” In these critiques, there is thus the very strong sense that there is something wrong about this strategy of containment theology typically follows.

These are not merely theoretical questions, but can be matters of life and death. A focus on “self” and “other” not only produces the other as other, but also disregards and silences the other within the self, both in the sense of dissenting voices within the tradition and an insistent refusal of the messiness of lived reality to yield to theologians’ dreams of clarity and simplicity. At worst, it may become complicit with the silencing of, and violence against, the individuals and communities that come to represent that difference.

Instead of repressing, containing, or silencing this unruly insistence of difference, feminist and postcolonial authors appear to suggest rather its embrace, guided by the intuition that radically new possibilities open up in the cracks and fissures it engenders. The unruliness or anarchy of religious difference may be destabilizing, yes, but it may also hold a particular, if open-ended, promise: The anarchy of difference may prove to be good news. What is required, we might say, is therefore not the restriction of anarchy, but a pact with it, yielding something like an anarchist theology or theopoetics of religious difference. Instead of “co-existence,” such a theopoetics would work towards “co-resistance”: a shared commitment to undoing unjust structures and subverting the way religious difference is employed to exert domination.

Following the pointers of Kwok and Hill-Fletcher, such a pact would not be made in the name of a universal faith or a philosophical abstract consensus, nor would it happen in the reassuring company of doctrines that would safeguard Christianity from too great a challenge. Instead, it would be made in the name of an affirmation or hope that remains elusive, that remains a hope for the unforeseeable “to-come,” an alterity can never quite be caught and brought under conceptual control. This is so, however, not because it would be transcendent and ineffable, out of reach of the sticky, earthy fingers of immanent beings, but rather because the elusiveness of the divine is intimately caught up with the unfolding of immanent life. It is precisely in the intensification of immanence, in the way immanence, the planet, being itself, can present itself in its depth and alterity, that the affirmation of faith takes hold. Religious commitment is always “groundless,” philosophically, but this does not mean it happens anywhere else than on the ground.

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326 Egnell, Other Voices, 305; emphasis mine.
fragility of religious hope for the renewal of the world is intimately caught up with the fragility of both the human communities cherishing that hope and of the earth on which they live.

As I have indicated above, such philosophical questions have not been the primary concern of the authors I have discussed in this section. While feminist questioning raises important questions, also about transcendence, truth, and the nature of faith, the above authors do not seriously consider the consequences of their questioning for such topics, as their occasional “relapse” to basically pluralist frameworks indicates. This could be construed as a weakness in their thought, as the necessary nature of an emerging field, or perhaps simply as not their primary interest. In any case, a discussion of the philosophical consequences of this “anarchy” of religious difference, and the possibility for a pact with it, will be an important aspect of the remainder of this study.
I.6 Anarchy: A Question for Philosophers

In this chapter, I have discussed contemporary debates in theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, pursuing particularly the way religious difference, or the interreligious, eludes understanding, resists being fixed in a theme, and in turn destabilizes confessional theology. I have called this unsettling, complex and unruly nature of religious difference “anarchy,” in the sense that it is both destabilizing and unstable, that it resists being grasped, explained from a first principle, or brought under control (archē).

In each section after the introduction, an additional layer of this anarchy was brought to light. In the first section, I discussed pluralism, which starts from the realization that Christians must admit there is something true and real going on in other religions, and that Christianity is not uniquely privileged in its access to truth. In the second section, I discussed two critiques of pluralism, arguing that, while the affirmation of truth at work in other religions must challenge Christianity, there is no neutral ground from which to adjudicate or assess religious diversity. In the third section, I discussed comparative theology, adding a third layer: that the interreligious does not appear to give enough of itself to go beyond these two observations—neither a privileged position for Christianity, nor a privileged meta-position—into comprehensive schemata; indeed that the tensive and open-ended nature of interreligious learning resists being schematized and opens Christianity to its own groundlessness. In the fourth section, finally, I discussed feminist and postcolonial critiques, which argued that taking religious difference seriously requires the deconstruction of some of our most central assumptions; that religious difference is intimately caught up with issues of power and violence; that a theology of religious difference is required.

However, the approaches each also, in their own way, served to re-center or stabilize religious difference. In pluralism, this takes the form of the attempt to fix religious diversity into a general schema with a purported view from nowhere, thus seeking to neutralize the challenge of the interreligious. In the Trinitarian approaches I discussed, it took the form of the delimitation of the space given to this challenge: The reliance on a Christian schema protected Christian superiority and normativity. Comparative theology, at least in the forms I discussed here, effects this restriction through its self-identification as a “marginal” discipline and its (implicit) reliance on relatively delineated “home” and “foreign” traditions. And finally, the feminist and postcolonial theologians I discussed do not think through the consequences of their recognition of interreligious anarchy on a philosophical level, at times even appearing to relapse into a generally pluralist schema.

In each section of this chapter, I have thus striven to deepen and broaden the suspicion that religious difference, when taken seriously, undoes or unsettles both the grounds and the bounds of Christian confessional theology. Where many approaches I discussed strove to contain this unruliness, I found
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an alternative strategy in the works of feminist and postcolonial theologians: not its containment, but its embrace, a pact with anarchy, guided by the intuition that its instability might prove to be particularly good news. What is required is thus, in a sense, not merely a theology or theopoetics of religious difference that is aware of its unruliness, but one that is anarchist, that sees its anarchy as holding a unique promise that Christianity should not miss out on. Instead of “co-existence,” such a theopoetics would work towards “co-resistance”: a shared commitment to undoing unjust structures and subverting the way religious difference is employed to exert domination.

And these, thus, are the stakes for the next chapters. For the anarchy of religious difference raises some fundamental theological and philosophical questions. What does it mean for religion to recognize its own groundlessness? What does it mean for faith to embrace this instability? How can we affirm that which religion attempts to name—God—in the context of such deconstructive unsettling? What does faith and testimony mean where there is no clear ground to stand on, only the interminable process of “coming to know?” And how do we think belonging to a community and a tradition—as Daggers attempts to “re-center”—if those things find neither stable ground nor stable bounds?

In Kwok’s “theology of religious difference,” I found the most far-reaching formulation of this interreligious anarchy. Through the reference to Bhabha’s and Derrida’s work, she also provides a theoretical framework to think this through in greater depth—which Kwok does not yet do. Theopoetics is an obvious choice for such further theoretical explication: Kearney has worked extensively on imagination, the “to come” and the “experience of the impossible” appear to come directly out of Caputo’s vocabulary, and the “planetary” as an all-embracing alterity clearly points towards Keller’s eco-feminist process theology. This is what I will do in the next chapters, returning to more directly engage with Derrida and Bhabha, among others, in the final chapter.

The philosophical questions raised by the anarchy of religious difference will thus provide the primary framework for the entry of Caputo, Kearney, and Keller to the stage. Each of these three has profoundly embraced the groundlessness of faith, the necessity of a radical critique of the tradition, especially of its understanding of transcendence, and the elusive affirmation that faith in the Divine finally represents. Philosophically, they deepen a number of the commitments that have started to announce themselves in the above: deconstruction, philosophical hermeneutics, process thought, theopoetics.

Their work is, however, also profoundly steeped in the realization that God’s call in this universe is always a call to political solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized; that the unfolding of the divine in the world must be seen as a co-production in which human and divine mutually make each other possible. The philosophical questions of the following chapters
thus emerge from, and remain accountable to, profoundly practical realities. The theoretical questions I will ask in the next chapter are always profoundly embedded in biographies of social action and profound emancipatory commitments—my own and those of the authors I am drawing on. Their and my philosophical concerns are precipitated by concerns of justice—they are the hard theological and philosophical questions that emerge from, and necessitate, the commitment to co-resistance.
Chapter II

Richard Kearney

II.1 Introduction

After the disenchantment of critique, loss, and tragedy, it can become possible to imagine again, to believe again, to again encounter the divine call towards an open future. This renewed encounter can be qualitatively different: After the Death of God as a divine Sovereign, we may encounter the Divine as a stranger, who needs our help as much as we need theirs. This seems to be the retrieval around which Kearney tells his story on religion: Instead of certainty of beliefs in an omnipotent Master-God, faith can become new again as a tenuous and fragile “maybe.” As much guided by readings of philosophy, arts, and literature as by the rich theological tradition of his own Irish Catholicism, Kearney brings his skill as a philosopher to a project with a clear theological interest, a project he has come to term “anatheism”: ana-theos, God, again. Discerning God at work outside the Christian tradition is crucial for this work of retrieval.

Kearney can be described as a hermeneutic philosopher. The “hermeneutic” part of this means Kearney’s work both expresses and embodies a belief in the worth of conversation. He rarely addresses an issue directly and systematically, instead embedding his own scholarly voice in readings of other authors, including John Caputo and Catherine Keller,¹ as well as many oth-

ers. In many cases, this means he travels with them a portion of the way, before taking his leave and going in a different direction.

Kearney’s method of accompaniment often means he navigates two extremes before choosing a more mediated third option. In Kearney’s own words, this third option “is not just a synthesis of opposites . . . the middle actually opens out onto a new path.” As this new path is frequently again an accompaniment of further thinkers, it is often difficult to pinpoint precisely where Kearney stands himself. This will become particularly clear in II.2.3, below, as Kearney attempts to navigate his loyalty to both Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. While I will indicate the authors and works he draws on where appropriate, discernment of the precise relation of Kearney’s interpretation to the author he is conversing with is not the goal of this work. I will thus attempt to present Kearney’s own voice as clearly as possible throughout this chapter, accepting that this inevitably does some violence to his hermeneutic style.

Of the many authors Kearney converses with throughout his texts, Paul Ricoeur stands out both as a significant conversation partner and a crucial influence. Kearney describes himself as “closer to Ricoeur than to any other philosopher,” though insists he is not a “disciple” of Ricoeur’s, if mostly because hermeneutic philosophy means there cannot be a Ricoeurian “school.” Particularly important in light of Kearney’s later thoughts on religion, it appears to me, is Ricoeur’s idea of “the world of the text.” The world of a text is not merely the historical context or psychological life of its author, but the “sort of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text.” The text proposes a possible world: “Fiction and poetry intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility.” A fictional narrative, or indeed a religious one, can be “true” if it refers as a whole to a possible world that is revelatory about the world we live in. The issue or truth of the text is thus “the proposition of a world that in the biblical language is called a new world, a new covenant, the kingdom of God, a new birth.”

As a philosopher, Kearney employs readings of classical theological dogmata or biblical texts less as stand-alone analyses than as illustrations of his philosophical arguments. I will attempt to reflect this by foregrounding his philosophical discussions and presenting the more theological elements towards the end of a section, when the philosophical stakes have been es-

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3Ibid., p. 378.
5Ibid., p. 43.
6Ibid., p. 43.
7Ibid., p. 44.
II.2. RESOURCES

Established, as “figurations.”

Kearney’s work on religion can primarily be found in his more recent works, such as *The God Who May Be* and *Anatheism*. Their evocative style and more associative argumentation appear to set them apart somewhat from his earlier work, leading Kevin Hart to describe *The God Who May Be*, for example, as a “series of suggestive papers” rather than a rigorous argument. However, many of the central themes in Kearney’s work on religion are already apparent in his earlier, more generally philosophical or literary works, such as *Poetique du Possible, The Wake of Imagination, Poetics of Modernity* or *Postnationalist Ireland*. They thus continue to form the background and philosophical backbone of his more recent studies. This is reflected in the organization of this chapter.

In the next part of this chapter (II.2), I will thus explain three aspects of Kearney’s work that may prove fruitful for meeting what I have called the “anarchy” of religious difference. First, I will discuss Kearney’s take on narrative imagination and narrative identity. While his most elaborate discussions of these themes are not primarily interested in religion, they influence his understanding of religion in his more recent work significantly, and offer us profound readings of imagination and the formation of collective identity in their own right. Then, I will discuss Kearney’s recent case for a kind of Christianity he calls “anatheist,” in which the affirmation of faith is deeply conditioned by the negation of loss and critique. Third, I will discuss Kearney’s discussions of hospitality and the encounter with the stranger as a quintessential moment of Christianity. In the second part of this chapter (II.3), I will survey what Kearney has himself written about religious diversity and interreligious encounter, again in three steps: first, Kearney’s specific comments on an experience of interreligious dialogue and on Islam; second, his characterization of the interreligious as a kind of hospitality; and third, his affirmation, in his own vocabulary, of a theology of religious pluralism.

II.2 Resources

II.2.1 Narrative Imagination

I will start this investigation by discussing Kearney’s understanding of narrative, imagination, tradition, and identity. Although, as I noted above, religion does not feature prominently in these analyses, Kearney’s understanding of narrative collective imagination and tradition not only underlies and informs his work on religion, but also offers significant resources for the

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main concerns of this study. After establishing Kearney’s interpretation of narrative imagination as a mediation of past, present, and future, always guided by ethical concerns, I will look at how this becomes deepened in his work on Ireland, zooming in on questions of national belonging and the role of otherness in the narrative construction of identity.

A Wake for Imagination?

In his 1988 *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney traces various iterations of concepts of imagination in Western culture. He does so in a journey from antiquity through postmodernity, guided by the search for a retrieval of imagination after “the postmodern deconstruction of the humanist subject and its pretensions to mastery.” The title is a play on words: On the one hand, Kearney wonders if the omnipresence of prefabricated images in postmodernity has caused the death of imagination, occasioning a “wake” or vigil to mourn its passing. On the other hand, however, postmodernity’s loss of inherited certainties may set imagination loose in a renewed manner, making possible “an other kind of poiesis—alternative modes of inventing alternative modes of existence.” In this sense, Kearney suggests we follow in the “wake” or turbulent trail behind it, perhaps even its awakening.

Kearney finds three fundamental paradigms of the imagination in Western intellectual history. Each has its limitations, but also offers something we can learn. Premodern imagination, Kearney explains, was predominantly theocentric, with the author primarily functioning as an anonymous craftsman. From this, we may learn that “imagination is always a response to the demands of an other existing beyond the self.” Modern imagination, in contrast, was largely anthropocentric, viewing imagination as the autonomous expression of the artist. From this, Kearney draws a warning not to “abdicate a personal responsibility for invention, decision and ac-

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9 I hesitate to identify Kearney’s approach as a “narrative theology,” also known as postliberal theology. According to Ronald Michener, postliberal theology is associated with theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, but is also a broader “loose connection of narrative theological interests” concerned with “the renewal of Christian confession over theological methodology.” Postliberal theology “rejects efforts to modernize Christian doctrines to make them palatable to contemporary scientific or rational mindsets” and “stresses the narrative of scripture along with the community of the church and its practices.” Other authors include William Placher and Stanley Hauerwas. Ronald T. Michener. *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 3, 4.


11 Ibid., p. 33.

12 Ibid., p. 390.
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Postmodern imagination, finally, is *ex-centric*, with the artist as a “bricoleur: someone who plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created.” From this we can learn that “we are living in a common Civilization of Images—a civilization which can bring each one of us into contact with each other even as it can threaten to obliterate the very ‘realities’ its images ostensibly ‘depict.’”

We can already see here a prefiguration of the structure of his later anatheism project, which I will discuss below: Kearney hopes that a “postmodern imagination,” though it appears a contradiction in terms, may retrieve an imagination not held hostage to either divine or human mastery. Postmodernity as “the end of modernity” may hold “a possibility of rebeginning,” a hope for “preserving, through reinterpretation, the functions of narrative identity and creativity.”

At stake in this retrieval of imagination is thus, in addition to an attention to otherness inspired by the premodern paradigm, also a retrieval of the human and the subject prominent in the modern paradigm. While the postmodern “decentering” of the anthropocentric “productive” imagination of modernity may have quite salutary effects if it breaks egological mastery, Kearney continues to insist on the possibility of “a properly human imagination.” The subject must be retained, in some way, Kearney argues, because of ethical concerns: Only a self can make an ethical stand and respond to the call of the other.

The intertwinement of a human imagination, which retains an intentional subjectivity, with an attentiveness for the call of the other, which reaches us from beyond that intentional horizon, remains an important theme in Kearney’s work. I will discuss this dynamic in greater detail in II.2.3 (Hospitality). For now, I just want to stress that Kearney sees in the moral call from the other, from the face of the other, the potential for a break in the postmodern culture of images. It delimits the “postmodern logic of interminable deferment and infinite regress, of floating signifiers and vanishing signifieds.” Instead of dulling our imagination, the call of the other reaches through the image on the television screen, reinserting a sense of relationship between self and other. “Even in those televisial images which transmit events from the furthest corners of our globe, we are being addressed, potentially at least, by living others.”

So the retrieval of imagination Kearney is looking for would serve to

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13Ibid., p. 390.
14Ibid., p. 13.
15Ibid., p. 390.
16Ibid., p. 27.
17Ibid., p. 32.
18Ibid., pp. 360-361.
19Ibid., p. 361.
20Ibid., p. 388.
counteract the postmodern potential for nihilism on at least two counts: It reinstates a sense of self, and it reinstates an attentiveness to the reality of suffering of the other. Neither washes out the other. Further, imagination serves to “imagine that the world as it is could be otherwise,” to dream of a future that is not yet but is possible: It is a “poetics of the possible.”

A postmodern imagination would, on the one hand, function as a force for empathy with the concrete other, while on the other hand imagining “the transformation of our social existence.” It is thus both guided by the reality of human suffering and the possibility of a wholly different future.

This work of a postmodern imagination has important political implications, Kearney remarks in a longer endnote. Drawing on Michel Foucault, François Lyotard, and Julia Kristeva, Kearney contends his retrieved postmodern imagination “marks a radical challenge to the conventional models of political power as ‘sovereignty’—i.e. centralized nation-states and geopolitical blocks.” A politics based on Kearney’s postmodern imagination would involve “radical decentralization,” and foster “difference, plurality and otherness.” It would dismantle the center-periphery dichotomy and go beyond the nation-state. It would start with “particular commitments to local struggles,” and renounce the “temptation to propagate a New Universal Theory,” instead pluralizing and differentiating the activity of resistance.

On Narrative

For such a retrieval of imagination, Kearney finds narrative particularly apt. For an explication of this, Kearney draws strongly on Ricoeur’s 1984-1988 Time and Narrative series and his 1990 Oneself as Another. In the former, Ricoeur had suggested that narrative offers a “refiguration of temporal experience,” resulting in an “imperfect mediation between the three dimensions of expectation, tradition, and the force of the present.” For Ricoeur, it is thus ultimately not philosophy but narrative and poetics that allow humanity to understand itself and the world it lives in. In Kearney’s words, narrativity is “the universal desire to make sense of history by retelling the story of ourselves,” forming the site “where the text of imagination interweaves with the context of history.”

This is not only a matter of the individual: Collective narratives and collective imagination shape, interpret, and make possible the way a society

23Ibid., 457n55f.
24Ibid., 458n55.
27Ibid., p. xii.
understands itself, others, and its history. Central to the narrating of history is the effort to give a place to the responsibility towards those who came before us, particularly those who have suffered and died. Neither the past, nor the future, in which this responsibility must find a place, is simply available: They must be imagined. Narrative imagination therefore functions to make present what is absent, standing for the past, through retrieval and testimony, or for the future, through emancipatory projection.28

This process of historical standing-for is marked by an ambiguity: While it must imagine the past to recall our debt, it has a “dual fidelity,” both to the otherness of the past and to its relatability to a contemporary mindset.29 Historical imagination attempts to make the past relatable “as” it really was, but this “as” stretches across both the correlation with the present, necessary for its relatability, and the respect for otherness required by the gravity and verity of historical events. This “as” is thus “a two-way trope of absence/presence.”30 The past is on the one hand narrated and reconstructed, enabling us “to see and hear things long since gone,” but on the other hand, it has a “right” to “incite and rectify our narrative retellings of history.”31 On either side of this exists a danger: either to view the past merely as a playing field for contemporary imagination, or to “collapse into a literal belief,” obviating the seeing-as into a mere seeing.32

A related tension appears in the function of “individuation”: the duty to remember “the uniquely unique character” of specific historical events while threading them into collective storytelling. Terrifying massacres “cannot be explained away as cogs in some dialectical wheel.”33 On the other hand, a too radical version of this would allow the events to slip away entirely, becoming entirely unavailable to contemporary understanding: “[E]xplanation without imagination is ultimately inhuman, just as imagination without hope of explanation runs the risk of blind irrationalism.”34

Narrative Identity

A further task of narrative imagination is its role in the narrative construction of identity. In his earlier works, Kearney primarily addresses this in the context of national, especially Irish, identity, but his discussions illuminate a more general hermeneutic structure that may be profoundly meaningful

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30Ibid., p. 96.
31Ibid., p. 97.
32Ibid., p. 98.
for questions of religious tradition or community as well and indeed substantially inform his later discussions of religious tradition.

In narrative identity, Kearney finds an understanding of identity that is more sensitive to “fundamental processes of socialization” than substantialist modernist notions of the subject or ego, without quite yielding to a dissolution of the self, which would threaten the self’s ethical answerability as we saw above.35 Ricoeur had noted that a notion of the self as the subject of a story “implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality.”36 Continuity is achieved by the story that ties a life or a community together. In this process of narrating, it is imagination that fills the role of synthesizing “the different horizons of past, present, and future.”37

The narrative tradition we grow up in forms our starting point, individually as well as collectively; it forms our (pre-)understanding of ourselves and the world.38 However, Kearney stresses that narrative imagination is always also a dynamic process: Narratives not only interpret, but also reinterpret the past, releasing concealed possibilities, and can subject it to critical scrutiny in order to “wrest tradition away from the conformism that is always threatening to overpower it.”39 The formation and reformation of collective imagination is thus an unceasing process:

Every cultural narrative — be it a poem, play, painting, film, novel or political discourse — is in some sense a reinterpretation of its own history; an attempt to retell the story of the past as it relates to the present; an act of understanding otherwise the subworld of symbols that informs our consciousness of society.40

In addition to its nature as an ongoing process of telling and retelling, Kearney stresses that the mediation of past, present, and future in collective narratives is always already plural. Tradition is always already multiple:

As soon as we acknowledge that tradition is not some monolith of homogeneous dogma but an ongoing dialectic made up of different rival traditions, internal crises, interruptions, revisions, and schisms; as soon as we acknowledge this, we discover that there exists an essential dimension of distance at the very heart of tradition which actually invites critical interpretation.41

Such critical interpretation is necessary because collective narratives are ambiguous. When they become ideological, they can come to cement an unjust

35Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, p. 99.
37Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, p. 99.
38cf. ibid., p. 78.
39Kearney, Navigations, p. 392.
40Ibid., p. xii.
41Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, p. 84.
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Social order and serve a sense of superiority over, and exclusion of, others. In making this argument, Kearney also draws on Edward Said, who, in Kearney’s words, observes “how narratives frequently operate as representations of power: representations that must be challenged by ‘counter-narratives’ in order that their abusive tendencies be exposed and ideally, reversed.” This is done primarily by other, alternative stories: counter-narratives “of marginal and truncated histories, indirect stories of irony and subversion,” that “put the dominant power in question.”42 Narrative imagination as the formation of identity, on the one hand, and the imaginative subversion of identity, on the other hand, thus belong together.

A critical fluidity and openness pertains to narrative identity as long as we recognize that it is always something made and remade. ... At its best, narrative imagination remains open to the possibility of its own self-deconstruction.43

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, imagination “has to remain critical, lest it congeal into a new ideology subordinating the catalysing power of dream to the literal demands of propaganda.”44 In order to give a place to both a hermeneutic of suspicion, which would critique or deconstruct these ideological aspects, and a hermeneutic of affirmation, which would retrieve what remains emancipatory and life-giving, Kearney proposes a “hermeneutic imagination capable of critical discrimination” between “falsifying and emancipating modes of symbolization.”45 A hermeneutics of affirmation focuses “not on the origin (arche) behind myths but on the end (eschaton) opened up in front of them,”46 “the horizon of aspiration opened up by symbols.”47

Instead of a “monolithic doctrine to which the citizens of the nation submissively conform,” Kearney thus envisions national myths as symbols “bearing a plurality of meanings.”48 The universality of myth is a capacity to “migrate beyond national boundaries and translate into other cultures.”

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43Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, p. 100.
45Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, p. 74.
46Kearney, Navigations, p. 394.
47Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, p. 74. What Kearney calls “archeological hermeneutics” seeks a “causal reference to some predetermining reality hidden behind the symbol.” Utopian interpretation, in contrast, “discerns in symbols a reference that is not exhaustively determined by anterior causes. This utopian reference is a ‘second order’ signification, wherein a symbol can refer ... to some ‘surplus’ meaning that transcends the limits of ideology. Here value is in front of the symbol, not behind it; it is disclosed as a posterior horizon of possibilities.” Ibid., p. 75.
48Kearney, Navigations, p. 397.
Its universal value thus depends on its multiplicity, not on a universal univocity. Instead of believing in myths as “ideological creeds,” it becomes possible to “freely reinvent them as utopian metaphors.”

In sum, “[t]he idea that there exists some immutable ‘essence’ of national identity . . . is nonsense.” Kearney therefore proposes a “poetical fidelity” to the myths of tradition, that retains a “questioning attitude,” particularly questioning where narrative eclipses and oppresses the narratives of others. Such a hermeneutically informed narrative imagination would read and interpret the stories of the past not for the sake of the past or its restoration, but for the sake of the creative transformation of the future, seeking to restore the “genuinely utopian projects of liberty” of the social imaginary.

**Ireland: Retelling Nation**

The collective dimension of narrative imagination is deepened additionally when Kearney discusses the political imaginary of his native Ireland. In his 1997 *Postnationalist Ireland*, written and published during the Northern Ireland Peace Process which culminated in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Kearney sets out to investigate issues of nation, sovereignty and political imagination as they pertain to the Irish situation.

Irish culture, Kearney argues, does not constitute a single entity, but must be understood as “a manifold of narratives that resist the uniformity of a closed system.” This diversity is not to be repressed but celebrated, for it yields a “surplus of cultural meaning” that allows contemporary Irish thought to resist “both the tyranny of a unitary identity and the sectarianism of embattled tribes.” Though Irish nationalism has been “extremely variegated” historically, it has generally responded to this manifold by “unifying a variety of elements . . . into a certain identity, thereby imparting to them a special function of inclusion and exclusion.” Nationalism thus has a profoundly interpretative function as a “hermeneutic construct”: “[N]ational identity cannot be predicated on any ‘objective’ characteristics (however intimately associated) but only on the view which the members of the ‘nation’ in question have of themselves.”

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50 Ibid., p. 399.
51 Ibid., p. 391.
54 Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 76.
56 Ibid., p. xviii.
59 Ibid., 198n20.
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The Irish population was always already ethnically mixed, so ethnocultural purism is “in fact a betrayal of the full complexity of Irish culture.”Both Ireland and Britain are “imagined communities,” without recourse to a perennial essence, and therefore also capable of reimagining themselves. Kearney calls for a “transition from traditional nationalism to a post-nationalism,” which would preserve the emancipatory potential of Irish nationalism while reinterpreting it.

Politically, this postnational model would be marked by interdependence: Instead of the two dominant options for Northern Ireland, remaining in the UK or joining the Republic of Ireland, a postnationalist Ireland would see a “confederation of councils,” a “renunciation of sovereignty in favour [sic] of federated political communities.” Kearney thus envisions a more distributed system of governance with both a stronger local belonging and a stronger European context. Kearney lays this out in greater detail than I will reproduce here, but it involves the possibility for citizens of Northern Ireland to “owe differing degrees of allegiance to an expanding range of identifications: from regional townland, parish or province to national constitution (‘British or Irish or both’) and, larger still, to the transnational union of Europe.”

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Of particular interest for this study is Kearney’s attention to the role difference plays in the construction of both Irish and British nationhood. He begins by noting the peculiarity that in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict, only Irish nationalism is referred to as nationalism. For it is British nationalism that has historically been the primary nationalist force in the British Isles, and far beyond, with a relatively clear and unambiguous relation of people to territory, sovereignty, and Church. However, in an unequal power balance, dominant nationalism becomes occluded: “By thus externalizing the crisis of national legitimation onto its neighbours or adversaries, British-English nationalism conveniently forgot that it was in fact the first of its kind in the world.”

This English nationalism itself has its roots on the Irish island. For the

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60Ibid., p. 6.
62Ibid., p. 59.
64Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 6. “British or Irish or both” is a phrase from the Good Friday Agreement, which recognizes “the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose.” The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 2.1.vi.
65Ibid., p. 16.
English, particularly English settlers in Ireland from the fourteenth century onward, it was especially important to distinguish themselves from the Irish population because their difference was not self-evident. The statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 thus “instigated segregation between colonizer and colonized, fomenting political divisions between two supposedly incompatible ‘peoples.’” This border was carefully policed: marrying or commingling across the border was “‘degeneracy’ — that is, the falling outside the . . . gens.” Kearney sees here a first occurrence of the forging of an English, proto-British nation. Segregation thus makes the nation: Dissociation is always already caught up with the associative movement of togetherness. “While it was Alfred’s expansion of Wessex (871–99) that opened the way, it was actually in the laboratory of Ireland that the English nation first saw itself in the glass and believed its image.”

In response, the Irish, too, came to define themselves as a nacio, as apparent in King Donald O’Neill’s letter to the Pope in 1317, “affirming an unbroken historical continuity of the Irish people (gens) through their laws, speech and long memory of tribulations sufferet at the hands of the colonial invaders.” This in spite of the fact, Kearney adds, that the Irish, too, were “a mongrelized ethnic mix of successive migrations.”

In the work of historian Linda Colley, Kearney finds further development of this idea of the doubling of Irish and British nationhood. Colley in turn draws on Edward Said. In his famous study Orientalism, Said had argued that it was particularly the objectification and domination of the Orient that allowed the European Occident to constitute and shape itself. Similarly, Colley argues that the British nation constituted itself in and through the confrontation with, and subjugation of, the Other. In addition to Ireland, Britain’s eminent Others also included continental Europe, especially France, as well as the societies Britain came to dominate as a colonial ruler. However, Ireland played a special role amongst these as both a Catholic nation and a colonial subject, serving significantly as a place for the Protestant British empire to experiment with colonial rule before applying this knowledge in India and elsewhere.

The two national identities, British and Irish, are thus intimately caught

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67 Cf. Kearney, Postnationalist Ireland, 201n23.
68 Kearney, Navigations, p. 6.
69 Ibid., p. 6.
71 Kearney, Navigations, p. 6.
72 Ibid., pp. 6–7.
73 Ibid., p. 7.
up with one another, Kearney argues, describing them as Siamese twins, “joined at the hip of Ulster.”

Britain has always been obsessed by Ireland, and oblivious of it, at one and the same time. Ireland, and in particular Irish nationalism, is its alter ego, its ally and enemy, familiar and foreign. The other which defines, and undermines, its very identity. The double which haunts and fascinates.

In Ireland, England is confronted with its own non-self-sufficiency: Its identity does not arise transparently from essence but is dependent on multiple negotiations, differentiations and relational references. This confrontation with this ambiguity of national difference is what makes Ireland the “deconstructive seed at the heart of the British body politic.”

Fin

So we have seen that Kearney looks to retrieve imagination in postmodernity, in a way defined by neither autonomy nor heteronomy, yet answerable both as a self to an other. In narrative identity formation, imagination stands for both what is past and what may become real. Narrative identity, individual or collective, is not given but constantly made and remade, and always already plural. In his work on Ireland, further, it becomes clear how national identities are predicated on both an associative movement of gathering various strands together and a dissociative moment of segregation from an other.

Kearney’s approach to narrative is of interest for the purposes of this study, as it gives a central place to the stories that form our world-view, while also remaining open to the way difference and alterity always already

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76 Kearney, Navigations, p. 7.
77 Kearney, Postnationalist Ireland, pp. 9–10.
78 Kearney, Navigations, p. 12. It appears that this particular dynamic, the narrative construction of a collective imaginary in reference to another concrete collective, does not appear again when Kearney is not explicitly discussing Ireland. This despite the focus of Kearney’s 2005 Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, which explicitly sets out to investigate “practices of defining ourselves in terms of otherness.” However, here Kearney appears primarily interested in otherness in its anonymous and indeterminate forms, spending time discussing the Immemorial, the Sublime, Terror and the Divine, enlisting art, religion, and psychoanalysis alongside hermeneutics to mediate or narrate our broken relationship to those alterities. Concrete otherness reminiscent of his above discussions, where the English are far from strange, divine, or monstrous to the Irish, yet still serve as their quintessential Other, does not appear in the book. Indeed in the opening pages Kearney affirms he is here mostly interested in Others as “tokens of fracture within the human psyche,” and alterity as something “deep down,” thus suggesting otherness is a consequence of issues within the Self. Kearney, Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, pp. 4, 5. I will discuss several elements from the book below, in II.2.3 (Hospitality: Discerning the Stranger). See also my critique of understanding the interreligious as the encounter with “strangers” on pp. 106f.
invade identity, and how the gathering of an identity is profoundly caught up with questions of imagining not yet realized possibilities. Though we are formed by the context in which we are born, the formative narrative world is not a single clearly bounded whole but always already marked by multiple transitions and translations. Kearney understands narrative imagination as a mechanism that not only interprets the world through a hermeneutic lens, but also opens up the stories of tradition themselves to reinterpretation, to the other, and to a future yet unseen.

Each of these elements can be part of a response to the “anarchy” of difference. Narrative identity, especially on Kearney’s pluralist and processual take, can respond to the *groundlessness* of religion with an understanding of tradition not built on a given and fixed ground but instead on an interminable process of critique and re-telling. The constitutive role of difference in the narrative construction of identity, further, may go some way in understanding the unruliness of religious difference. If religious difference could be said to reveal the extent to which our identity does not emanate transparently from essence, but is always already dependent on transitions, demarcations and negotiations, it would thus define, and undermine, our very identity—a “deconstructive seed” at the heart of our religious fields.

**II.2.2 Anatheism: The No the Yes requires**

In a similar way to *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney’s more recent work on religion is shaped by the search for a retrieval of religious narratives in a way less amenable to violence, exclusion, and religious triumphalism. He comes to call this search “anatheism”: a return again (“ana”) to a God after a salutary critical moment. What is retrieved is qualitatively different: a tenuous wager on a God of hospitality over the inhospitable certainties of dogmatic theism and atheism. A God of possibility, who profoundly depends on human participation to become real in the world.

I will spend more time discussing this “wager” on hospitality for the stranger, which is vital to anatheist faith, in the next subsection. Here, I will focus on the way Kearney develops an understanding of religious affirmation that remains tenuous, rejecting certainties and instead embracing a faith profoundly marked by negation. This negation makes itself felt not only as a theoretical critique, but especially also as the pain of tragedy, injustice and loss. In Kearney’s view, after a twentieth century filled with death camps, wars, and nuclear weapons, belief in an omnipotent providential God who secretly has it all under control is not only implausible: It is appalling.

In terms of its theoretical biography, anatheism appears to be an interpretation of Paul Ricoeur’s notion of a “second naïveté.” Ricoeur had argued for the possibility to be “called again” after criticism has riven one of naive literalism.\(^79\) While the immediacy of belief may be “irremediably

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lost,” such a postcritical faith would seek to “go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative.”

However, despite a detailed affirmation of Ricoeur’s second naïveté, and admitting anatheism owes “a great debt to Ricoeur,” Kearney argues it is not “a matter of going from first faith to a second faith, as . . . Ricoeur recommends. There is a third and fourth and fifth faith. It’s faith after faith after faith, ad infinitum.” Although this is somewhat confusing, as Ricoeur also describes the affirmation of a faith tradition as a “continuous choice,” Kearney here presumably wants to eschew connotations of “development” to a higher stage of faith, which would suggest that the anatheist has “achieved” some superior understanding of God. It is not hard to see how this suspicion can be aroused by his schema, so it is important to stress how Kearney affirms instead a constant tension, in any faith worth the name, between negation and affirmation.

After God, After Atheism

For Kearney, religion needs to take seriously the “death of God” as prompted by secular critique, contemporary culture, and especially through the horrors of the twentieth century. After the Holocaust, the Gulag and the atomic bomb, “the idea that God orchestrates good and evil alike was no longer tolerable.” In light of this, atheist critique is not only something religion needs to defend itself against, but something that can be highly salutary if it “exposes the dissimulating mechanisms of religious insecurity and infantile dependency—thereby destroying its destructiveness.”

Given the importance of atheism for Kearney’s schema, it is peculiar that he does not seriously discuss any atheist critiques of theism, possibly excepting his discussion of Ricoeur’s reading of Freud and Nietzsche. Instead, he focuses on several thinkers’ meditations on the Shoah, among others Elie Wiesel and Hannah Arendt, to argue that the reality of suffering in the world makes a notion of a providential omnipotent divine a “cruel sham.” The death of God is the death of “a specific kind of deity—namely, the God of metaphysics and theodicy.” A critical hermeneutic of suspicion

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80Ibid., pp. 350–351.
81Kearney, Anatheism, pp. 71ff.
83Ibid., p. 203.
85Kearney, Anatheism, p. 58.
86Ibid., p. 72.
87Ibid., p. 72.
88Ibid., p. 58.
89Ibid., p. 59.
can help religion shed its dark, violent side and say goodbye to God as an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent ruler, “invoked to justify the worst atrocities as part of some Ultimate Design.” This God “deserves to die.”

After this “no” to the kind of divine actor who “could have stopped the torture—and didn’t,” Kearney argues the responsibility for justice in the world falls to us humans. “The only Messiah still credible after the death camps would be one who wanted to come but could not because humans failed to invite the sacred stranger into existence.” Kearney finds with Dietrich Bonhoeffer the idea that “a nonsovereign, nonmetaphysical God is one whose very powerlessness gives us power, making us capable of life, resistance, and rebirth,” calling us into “a public world of shared action.”

Kearney thus argues that it is both possible and necessary to find new ways of retrieving narrative tradition, religious figurations of the sacred, and faith that do not depend on a metaphysical “Omni-God of celestial Might.” He thus envisions a return to the sacred “after” atheism. This “after” is not to be understood as a historical moment or singular motion at our current point in history: Kearney finds this movement between loss and retrieval of faith figured throughout religious traditions, including the “dark night of the soul” as a vital existential aspect of personal faith. “Without the abandonment of accredited certainties we remain inattentive to the advent of the strange; we ignore those moments of sacred enfleshment when the future erupts through the continuum of time.”

According to Kearney, after disenchantment, despair and loss, it can become possible to “return again to the primal experience in a new light, over and over;” There is a qualitative difference in the rediscovery: What was once a possession may be “retrieved as gift;” what was once literal “comes back again as figural—that is, as sign and symbol, as a second presence in and through absence.” Therefore, this secondary return of a God deemed lost “may well be the return of a more real presence.” However, and crucially, though it may be more real, it is no longer self-evident. “No longer a given, faith becomes a choice, a matter of interpretation.”

Anatheism is thus marked by “the double a . . . both a turning away...
from \((ab \text{ deo})\) and a turning towards \((ad \text{ deo})\) God.” In this negation of negation, Kearney sees a potential for “a double nihilism, a nihilating of the nothing which, it seems to me, opens onto something—something else, something other, ‘something rather than nothing!’”\(^{100}\)

**The May-Being of God**

Kearney describes the divinity of tenuous promise he has in mind as a God who “may be” rather than “is.” In his 2001 *The God who May Be*, Kearney develops an understanding of a God who does not offer guarantees but possibility: As a “God of the possible,”\(^{101}\) this divinity is the eschatological announcing of a possible future, dependent on humanity for its realization. On the other hand, this divine posse also makes possible ethical action, calling us from this future “where the infinite eschaton intersects with the finite order of being.”\(^{102}\)

Faith in such a divine possibility means an attentiveness to the way the present is opened up and transfigured by a call from the future. A hope in what is to come—in what may be—replaces the belief in the traditional divine. “[T]he destruction of onto-theological desire might be more properly conceived as a spur to transcend our captivation by all that is \((ta \text{ onta})\) [1 Cor 1:28] for another kind of desire—a desire for something that eye has never seen nor ear heard [1 Cor 2:9]. That is to say, eschatological desire.”\(^{103}\)

While, on the one hand, the eschatological desire thus puts the present into question, relativizes it in a way, it also transfigures and intensifies the present. For Kearney, eschatological deferment does not lead to quietism, but rather to intensified urgency of the divine call or demand placed on us humans. “The Ana-God is the opposite of the Alpha-God in that it promises a kingdom which cannot come unless we risk everything. Nothing is given in advance. Posse needs us for its esse. It is up to us.”\(^{104}\)

An important part of Kearney’s argument for a God of possibility is a reading of Exodus 3:14.

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said

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\(^{101}\) Kearney, *The God who May Be*, p. 2.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., pp. 61–62.

to Moses: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, an this my title for all generations.” (Ex 3:13–14)  

The New Oxford Annotated Bible offers “I will be what I will be” as an alternative translation for “I am who I am.” After a review of Aquinas’s ontological reading of these lines as divulging God’s metaphysical nature as “being itself” (ipsum esse), Kearney appears to side with this alternative translation. “[W]hat the suffering Hebrews needed from Moses was not some metaphysical proof about the existence of God as ipsum esse but an assurance that He would remain close to them.” The words of Exodus 3:14 are “a pledge to his people that he will not abandon them.” The God of the Hebrews’ ancestors thus becomes a God of emancipatory promise for the future. Moses’s participation to go out and announce this promise of liberation is inextricably part of this promise, Kearney notes. “Here God commits Himself to a kingdom of justice if his faithful commit themselves to it too. . . . [T]he promise can be realized only if those who receive it do not betray its potential for the future.”

Classically, possibility has been considered inferior to actuality. For something that is possible is not yet realized, not yet complete: merely possible. Thomas Aquinas thus described God as actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate. Kearney reverses this philosophical hierarchy: the possible as “something higher rather than lower than the actual.” Possibility, as “advent rather than arche,” can thus come not merely to be realized as an already present latency, but can come to transfigure what is into new and other being.

**Figurations**

Kearney includes many biblical readings in his argument for an anatheist faith or a God who “may be.” Above, I already discussed his reading of Genesis 3:14. I want to briefly discuss two further figurations that show a

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106 Kearney, The God who May Be, p. 27.

107 Ibid., p. 28.

108 Ibid., p. 29.


110 Ibid., p. 99. For this insight, Kearney relies on a reading of Nicholas of Cusa, whose notion of “possest” suggests an actuality to possibility itself. Ultimately, Kearney parts ways with Cusa because he considers him still too committed to a God of ontology. Ibid., pp. 104–105. I will discuss Cusa in greater detail through Catherine Keller’s readings (see below, pp. 177ff.).

111 Ibid., pp. 110-111.
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letting-go and retrieval akin to the anatheist movement.112

First, Kearney likens his anatheist motion of letting go and finding again to a reading of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. In the Genesis narrative, Abraham is called by God to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering to God (Gen 22:1-19). After three days, they reach the assigned place, and when Abraham is about to slaughter his son,

the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said,

“Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said,

“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.” (Gen 22:11-12a)

Having canceled the human sacrifice, God provides a ram to be offered instead. After Abraham has thus proved his submission to God, God reiterates his promise to Abraham to make his “offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen 22:17a).

Kearney offers two distinct readings of this narrative, and they diverge somewhat. On the first, it is Abraham’s willingness to give up his son that is the element of negation, while receiving him back is the anatheist moment of retrieval. “Abraham has to lose his son as a given in order to welcome him back as promise. Isaac is not Abraham’s (as extension, acquisition, projection) but another’s.”113 In giving up what is most precious to us, severing our attachment to it, and trusting in God, it becomes possible to receive it all back as a gift. This is probably closest to the traditional reading of this text, and it makes tangible something of the profound terror that Kearney says accompanies the anatheist moment of loss before retrieval.114

Kearney’s second reading of this passage, however, goes in a different direction. Now, it is not Isaac who is lost and retrieved, but God: Kearney frames the episode as Abraham’s choice between the God who demands human sacrifice, on the one hand, and the God who forbids it, on the other. When Abraham hears the voice of the angel, he is forced to make a decision no-one can make for him. Is this voice divine, or does loyalty to God demand that he continue with the sacrifice? In choosing to discern the Divine in the angel forbidding the sacrifice, Abraham comes to reject the earlier God, the one of “tribal ways of blood sacrifice.” The choice is one of fear and trembling, encapsulating the anatheist moment: A violent God is rejected and a more compassionate one is rediscovered.115

Second, Kearney presents the Trinitarian notion of perichoresis, or the “rotation” of the three persons of the Trinity, as a figuration of his anatheist faith. Traditionally, perichoresis is defined as the mutual indwelling of each

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112Others include the hospitality of Abraham (Gen 18), which I will discuss below (p. 97), and Jacob’s wrestling with God (Gen 32:24; Kearney, Anatheism, p. 20).
114See also note 50 on p. 131, below.
115Kearney, Anatheism, p. 19.
person in the others, in Latin called *circumincessio*. On Kearney’s reading, the rotation of the three persons becomes a circular dance around an “empty center (*chora*).” The persons of the Trinity are not only present in each other, they also *give space* to each other. This giving-space is crucial, the persons “always deferring one to the other, the familiar to the foreign, the resident to the alien. Without the *gap* in the middle there could be no leap, no love, no faith.”

On Kearney’s take, there are thus “two steps” to this circular “dance,” a dynamic movement of ceding one’s place to the next person, and receiving their place from the previous, “*circum-in-cessio* as both *cedere* and *sedere*,” ceding and being seated. Although this movement is “reconciled” in a sense, there is no final stasis, fusion, or *telos*; instead the dynamism itself is the final word. Divine reality remains marked by dynamic moments of hospitality, desire, ceding and receiving, and as such becomes an image for human reconciliation, which never becomes fusion or stasis. In this Trinitarian mutual deferral, “the movement of seeming communing and presencing, where all is recapitulated, is itself accompanied by a countermovement of radical distanciation and displacement.”

**Fin**

In giving negation such a central location within his theology, Kearney offers a way to think about faith as not only *not threatened* by negation, deconstruction, or suspicion, but as eminently *made possible* by them. If faith is to be a faith worthy of the name, a faith infused with hope and love and possibility, it requires the critique of a too self-certain Christianity. The negation of theological certainties opens into the possibility of a rediscovery of the Divine, not as a given, but as a gift.

The embrace of negation and affirmation is significant for the theme of this study, as Kearney explicitly remarks that some of the primary targets for rejection or suspicion are Christian exclusivism and absolutism. The “may be” first and foremost affects the certainty with which a Christian can hold their beliefs, and the legitimacy with which such beliefs can come to serve exclusion or oppression.

If the fact of, or encounter with, religious plurality can be said to be “anarchic” and to put confessional religious beliefs under suspicion, the effect of the anatheist embrace of this suspicion can be quite salutary. Christianity does not need to see plurality as a threat it needs to defend itself against, but rather can embrace it in all its difficulty and messiness, for it is the

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messiness that allows faith to come into its own. A God of *posse* would not seek to bring the anarchy of religious difference under control, as control is fundamentally alien to a divinity so conceived. It is noteworthy that Kearney refers to John Caputo and Catherine Keller for a further development of this notion of the Divine as a weak force.\(^{120}\) In Chapters III and IV I will turn to these authors to deepen this conversation.

A crucial aspect of Kearney’s anatheist faith has been left out until now: the encounter with the Divine as with a stranger, and the concomitant discernment of the Divine in every stranger. This will be the theme in the following.

**II.2.3 Hospitality: Discerning the Stranger**

The experience of the Divine, Kearney holds, is quintessentially illuminated by the encounter with the strange. In an encounter with a stranger, one’s initial response is a wager: While one attempts to discern what the other’s intentions are, ultimately the choice for hospitality or hostility cannot find sure footing. It remains structurally underdetermined. And so it is with the Divine: Seeing the Divine in the human stranger, the sacred in the everyday, ultimately remains a choice and a wager. Though a hermeneutic tradition gives the subject the conditions for imagining the Divine, ultimately faith does not find certain footing. The decision for or against hospitality or faith does not dispel this groundlessness. Even as discernment remains our fundamental way of being in the world, unknowing remains at the heart of faith.

As this encounter is so important to Kearney’s schema, he devotes a fair amount of time to its phenomenology. However, his dual loyalty to both the externality of the stranger and the subject’s dependence on interpretation and figuration means he at times appears to hesitate between the two. This dilemma of alterity has been a concern of his since at least *The Wake of Imagination*: Ethical responsibility requires *both* an answerable, interpreting subject and an exterior otherness not swallowed up by the subject’s mastery. In his attentiveness to alterity, Kearney exhibits an apparent loyalty to Emmanuel Levinas; in his emphasis on the discerning subject, to Ricoeur. At times, Kearney seems to commit to one or the other, but ultimately, it remains an unresolvable tension.

**The Divine Stranger**

Part of Kearney’s anatheist schema is the idea that the encounter with God is quintessentially an encounter with a stranger. Kearney finds such encounters with the divine stranger throughout the First and Second testaments and the Islamic story. “The entire Bible, it could be said, is a story of

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\(^{120}\)Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 68.
struggles between different ways of responding to the alien.”\textsuperscript{121} For Kearney, the Divine-as-stranger translates into the possibility of the Divine in every stranger, even more so than in the familiar. So “the divine, as exile, is in each human other who asks to be received into our midst.”\textsuperscript{122}

The frequency of biblical exhortations to do justice to the stranger, Kearney points out, indicates that “[h]ospitality to the irreducibly Other does not come naturally,” but is a risky venture surrounded by unknowability.\textsuperscript{123} Rarely do biblical figures immediately recognize the divine stranger as such. “God is revealed \textit{apr`es coup}, in the wake of the encounter, in the trace of his passing.”\textsuperscript{124} While the Divine thus moves towards us to encounter us in the stranger, the very same movement epitomizes God’s absence from our intentional grasp.

Kearney appears to remain somewhat ambiguous about the precise relation of the Divine to the human stranger. On the one hand, he stresses that “[t]he divine is in every stranger we meet,”\textsuperscript{125} but on the other hand, he warns against “confounding the otherness of God with everything and everyone that is not-God, thereby compromising God’s unique transcendence.”\textsuperscript{126} So while the Divine is \textit{in} the stranger, divine transcendence is not \textit{exhausted} by human alterity. Kearney describes the relation as metaphorical: In the experience of the stranger \textit{as} divine and the Divine \textit{as} stranger, “the metaphorical \textit{as} contains within itself a mixed copula of \textit{is/is not}. The stranger before me both \textit{is} God (as transcendent Guest) and \textit{is not} God (as screen of my projections and presumptions).”\textsuperscript{127}

The Wager

The fundamental experience of the Divine as a stranger who eludes our grasp makes “every dramatic encounter between the human and the divine into a radical hermeneutic wager: compassion or murder. You either welcome or refuse the stranger.”\textsuperscript{128} Although always accompanied by hermeneutic discernment, the wager signifies a choice that remains at root underdetermined.\textsuperscript{129} Though such a choice can and indeed must be made, it does not achieve retroactive certainty. For Kearney, this explains the vast difference in human responses to the divine call: from intolerance and war to great acts of compassion and kindness. Though we are encouraged to choose hos-

\textsuperscript{121}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{123}Ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{124}Ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{125}Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 204.
\textsuperscript{126}Kearney, \textit{The God who May Be}, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{127}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{128}Ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{129}Describing the situation of a choice for faith as a “wager” appears to come from Ricoeur, eg. Ricoeur, \textit{The Symbolism of Evil}, p. 355.
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pitality and faith, it will always have been possible to choose hostility or atheism instead.

While the wager is thus prompted by an experience of an alterity that escapes our grasp, the situation does not overwhelm one entirely. Ultimately, the subject is called on to make a choice. Such an intentional response to an alterity which interrupts our capacity to predict continues a discussion on intentionality and ethics that has been a concern of Kearney’s for some time: On the one hand, a phenomenology of alterity that exceeds and precedes the subject, putting it into question; on the other hand, the need for a subject that can make an informed choice, and answer for it.

On one side of this discussion, Kearney is guided by a sympathy for a Levinasian alterity or persistent otherness that occasions ethics as care for the other. Levinas had argued that a phenomenology of obligation must start not with law or the self, but with the other, who precedes and challenges the self’s will to mastery. The self’s response, in whatever form, is always a response to this call. The only way ethics is possible is if concern for the other is not a factor of my own interests and desires. This means the other, divine or human, both exceeds and precedes the subject, and cannot be brought under the subject’s control without being reduced to the Same, which is in itself already violence.130

So Kearney argues that, while the imagination may enable empathy and release us from our self-obsession and egoism, it ultimately “cannot actually transcend the symbolic projects of my unconscious desire and encounter the other in his/her otherness.”131 The call of the other is what “sets my desire for the other in motion in the first place.”132 The impetus for responsibility towards the other appears not as a figure of the imagination but presents an irreducible call. Narrative imagination is only ethical when it is “answerable to something beyond itself.”133

Kearney’s loyalty to Levinas is also expressed in what he calls the “persona,”134 which can be described as the uniquely singular in each person. In the other, the persona “outstrips both the presenting consciousness of my perception . . . and the presentifying consciousness of my imagination.”135 Drawing on Levinas, Kearney argues that ethics ultimately only begins when I am confronted by something other, and that attempts to ground it in symmetrical relations “compromise the irreducible alterity of the other’s persona.”136

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130 See especially Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*.
132 Ibid., p. 370.
134 Used in a different sense from Hick’s *personae* and *impersonae* of the Real. Kearney, *The God who May Be*, pp. 9ff.
135 Ibid., p. 10.
136 Ibid., p. 13.
However, the *persona* is also described as the dwelling place of God in us, or as the “capacity in each of us to receive and respond to the divine invitation.” 137 This implies that each relation with another person is a symmetrical and mutual relation of a *persona* (me) to another *persona* (the other). The persona’s initial description as unconditional alterity, beyond consciousness or perception, thus does not appear to foreclose a sense of mutuality between me and the other—even between me and God.138

While Kearney’s phenomenology of the *persona* thus gives space to a Levinasian alterity, it also limits this space.139 For ultimately, he has “difficulties” with following Levinas all the way.140 In Kearney’s estimation, Levinas’s understanding of ethics as the limit-case of “substitution” comes down to “abject humiliation,”141 and “does not . . . sufficiently allow for human freedom and choice in one’s response to this [the other’s] call.”142 For this reason, Kearney concludes that one’s obligation to the Other cannot be infinite, as Levinas had argued, but must be delimited by “the critical and narrative services of hermeneutic imagination.”143

On the other side of this dilemma, therefore, is the influence of Ricoeur, the hermeneutic emphasis on *discernment* and, ultimately, *choice*. The intentional movement of imagination, Kearney argues, is crucial not only to choice, but also to moral responsibility itself. Though prompted by an alterior call, ethics continues to require “imagining the Other ‘as’ Other (metaphorically) or ‘as if’ the Other were like me (fictively).”144 I think what Kearney has in mind is a supplementation of Ricoeur by Levinas and vice versa, as he suggests in a conversation with John Caputo:

I would consider Levinas as important as Ricoeur, in terms of the break with any kind of “totality” . . . I share Levinas’s ethical critique of such totality, as I do Ricoeur’s repeated insistence on an irreducible “conflict of interpretations”—a “radical pluralism” . . . which has that moment of critical suspicion.145

While self and other are figured or imagined narratively, this does not take away from the fact that *something presents itself to* the interpreting subject;

138Ibid., p. 79.
139A more precise evaluation would have to note that the balancing act attempted with the *persona* is not without its difficulties. Especially the mutuality of the *persona* is a dubious interpretation of Levinasian alterity. In the words of Kevin Hart: “[T]here is no equivalence: Levinas’s thought is based on a fundamental asymmetry in which the Other is elevated above the Self, while Kearney maintains that both Self and Other have *personae* and that we can open ourselves to divine transformation.” Hart, “Mystic Maybes,” p. 219.
144Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 42.
it is put in a position where it needs to respond to something given from outside the sphere of what it has already narrated and understood. Ultimately, however, this response must involve an intentional, interpretative movement by the subject. It is worth pointing out that Levinas grapples with a similar paradox: On the one hand, the irreducible alterity of the other needs to become visible and countable in a system of justice. On the other hand, this means it is, in a sense, reduced and delineated. For Levinas, this is an inescapable tragedy: necessary, but also a “betrayal” of the other’s infinite moral worth. \(^\text{146}\)

Kearney appears to agree with the double nature of this dilemma, but does not seem to see it as a tragedy so much as simply an inevitable “paradox of configuration”. \(^\text{147}\) Even if I deem the stranger not to be hostile, if I decide to welcome the strange, I must relate it somehow to the familiar. However, this always endangers that strangeness. The strange thus expresses a double and paradoxical call: “translate me/do not translate me!” \(^\text{148}\) Kearney sees here “a chiasmus of asymmetry and reciprocity,” a “critical balance” between “equiprimordial primacies.” \(^\text{149}\) The dilemma does not get resolved, but is integral to the experience of otherness.

Incidentally, this means that in Kearney’s schema the otherness of the stranger has something of a dual structure. On the one hand, there is simply the strange, de facto unknown but not in principle unknowable. This calls to be understood and welcomed where appropriate, if perhaps not assimilated. On the other hand, there is otherness as persona, necessarily beyond our intentional grasp. This calls to be respected as the irreducible divine moment in each stranger. It may be that this dual structure is simply the result of Kearney’s hermeneutic writing strategy, but it appears to me to have a unique relationship to the wager of hospitality: The alterity of the persona makes a wager necessary; the fact that strangeness is also relative and contingent makes it possible.

What makes a choice possible?

The wager thus remains a choice, without solid recourse to knowledge. But precisely because there is no solid foundation for a wager, it needs to rely on hermeneutic movements of interpretation. While this may appear to delimit the wager as a pure decision, it is important to recall that interpretation is never final; another interpretation will always also have been possible. For Kearney, the wager of hospitality is made possible by processes of imagination and discernment, processes that are neither firmly grounded nor pure.

\(^{146}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 158.
\(^{147}\) Kearney, *The God who May Be*, p. 10.
Imagination makes choice possible because it allows one to imagine the different possibilities of the choice before making it. Kearney now emphasizes the most primordial relation to the other is already a seeing-as, is already an imagining. For an ethical response to the “irreducible transcendence and alterity of the stranger before me,” Kearney explains, it is necessary that I imagine myself in their shoes.\(^{151}\)

Discernment is a further vital aspect of hospitality. Otherness is always hermeneutically “interpreted by a self, . . . in a variety of different ways—albeit none of them absolute, adequate or exhaustive.”\(^{152}\) One only ever encounters alterity in a relative form: namely, relative to oneself. Instead of indiscriminate hospitality, welcoming the other also means understanding them.\(^{153}\)

Kearney stresses this must necessarily include discrimination between “different kinds of otherness.”\(^{154}\) All others are not the same, and doing them justice includes interpreting and judging between them. Kearney thus suggests “a hermeneutic pluralism of otherness, a sort of ‘polysemy of alterity’—ranging from our experiences of conscience and the body to those of other persons, living or dead (our ancestors), or to a divine Other, living or absent.”\(^{155}\) Based on this differentiated view, Kearney suggests a kind of hospitality that is strongly conditional: “Not every stranger is divine. There is the other who kills and the other who brings life.”\(^{156}\) Strangers are only deserving of our hospitality, Kearney appears to argue, when we can expect them to be good to us.\(^{157}\)

This appears to somewhat complicate his insistence that “[t]he divine is in every stranger we meet.”\(^{158}\) The dilemma returns, but now it appears more and more difficult to estimate where Kearney stands: On the one hand, he argues for “radical hospitality,”\(^{159}\) suggesting that the alterity of the persona of a stranger means we ought to resist “reading them off against our familiar grids of understanding and identification.”\(^{160}\) On the other hand, however, he warns against accepting strangers indiscriminately, seeking “criteria” to differentiate between “the one who heals and one who

\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{151}}\)Ibid., p. 42.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{152}}\)Kearney, Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, p. 81.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{153}}\)Ibid., p. 77.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{154}}\)Ibid., p. 77.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{155}}\)Ibid., p. 81.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{156}}\)Kearney, Anatheism, p. 45.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{158}}\)Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 204.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{159}}\)Kearney, Anatheism, p. 29.
\(\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{156}}\)Kearney, The God who May Be, p. 10.
mains, between one who hosts and one who shuts the door.”\textsuperscript{161}

In any case, this “wager” of faith, while uncertain, is not a shot in the dark. Kearney gives the discerning subject quite a lot to go by: “[A]nathiest decision is not decisionism,” he stresses in a conversation with Caputo. “It’s informed, I would say, by narrative memories, traditions, and inheritances.”\textsuperscript{162} And elsewhere, by “savvy” of the senses\textsuperscript{163} or “carnal hermeneutics,” the way the body is always already interpreting its surroundings in the background.\textsuperscript{164} Crucially, however, with all this interpretation and information and savvy, “the not knowing never disappears.”\textsuperscript{165} The wager, be it a wager of interpersonal hospitality, or the wager of faith, remains suspended between an incessant hermeneutics, as a human mode of existence in the world, and a fundamental alterity. And it is this tension or opening that makes human freedom possible, and calls for human action, as the future is unwritten. “It is up to us.”\textsuperscript{166}

Figurations

As above, I want to discuss Kearney’s reading of two traditional figurations of this “wager,” in this case in two Bible stories. The first example of such a wager I will discuss is the hospitality of Abraham, the “first prophet of strangeness.”\textsuperscript{167} In the Genesis narrative, Abraham is seated by the entrance of his tent “in the heat of day” (Gen 18:1) as three figures appear. Kearney measures out the stakes of Abraham’s encounter with these three strangers: “He is filled with fear. Why have they come? he wonders. To kill him? There are three of them, and he has two women to protect.”\textsuperscript{168} But Abraham risks hospitality. And as the strangers sit down to eat, Kearney notes that the text starts to speak of a single guest, finally revealing them as God himself, come to promise a son. Kearney emphasizes that it is Abraham’s choice for hospitality over hostility against the three strangers, of whom he could not possibly know their character or intentions, which creates the scene in which the divine Other reveals himself. Abraham’s wager of hospitality thus makes it possible for divinity to dwell in the world. It even makes the impossible possible: Sarah and Abraham are promised a child.

A similar schema unfolds in the story of the Annunciation, here with the added consideration of a narrative tradition that makes a wager possible. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary, presenting to her the divine plan

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\item \textsuperscript{161}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, p. 47.
\item \textsuperscript{162}Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” pp. 213-214.
\item \textsuperscript{163}Kearney, “God After God,” p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{165}Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 214.
\item \textsuperscript{166}Kearney, “God After God,” p. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{167}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{168}Ibid., p. 18.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
in which she is to bear the Messiah (Luke 1:26–38). After Gabriel’s greetings, Kearney notes that according to the Gospel text Mary is “troubled” by the appearance of the stranger, and “ponders” what his words could mean. This is the fundamental situation of each confrontation with alterity, Kearney contends. “You’re troubled as you ponder.”  

In traditional depictions, Mary is “almost always portrayed . . . as accompanied by both a lily and a book. . . . She hails from the tradition of the Book, a hermeneutical, rabbinical tradition, and also of the body.”  

The “pondering” is thus the hermeneutic reading of the tradition which makes that decision possible. While the advent of the stranger takes us by surprise, the decision on a response is surrounded by hermeneutic interpretation. Ultimately, after some conversation and further questions, Mary agrees: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:26–38) Kearney stresses she might have said no. “She is not violated. She volunteers.”  

And it is this volunteering that makes the incarnation, and thus Christ and Christianity, possible. God’s coming into the world is dependent on our consent and our cooperation.

Fin

In his discussions of hospitality, Kearney is interested in respecting the radical otherness of the other as much as in washing away the anonymity of this otherness, discerning with mind and body who they are. It is these two aspects of the encounter with the strange that Kearney attempts to hold in a tension: Otherness as an irreducible alterity, on the one hand, and the response to such otherness through various intentional movements, on the other. Whether Kearney quite succeeds at this balancing act is not immediately clear. His statements at times appear contradictory, though that is ultimately a question that would require a longer and more detailed study.

Kearney’s work on hospitality may be helpful for thinking about the interreligious for the simple reason that he places encounter with the strange and other in the center of his anatheist Christianity. Even the most “familiar,” the center of our religious tradition, is already marked by a strangeness. Further, he draws attention to the need for understanding and discernment: Just as it is necessary to respect that the other is not simply an extension of ourselves, or may not fit neatly into our own schemata, we must not exoticize them either. However, Kearney’s own application of this work to questions of the interreligious has its limitations, as I will discuss in the next section.

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171 Kearney, Anatheism, p. 25.
II.3 Kearney on the Interreligious

In this section, I will explore what Kearney has written directly about the interreligious and religious diversity. Interreligious encounter has been an important concern of Kearney’s in the past decade or so: He has edited volumes on the subject and given it a central place in his anatheism project, which he describes as “essentially” interreligious. The discernment of the Divine at work outside the Christian tradition can help Christianity avoid its darker sides:

Belief in God as a transcendent alterity does not have to deny that the divine Other may take the form of different others. . . . Faith in an Absolute might best avoid the trap of absolutism—source of so many wars and injustices—by embracing a hermeneutics of religious pluralism. For thus might we endeavour to judge between different kinds of selves and different kinds of others, while avoiding the twin temptations of judgementalism and (its opposite) relativism. A diacritical hermeneutics of discernment, committed to the dialogue of self-and-other, wagers that it is still possible for us to struggle for a greater philosophical understanding of Others and, so doing, do them more justice.

Most of Kearney’s discussions on interreligious encounters are found in Anatheism. In addition, he has written an introduction to a Religion and the Arts special issue on interreligious imagination, “A Pilgrimage to the Heart,” and a contribution, “Pranayama: Breathing from the Heart,” and touches on the issue in Reimagining the Sacred and a handful of other works.

I will discuss Kearney’s remarks on the interreligious in three parts. The first two will each take the form of a relatively brief discussion of one aspect of these remarks: First, his discussions of specific encounter or specific religions, where I will single out Kearney’s discussion of his travels to India and his remarks on Islam; and second, Kearney’s description of interreligious hospitality as a kind of hospitality for strangers. The third part will take the form of a slightly longer discussion of the kind of theology of religious pluralism Kearney devises, including his understanding of religious truth.

174Kearney, Anatheism, p. 4.
175Kearney, Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, p. 232.
II.3.1 Exotic Oriental Verities

To begin, I will discuss two particular encounters between Kearney and other faith traditions. The first is Kearney’s account of a journey to India, where particularly his encounters with forms of Hinduism left a lasting impression on him. The second is Kearney’s pages on Islam in *Anatheism,* which are less encouraging.

A Pilgrimage to the Heart

In “A Pilgrimage to the Heart” and “Pranayama: Breathing from the Heart,” Kearney reflects on a recent interfaith conference in India and the journey he undertook afterwards to visit several Hindu and Buddhist holy sites. It is clear from Kearney’s accounts that both the conference and the journey made a significant impression on him.

“[O]ur journey was not just geographical but spiritual,” Kearney intimates as he recounts his experiences with Hindu spirituality. In the first article he expresses his admiration for many individuals he met at and after the conference, especially those who practice a form of multiple religious belonging or find a common core truth—notably the “heart”—expressed in Hinduism and Christianity. It appears that a more systematic discussion of the issues surrounding such a pluralism, multiple religious belonging, or the “mystical imagination,” which provides “language and liturgy which translates across confessional divides,” is not his concern here.

The same can be said of the second article, which is a more specific account of Kearney’s experience learning from a yogi. It includes accounts of meditation lessons as well as Kearney’s attempts to understand the non-dualist logic of the Upanishads in conversation with his teacher.

Though they are not systematic theoretical discussions, both essays reveal a fascination with the forms of Hinduism Kearney encountered, as well as a conviction that there is no fundamental contradiction between Hindu traditions and Kearney’s own Christianity. More generally, both articles exhibit a great optimism about the potential of interreligious encounter, be it to understand the other, illuminate the familiar, or come to a shared

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177 For instance, Kearney describes how he “personally will never forget” and “could not but be moved” by the “sheer humanity and humor” and “deep, booming voice” of one of the speakers, “or the time afterwards when, sharing a meal with the other participants, he scooped little mounds of dhal and rice with his enormous fingers, . . . all the while regaling us with mischievous stories about his past life.” Kearney, “A Pilgrimage to the Heart,” p. 6. The volume also includes a photo of Kearney in shorts and hiking boots.

178 Ibid., p. 18.

179 Ibid., p. 7. He does make a few remarks on “cross-reading” and interreligious translation, however, and hypothesizes that “[s]omething new arises from bilateral translations between the ancient imaginaries of the great wisdom traditions”. This appears to form the basis for his discussion of the interreligious in *Anatheism,* so I will include these remarks in my discussion of interreligious translation, below. Ibid., p. 9.
journey.

Kearney notes, however, that the fascination he feels for the Hindu other is marked by ambiguity, particularly given India’s colonial past. He finds within himself a conflict between “pilgrim and spectator.” While he would like to think of himself as a “genuine searcher of the heart,” there was always also the shadow of a “predatory researcher of exotic Oriental verities.”\(^{180}\) He wishes to learn from this yogi, but finds in his perception of him his own “Oriental fantasies”\(^{181}\) played back at him.

Islam

In *Anatheism*, the main argument of which I discussed above, Kearney discusses Islam on two occasions.\(^{182}\) The first is part of Kearney’s discussion of the divine stranger. Following his reading of Gabriel’s visit to Mary, Kearney depicts Mohammed receiving the first words from the angel. Kearney describes this as an encounter with a divine stranger calling for a wager, surrounded by fear and trembling. “And no sooner has he overcome terror and surrendered (*islam*) to the stranger before him than he hears a voice speak through him.”\(^{183}\) In a similar way to Abraham’s encounter with the three strangers, and Mary’s pondering “yes,” Kearney thus submits Islam also gathers around a fundamental wager of the imagination that makes possible the coming of the Divine into the world. Hospitality for the stranger continues to be a common, central value throughout Islamic history.\(^{184}\)

However, as all wagers, the wager of Islam is marked by a “deep ambiguity,” Kearney continues. Reminders of the “bloodier, if unrepresentative, chapters” of the history of Islam have become commonplace in the Western public since the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York by Al-Qaeda. “The liberating legacy of Islam is one that . . . has to be reclaimed rather than assumed,” Kearney contends. This task of reclamation is more difficult for Islam than for Judaism or Christianity, as Islam “escaped the disenchanting rigors of a secular enlightenment.”\(^{185}\)

Kearney thus looks for “counternarratives”:\(^{186}\) progressive Muslim the-
ologians and historical examples of Muslim religious tolerance, including Averroes and the poets Hafiz and Kabir Das, as well as the contemporary mainstream Jordanian initiative A Common Word.187 "It is humbling for Westerners to recall" the multifaith reality of the Mughal empire, contemporary with the heights of Christian intolerance and persecution, Kearney notes, intimating: "One sometimes forgets that there have always been multiple schools of Islam, not one monolithic authority."188

The second occurrence of Islam in Anatheism is part of a chapter on ethics and practical implications of the anatheist schema. He starts by pointing out the problematic implications of Islamophobic “secularist’ polemics” that paint Islam as incompatible with democracy. However, he appears to agree that there is an issue there, asking: “[I]s the historical leaning of dominant forms of Islam toward theocracy not problematic? In short, is Islam intrinsically belligerent and intolerant?”189 In the search for an answer, Kearney discusses, among others, Iranian reformist thinker Abdolkarim Sorouh, who emphasizes the interpretative and diverse nature of all human religiosity.190 Despite the “undemocratic spirit abroad in many Muslim societies today,” Kearney thus argues, there are Muslim intellectuals who offer reinterpretations that allow Islam to “be accommodated with modern democracy.”191 Democracy is “by no means incompatible with a certain tradition of Islamic faith.”192

One wonders precisely what Kearney is hoping to achieve in these pages. His effort to include Muslim thinkers is certainly enriching, and his defense of Islam’s diverse history against its Islamophobic “critics” is certainly a necessary aspect of anatheist interreligious solidarity. However, the reader cannot shake the sense that Kearney is also still attempting to convince himself: “Hardly recipes for war or conquest!” he writes after citing a Quranic injunction towards hospitality.193 In a sense, he continues to let his islamophobic opponents set the agenda: He describes progressive and tolerant forms of Islam as “counternarratives,” and does little to seriously call into question the “secularist’ polemics” he is responding to.

Particularly this second point is important. In response to the ques-

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188 Kearney, Anatheism, p. 33.
189 Ibid., p. 143.
190 Ibid., pp. 143ff. See eg. Abdolkarim Sorouh. Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam. Trans. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Kearney also points to the significance of political theology and notions of sovereignty in this context, and argues briefly that Ibn Rushd may provide a helpful framework for thinking through these matters in an Islamic context. For a more in-depth, and in my view more astute, discussion of sovereignty, political theology and how these relate to Islam, see below in section IV.3.2.
191 Ibid., p. 146.
192 Ibid., p. 148.
193 Ibid., p. 32.
tion whether Islam is compatible with democracy, Kearney almost makes a powerful point about how secularism is made to serve racist and xenophobic interests. Instead, however, he seems to leave the assumptions of this “critique” in place, merely looking for heterodox Islamic intellectuals to argue that Islam may be generally belligerent, intolerant and leaning towards theocracy, but not intrinsically so. It is not so much my concern whether these assessments are accurate or not—they are clearly too general to be answered on a factual basis. Rather, I miss an awareness on Kearney’s part that he is here taking on the very question that places Muslims in the West under a general suspicion on a daily basis, and I fear he ultimately does less to dispel that suspicion than to confirm it as generally justified. The progressive Muslim thinkers Kearney cites are, without a doubt, very interesting. However, I cannot help but wonder if a more fundamental critique of a perfidious secularism in the service of xenophobia would not have been a more fitting response.

Fin

Above, I have discussed two instances in Kearney’s writing of contact with, or discussion of, a specific religious other: first, his reflections on a journey to India, and second, the pages on Islam in *Anatheism*. They show the deep experiential background of Kearney’s interest in the interreligious, and his willingness to continue to learn and engage with new thinkers from other religious traditions.

It may be that not much can be gleaned from these few passages. They appear as ad-hoc assessments, reflecting Kearney’s experiences in India and a certain awkwardness with debates about Islam. However, this awkwardness may be revealing of a more general problem, and thus prove rather fruitful for the concerns of this study. In my view, it presents an elucidating case of the way even progressive or liberal discourses on religious diversity can come to reproduce generalized suspicion or even exclusion of the religious other, especially when they do not recognize how their questions and assessments stem from a position of privilege.

It appears to me that Kearney’s wariness of his fascination with his yogi teacher is a response to precisely this problem, albeit in a different context. For in India, Kearney is deeply aware of how the problematic legacy of orientalist exploration ineluctably affects his own approach to Hinduism. The value of this self-assessment, as existing on the edge between an orientalist explorer and an earnest seeker, is one that Christian interfaith activists perhaps also ought to take to heart when it concerns Islam.
II.3.2 Hospitality

As we saw in the previous section, Kearney gives the affirmation of hospitality or openness to the stranger a central place in his theopoetics. Kearney frames his discussions of interfaith dialogue, too, as a kind of hospitality for strangers. Though interreligious hospitality as a particular case of hospitality does not seriously alter or expand the general theoretical issues I discussed above in II.2.3, I will here briefly discuss Kearney’s application.

Above, I discussed how Kearney sees the encounter with a stranger as an encounter with a double call: on the one hand, to be welcomed, and on the other hand, to be respected in difference. Kearney is particularly interested in hospitality as a model for approaching religious difference because, in his schema, it retains an identifiable difference between host and guest. This is, his affirmations of pluralism and multiple religious belonging notwithstanding, crucial to his view of interreligious hospitality: If the other does not remain in some sense strange, it will become “fusion,” which he calls “you-come-in-ism,” or “false ecumenism.” The religious other stays in some way other; the guest must also leave the house again in order to “remain a guest.” To characterize interreligious reconciliation as hospitality, he argues, is thus an alternative to “a program of rational assimilation” or a mere tolerance predicated on the guest’s surrender of “their irreducible uniqueness and difference.”

Kearney thus looks toward hospitality as a way to engage with religious difference that, on the one hand, expresses a genuine, potentially risky sort of relationship with non-Christians, but, on the other hand, does not deny the ambiguity of that relation and the persistent otherness that characterizes it. Hospitality is dynamic, since it allows both host and guest their own particularity. The line separating self and other is not fundamentally called into question, leaving each to their own identity. This is to be valued: “If religions were the same rather than different,” Kearney argues, “there would be no stranger to learn from, no alien to welcome to one’s home.”

Translation

The search for a kind of interreligious practice that affirms both commonality and remaining otherness, and invites a mutual move towards hospitality, leads Kearney to suggest translation as a further metaphor for interreli-

194Eg. Kearney, Anatheism, pp. 48–52.
198Kearney, Anatheism, p. 50.
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Kearney wrote the introduction to Ricoeur’s posthumous publication on translation, on which Moyaert draws for her work on interreligious translation. In his own distinct language, Kearney largely draws the same conclusions as Moyaert, whose work he affirms.

Kearney describes interreligious translation as “a summons of the imagination to transmigrate between one religion and another.” With Ricoeur, Kearney understands translation as a kind of hospitality, where the dialogue partners do not dwell in a supposedly neutral space but make space in their religious language for receiving the other. Rather than a single, shared language or “spiritual Super Highway,” understanding interconfessional reconciliation as translation means recognizing difference as both its condition and its goal. Further, “[s]omething new arises” in these interactions between religious imaginaries. Instead of a fusion or universal religion, then, Kearney envisions interreligious translation as engendering the emergence of something new: “Out of the silent dark of the heart-cave,” origin of many religions, thus spews forth a “chorus of sounds, images, and gestures soliciting endless translation into different liturgies.”

Though Kearney’s discussion of interreligious translation is brief, it is deeply informed by his earlier work. This includes his phenomenology of the stranger (see II.2.3): The encounter with the religious other remains caught in the tension between respect for alterity and interpretation, which calls for continuous discernment. This makes interreligious understanding on some level also always a matter of imagination (see II.2.1), hinging on a “metaphorical as.” In a way that is structurally similar to his discussion of historical imagination, the religious life of the other is not simply available, but must be imagined. The translation “stands for” the original, making itself understandable in terms of the familiar. It seeks to make the other understandable “as” they understand themselves, but this “as” stretches across both the correlation with familiar religious language, necessary for its relatability, and the respect for otherness required by the ultimate particularity and untranslatability of religious imaginaries. If this process fails, understanding may not emerge. But the success of translation also always presents the danger of forgetting one is only seeing-as, of believing a translation offers transparent access to the way the stranger truly “is.”

Interreligious translation and interreligious imagination thus remains “a

200Ricoeur, *On Translation*.
201Personal Notes, June 2015.
203Ibid., p. 49.
204Ibid., p. 51.
205Ibid., p. 15.
wager of transit between like and unlike,” and must remain attentive to its own inevitable failure to render a complete transparency. However, Kearney stresses, this failure is not bad news, but the greatest gift of the interreligious, engendering endless formulations and figurations. “The traversals proliferate in spiritual diversity just as fish flourish where tides meet.”

Fin

Though he places them in his own vocabulary, Kearney’s remarks depicting the interreligious as hospitality and translation are limited to a handful of pages and thus again do not constitute a serious systematic discussion of the issues. They may not appear to add much to what I discussed in Chapter I—especially Marianne Moyaert develops the Ricoeurián elements Kearney draws on further and places them in conversation with theology of religions. It must be admitted that the brief and superficial character of his remarks is puzzling given their apparent significance to his envisioned anatheist Christianity. However, though brief, they allude to the way his earlier, more extensive discussions on collective identity and an imagination that mediates between the self and alterity can be made fruitful for the interreligious. I will return to this in Chapter V, below.

I want to take this opportunity, however, to make a more fundamental point about viewing interreligious encounters as “hospitality” for “strangers” or “guests” as Kearney does. On a basic level, merely ethical hospitality to a supposed “stranger” or “other” is clearly not by itself a sufficient response to the intricacies of religious difference, simply because it does not necessarily say anything about one’s theological estimation of the other’s tradition. One might be ethically hospitable, but still theologically exclusivist; in such a case, one might well consider evangelism a kind of hospitality. In Kearney’s case, this critique is of limited applicability, as Kearney’s emphasis on hospitality informs the core of his theology and opens up into a discernment of the Divine in many religious traditions.

Second, however, the blanket depiction of non-Christians as “strangers” is problematic in its own way. It is clearly true that non-Christians may “remain (in part at least) always strange to us,” simply because their religious tradition is not ours, or because of a residual alterity in any intersubjective relationship. However, I wonder if characterizing interreligious relations as “hospitality” for “strangers” does not in many cases simply miss the point, and in many other cases serve to reinforce a discourse producing non-Christians as strangers and others. The relation between Christians and, say, Jews in the Netherlands is not one of “hospitality” towards “strangers” or “guests”: Jews are not sojourners in this country but ci-

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207 Kearney, Anatheism, p. 15.
208 Ibid., p. 52.
II.3. KEARNEY ON THE INTERRELIGIOUS

dizens. Describing Jews in the Netherlands as “strangers” would reinforce the arguably antisemitic idea that they are not really at home in this country. Further, it would conceal that Christianity has had a relation of violent familiarity with Judaism since its very inception.

Though this is especially so in the case of Christianity’s relation to Judaism, it applies to some extent to other interreligious relations, as well. Arguably, interreligious solidarity with Muslims, Hindus, and others in the Netherlands needs to include a discourse affirming their right to a presence in this country and its institutions, not as strangers and aliens, but citizens and members of the household (Eph. 2:19). A discourse on strangers or guests, at least in a Christian hegemonic context such as Europe (secularization notwithstanding), inscribes itself into xenophobic and antisemitic notions embedded deep within a society’s unconscious: that this continent is fundamentally Christian, and that others can live here only at the discretion of its Christian inhabitants. Kearney shows great skill in addressing that unconscious and its xenophobic grammar in his *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, but in his remarks on interreligious hospitality, this suspicion is missing.

It may be argued, in response, that both religions in a dialogue are strange to each other, that a discourse on strangers is not to allude to questions of national belonging but on opening up one’s religious community to those who are outside it. However, even if it were possible to ignore the context of xenophobia, antisemitism, and Christian hegemony, as this response appears to suggest, this would still ignore the profoundly intertwined history Jews and Christians, to stick with this example, share: Even if Christianity has more often been Judaism’s enemy than its friend, the two are certainly not strangers to each other.

In sum, while Kearney’s emphasis on reconciliation in lasting difference is certainly a necessary critique of assimilationist positions, it appears to me that his choice to inscribe this in a discourse on “strangers” can be considered counterproductive, or at least deserves greater suspicion than it gets in his work.

II.3.3 A Wager on Pluralism

It may have become clear by now that Kearney affirms a theology of religious pluralism, akin to the pluralism I discussed in Chapter I. I will now discuss Kearney’s pluralism in greater detail. For Kearney, religions are different figurations of the same ineffable transcendent truth, and Christianity cannot be said to have more privileged access to this than other religions. While he offers some problematizations and qualifications of more typical pluralism, Kearney remains operative within this basic pluralistic framework. Above,

I criticized pluralism for, among other things, its innate danger to believe it knows the other religions better than they know themselves, and this again becomes clear in Kearney’s version, which would like to see all religions develop into anatheist versions.

**Truth**

A good starting point for a discussion of Kearney’s pluralism is his take on religious truth. Religious accounts do not refer to facts, Kearney argues, but are narrative figurations of something that remains elusive. They illustrate virtues, notably hospitality, and serve as imaginative metaphors that can open up a world of the possible.\textsuperscript{211}

[Religious] images and terms are, of course, all figures of our imagination, signs and symbols, which fortunately shift, change, and mutate throughout history. “Supreme fictions,” as Wallace Stevens puts it, which does not, for me, mean false or illusory. They may well be the closest we can get to truth. Every religion worth its salt is a battleground of images, of tropes, narratives, metaphors, and metonymies—but always aiming and illustrating something, some moment of “truth.”\textsuperscript{212}

Instead of truth as facts, Kearney suggests “truth as troth—namely, a promise, pledge, commitment—to greater peace, greater love, greater justice.”\textsuperscript{213} While this “does not mean, as might first appear, a collapsing of the distinction between the imaginary and the real,” fictional narrative can be “more real” than “so-called reality,”\textsuperscript{214} a “truer truth.”\textsuperscript{215} Though religions may thus appear to contradict each other, if one understands them along the lines of narrative imagination, this contradiction disappears. All religions can be different figurations of truth.

This understanding of religious narratives as metaphors of the imagination is clearly an extrapolation of his earlier work on narrative imagination, which included, we recall, not only fiction, but also the representation of historical occurrences. It appears that Kearney sees religious narrative more like fiction, however, and is not very interested in their claims to historical verity. This raises the question whether religious texts are to be considered true only in the way that fiction is true. Do they merely serve to illustrate virtues? Kearney does suggest traditional religious narratives are simply *very good* narratives, not qualitatively different from fiction: “special, exemplary stories,” sacred because they “belong to a canon that a number of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{212} Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 203.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Ibid., p. 205.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 25.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Ibid., p. 23.
\end{itemize}
people say are holy to them.”\textsuperscript{216} This ascribed holiness means the stories become refigured into actions, “which in turn form new existential testimonies, inscribing themselves into an ongoing narrative of sacred hospitality.”\textsuperscript{217}

However, Kearney elsewhere emphasizes that “faith is not reducible to fiction.”\textsuperscript{218} Above, I discussed Kearney’s emphasis that historical narrative answers to an external reality, which cannot simply be subsumed in fictive imagination. Presumably, the same logic is at work in Kearney’s understanding of religious narrative, though not driven by the alterity of historical verity, but by that of the Divine: An external reality—God?—presents itself to the human imagination as a stranger, yielding a “surplus of meaning,” which “humanity must imagine it in many ways.”\textsuperscript{219} Out of “ineffability” emerges a “fability”—its translation into a variety of accounts, testimonies, fables, narratives, and doctrines.\textsuperscript{220}

So we see how Kearney’s metaphorical understanding of religious truth moves into the possibility of a shared reality underlying many religions. For Kearney, the “underlying truth,” or “deep truth” of all religions can be summed up as “sacred hospitality.” All religious traditions have “their own figures and their own narratives in which they express this.”\textsuperscript{221} Kearney thus argues that “the commonality of all religions across confessional differences” is “one of the essential points of interreligious dialogue.”\textsuperscript{222} Hospitality, we might say, is this shared deep truth, making for the multitude of various narratives and figurations. “The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.”\textsuperscript{223}

If this shared truth of all religions is hospitality, it is peculiar that Kearney here refers to it as an “absolute” that requires pluralism. This is not a singular case: In Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, Kearney suggests “faith in an Absolute might best avoid the trap of absolutism . . . by embracing a hermeneutics of religious pluralism.”\textsuperscript{224} In Reimagining the Sacred, published over a decade later, he submits we “have no absolute answers about the absolute.”\textsuperscript{225} Was the rejection of an Absolute as a metaphysical Supreme Being or First Cause not of crucial significance in his theology? And is the shared truth of all religions a transcendent, ineffable Absolute

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\textsuperscript{216} Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 208.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., pp. 208–209.
\textsuperscript{218} Kearney, Anatheism, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{220} Kearney, The God who May Be, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{221} Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” 208; these citations are in fact Caputo’s words, summing up Kearney’s point, to which Kearney responds “correct.”
\textsuperscript{222} Kearney, Anatheism, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{224} Kearney, Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, p. 232.
(to which we may be hospitable), or is it the virtue of hospitality for the stranger by itself?

Kearney responds this “absolute” should be understood as “a Levinasian notion of an absolute that calls and absolves [sic] itself” such as in the burning bush or in the transfiguration on the mountain, along the lines of the persona.\textsuperscript{226} So it appears we are to understand this “absolute” as an elusive Divine, an “absolute alterity,” which Kearney differentiates from the “relative alterity of other humans,”\textsuperscript{227} but which can be encountered in the human other. While this explanation brings his references to an “absolute” back into his general framework, I still wonder if “absolute” is really the most adequate term for the weak force of possibility of the God who May Be. Kearney’s use of this terminology remains, in my view, confusing, appearing to reinsert a sense of presence or metaphysics into the conversation he elsewhere seeks to overcome.

Qualifiers

While the commonality across religious difference is thus central to Kearney’s concerns, he does embed this pluralism in a number of qualifiers. The first of these is that his pluralism is itself a wager of the imagination. What is interreligiously held in common is but a “quasi-universality,” as it is “a wager rather than a presumption.”\textsuperscript{228} The different religious traditions “may indeed all be pointing to the same absolute,” but “we cannot ‘know’ that, of course; we can only ‘believe.’”\textsuperscript{229}

This is certainly a necessary caveat, especially in light of the common critique that pluralism is arrogant and presumptive. However, Kearney’s conceptualization here remains limited to these few lines, which by themselves do little to differentiate his pluralism from that of John Hick: Hick, too, emphasizes his pluralism is but a hypothesis formulated in response to the available data. Though this is a different vocabulary from Kearney’s, the qualifying effect is broadly similar, and in Hick’s case, it has done little to convince his critics that he is not presuming access to secret knowledge. And the same could still be said of Kearney: His emphasis that sacred hospitality is ultimately what all other religions are truly about still creates the impression that Kearney knows something about those other religions that they do not know themselves. His emphasis that he does not “know” this, only “believes” it, needs further theoretical work if it is to dispel that impression.

Secondly, Kearney emphasizes that this interreligious commonality does not overcome strangeness. A residual strangeness or limited incommensu-

\textsuperscript{226}Personal Correspondence, May 2016; cf. Kearney, \textit{The God who May Be}, pp. 9ff.
\textsuperscript{227}Kearney, \textit{Strangers, Gods, and Monsters}, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{228}Ibid., p. 19.
\textsuperscript{229}Kearney, \textit{Debates in Continental Philosophy}, p. 256.
II.3. KEARNEY ON THE INTERRELIGIOUS

...ability remains between religious traditions, and this remaining “otherness of each other” must be respected. While translation is possible, there remains an “untranslatable kernel” of strangeness, a “fundamental alterity,” Kearney writes, which makes reconciling religions at once necessary and inadequate. There is always something more to be said and understood, some inexhaustible residue never to be known. And it is this “more” — which many religions call God — that allows the stranger to remain (in part at least) always strange to us. This is why every authentic religious experience is a re-legere, a return again and again from surplus to signification to surplus.

This is clear enough: There will always be a persistent otherness in any intersubjective or interreligious relation. But something peculiar is going on here. One would presume “the untranslatable” to mean the particular idiosyncrasies of a given religion, precisely the opposite of what they have in common with other religions. However, Kearney here identifies the untranslatable with God. In Kearney’s view, because the experience of God is marked by the experience of an alterity or strangeness, the experience of strangeness in interreligious encounter does not stand in tension with a pluralist hermeneutic. Rather, he appears to fold commonality and difference into each other: The ineffable mystical point of unity, common to all religions, is the untranslatable, unsettling, otherness. Otherness is not in tension with commonality at all, but rather appears to function as one of the surest signs of commonality. For what is common to all humans is that we are all “answerable to an alterity which unsettles us.”

For this reason, the “move towards universal principles” must be supplemented by “a radical descent into the specificities of each spiritual tradition — a descent into difference” to complement or intensify the “ascent towards oneness.” For in this descent into the untranslatable and incommensurable particularities of a tradition, Kearney believes we may find “at the root of each religion, a silent, speechless openness to a Word, which surpasses us.” Divine alterity can only be experienced through the mediation of traditional particularity. So while Kearney affirms a common deep truth to the various

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230 Kearney, Anatheism, p. 175.
233 Kearney, Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, p. 5. Compare this to the paradox Kearney learns in the Upanishads during his meditation studies in India: “What struck me most, I told Ashish, was that the shining truth which the seeker desires is larger and higher than the heavens themselves but is to be discovered at the very bottom of the innermost vault of the heart.” Kearney, “Pranayama,” p. 268.
religions, this is not a truth that could stand by itself—traditional “sacramentalities and scriptures”\textsuperscript{235} are what allow us to approach this truth in the first place. Anatheist pluralism is not about transcending difference \textit{simpliciter}, but about “trying to retrieve and reimagine what is still life-affirming and emancipatory in tradition.”\textsuperscript{236} What is shared and what remains irreconcilably different thus, it appears, embrace.

I wonder if this quite works. What is shared, such as an ethical universal like hospitality, and what is not shared, such as, perhaps, opinions on sexual ethics, frequently do not so much embrace as simply diverge. Kearney describes the relation between his affirmation of difference and of commonality in unsatisfying terms: Religions “may be the same in some crucial respects (like the Golden Rule), while remaining diverse in others.”\textsuperscript{237} But how is this distinction to be negotiated? Is hospitality a “crucial” aspect? What about gender equality, strict monotheism, or pacifism? Kearney affirms Hans Küng’s Global Ethic project, an endeavor to bring religions together on basic ethical affirmations.\textsuperscript{238} How does such an effort relate to a “descent into difference”? These are likely issues that any theology grappling with religious difference needs to struggle with, and such a struggle will presumably always be a processual conversation without a fixed end point or formalist procedural rules. However, even if we grant that Kearney cannot be expected to give us answers to these questions, it must still be concluded that he does not give us many tools to have such a conversation.

So are all religions truly about hospitality? Is hospitality truly an ethical universal, if it does not appear to be not the primary concern of many religious traditions today? Kearney’s apparent solution to this conundrum, as I will show below, is a “conditional” pluralism: Religions are about the same common truth insofar as they agree with Kearney’s anatheist project.

**Conditional Pluralism**

Kearney’s vision of hospitality as a shared core to all religions is not only a descriptive effort, but also a normative goal: Kearney would like to see anatheist versions of all religions. He argues that anatheism, here understood broadly as a move away from absolutism and violence and towards hospitality, is an option available to, and necessary for, all religious traditions. So “anatheist Islam is no less conceivable, in principle, than anatheist Judaism or Christianity.” Anatheism is “an integral option of all Abrahamic faiths,”\textsuperscript{239} and indeed all faiths in general. Kearney thus explicitly rejects

\textsuperscript{235}Critchley and Kearney, “What’s God?” p. 159.
\textsuperscript{236}Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{237}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{239}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, p. 149.
the option that anatheism would be an exclusively Christian understanding of religion, and finds potential for anatheism in different religious traditions, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.\textsuperscript{240}

This implies a conversion of the heart whereby each religion finds at the ineffable quick of its belief the means to reverse the violent impulses that inform religious claims to master absolute truth. It involves an anatheist moment of critical and therapeutic self-retrieval.\textsuperscript{241}

This means that when Kearney says things like “the Master God must die so that the God of interconfessional hospitality can be born,” or calls for “a rigorous anatheistic critique of the theistic perversions of religion,” this must be understood as referring to all religions. All religions, Kearney thus argues, need to “purge” themselves of their “inherent temptation” to violence.\textsuperscript{242}

Kearney maintains this normative approach to pluralism is not one that “ignores the reality of conflicting convictions,” but that his ethic of hospitality “is an effort to retrieve a unique hospitality towards the stranger at the very root of each belief.”\textsuperscript{243} Kearney’s shared ethical vision of hospitality thus attempts to walk a delicate balance between hospitality as a descriptively formulated “deep truth” of all faiths and, on the other hand, as a normatively formulated conviction that all religions need to move towards. In Kearney’s pluralism, other religious traditions are affirmed insofar as they are potentially anatheist, insofar as they potentially give space for a move away from violence and towards hospitality.

Again, I am not sure if this works. While there is certainly potential for interreligious relations in coming together on a shared ethic of hospitality in difference, and a shared commitment to peace and justice, a Christian author prescribing a certain development for other religions seems somewhat presumptive and oblivious to Christianity’s history with those other religions. Even if hospitality is a fairly broad and innocuous norm for religions to live up to, Christianity proclaiming it as such may not sit entirely comfortably with the adherents of those religions. Above, I criticized John Hick’s pluralism for presuming to know other religions better than they know themselves. In Kearney’s case, this critique can be intensified: Kearney presumes not only to know what defines other religions (ethical hospitality), but also to know in what direction they should develop (purge themselves of their inherent temptation to violence).


\textsuperscript{241} Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, pp. 179–180.

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., p. 175.

\textsuperscript{243} Kearney, “Beyond Conflict,” p. 110.
In sum, Kearney subscribes to a form of pluralism, affirming a shared truth metaphorically expressed in many religions. He embeds this pluralism in a number of qualifiers: It is itself a wager of the imagination, it does not resolve the strangeness of the other, and it includes a call to an anatheist rethinking of each religion. However, these qualifiers each either do not by themselves differentiate his pluralism from more typical forms, as is the case with the first, or contain significant issues Kearney does not address, as is the case with the second and third. It is further peculiar, given his emphasis on overcoming the God of metaphysics, that Kearney continues to speak of the “absolute” in this context. In general, his remarks on pluralism, if perhaps more elaborate than his remarks on interreligious hospitality or translation, again remain of an apparently improvised nature compared to the thoughtful discussions in his earlier work.

Kearney’s account thus remains unsatisfying. At best, it is underdeveloped; at worst, it is problematic. Kwok’s critique of pluralism, that it “smacks of the patronizing tendency of white liberals,” was perhaps too facile when directed at Hick, but does not seem so exaggerated when applied to Kearney’s presumption to know what other religions is truly about, or how they are to be understood, or how they should develop.

To take this further, I worry that an understanding of the interreligious that hinges on a certain understanding of religious truth and an expectation of a certain enlightening development could produce a new line of difference, between “us” who are wise enough to understand how truth works in religion, and “them” who are still so primitive to believe in an existent actor God, or in any kind of final truth at all. It is true that Kearney firmly believes Christianity is not privileged among the religions, but such a metaphorical truth without metaphysics could devolve into its own kind of exclusivism in postmodern guise.

This is clearly not what Kearney is after. His goal is clearly not to

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244 Kwok, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology, p. 199.
245 This becomes particularly clear in the conclusion drawn by Jean-Luc Marion, another “post-metaphysical” Christian philosopher. For Marion, Christianity is not “one religion among others—superior for some, equal or inferior for others,” but uniquely capable of offering an experience of “the paradox of the Christ event as it unfolds in the nonmetaphysical relation between the possible and the impossible.” He considers all (other) religions “idolatry” and wishes to see them “disappear.” He is “not aware of any other culture where people think that way without referring to . . . the Christ event.” Thankfully, Kearney succeeds in making Marion admit “the case of the Old Testament is puzzling,” but cannot convince Marion that Christianity may not be privileged. So for Marion, his postmetaphysical philosophy of religion seems to serve to construct a new fault line, namely, between Christianity and “religion,” with only Christianity offering any way to something that is not “idolatry.” Richard Kearney and Jean-Luc Marion. “The Death of the Death of God.” In: Reimagining the Sacred. Ed. by Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 175–192, pp. 186, 187.
construct a new difference, but to question the privileged position of Christianity and discern the Divine at work in other religions as well, leading to something more like a shared pilgrimage towards an eschatologically open future. The pluralism he formulates, however, adds little to existing approaches and remains crippled by its apparently improvised nature. In my view, it must be concluded that Kearney’s work on the interreligious ultimately does not do enough to either develop or challenge the rudimentary pluralist framework in which he remains operative.

II.4 Fin

In this chapter, I discussed the hermeneutic philosophy of religion of Richard Kearney as a resource for grappling with the “anarchy” of religious difference. I started with a discussion of Kearney’s work on narrative imagination and identity. Narrative imagination mediates between past, present, and an open future, and thus allows a collective identity or understanding of self and others to emerge. I discussed Kearney’s emphasis that an associative movement, gathering an identity together in a coherent story, always already consists of multiple processes of transition, critique and re-telling. As these processes never come to a halt, collective identity never finds completely solid footing and never becomes quite homogeneous. Further, as became particularly clear in Kearney’s writings on the mutual identity construction of Ireland and Britain, this associative movement may be accompanied by a dissociative movement of separation: The confrontation with the other may reveal how our identity is already dependent on transitions, demarcations and negotiations with difference.

Second, I discussed Kearney’s proposed “anatheist” retrieval of the sacred “after” the death of God. Kearney has in mind a rediscovery of God, not as a given, but as a gift, a rediscovery made possible by the critique of a too self-certain Christianity. Negation, experienced through loss, tragedy, and critique, is thus not to be resisted or brought under control, but embraced for the way it opens us up to the possibility of a Christianity purged of absolutism and exclusivism. The response of an anatheist faith to the “anarchy” of religious difference would not be to seek to bring this anarchy under control, as control is fundamentally alien to the God of posse.

Finally, I looked at Kearney’s phenomenology of hospitality for the stranger. Kearney characterizes our response to a stranger—divine, human, or otherwise—as a “wager.” While we may try to interpret and identify the other, ultimately, the choice remains undetermined. Here, Kearney attempts a mediation of a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand, otherness as irreducible alterity which calls to us from beyond the horizon of our knowledge, and on the other hand, the way any response to such otherness is made possible through intentional movements of interpretation and
imagination.

In the second part of this chapter, I discussed Kearney’s own remarks on the interreligious. First, I discussed the impression left by a trip to India alongside his remarks on Islam in *Anatheism*. Although both appear as ad-hoc assessments, I highlighted the value of Kearney’s suspicion of his own (Western) fascination for Oriental wisdom. His discussion of Islam perhaps would have benefited from a similar suspicion. Second, I discussed Kearney’s discussion of the interreligious as a kind of hospitality for strangers, and, by extension, as a kind of translation, guided by his wariness of assimilationist positions. Here, he largely follows his more general schema on hospitality and the Ricoeurian understanding of translation also explicated for the interreligious by Moyaert. However, it allowed me to make a fundamental point about the way a discourse on “strangers” may be counterproductive, at least in a European setting.

Finally, I investigated Kearney’s affirmation of a theology of religious pluralism. Kearney affirms a shared truth expressed metaphorically in many religions. I concluded that Kearney’s pluralism remains operative within a rudimentary pluralist framework that he neither seriously expands nor challenges. Kearney declares his disapproval for the pluralism of John Hick, but it is unclear where precisely the difference lies. Where he does significantly diverge from more typical pluralism, he quickly runs into issues that remain unresolved.

In general, it must be concluded that, while Kearney’s philosophical excellence is beyond question, his remarks on the interreligious appear contradictory, ad-hoc, and in general unsatisfying. This is particularly odd given his stated interest in the topic and the depth of his more general thinking, which is still recognizable in his remarks on the interreligious but appears to have moved to the background. In my view, this makes vividly clear how the interreligious brings along its own set of problems, which challenge not only conservatives but also liberal progressives such as Kearney. Without a specific attentiveness to these problems, it is easy to lapse into a simple form of pluralism or even to inadvertently reproduce structures of exclusion. In my discussion with Kearney, three of these problems have especially emerged: The way a well-meaning interest in other religions can become complicit in their stereotyping (II.3.1), the issues surrounding discussing religious diversity in terms of “strangers,” (II.3.2), and the dangers of an uninterrogated understanding of religious truth producing new exclusions (II.3.3).

This does not mean that Kearney’s theopoetic framework does not hold a particular promise for a theopoetics of religious difference. Kearney’s analyses of identity, tradition, and otherness, and his search for a hospitable Christianity not marked by control and domination offer powerful resources for an embrace of the unruliness of religious difference. It would have been especially fruitful to see Kearney’s discussion of the intertwining of identity and otherness in the narrative formation of Irish and British identities ap-
II.4. FIN

plied to the interreligious. This would bring him into the vicinity of Kwok Pui Lan’s and John Thatamanil’s suggestions that religious difference itself is constructed and malleable, that identities are always already plural and that transitions and translations are crucial to the formation of religious traditions and identities.²⁴⁶ Several of his insights will therefore come to play a key role in Chapter V. Many of these themes will also return, in a different vocabulary, in the next chapter, where I discuss the deconstructive theology of John Caputo.

²⁴⁶I asked Kearney if extrapolating his British-Irish analyses to religious difference would make sense to him. He responded that he “never actually thought of it like that but it makes excellent sense.” After a hermeneutic of suspicion would have revealed religious tradition itself to be a product of difference, contestation, and exclusion, an anatheist “return” to particularity becomes imaginable. Religious difference itself can thus become subject to a hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. Personal Correspondence, May 2016.
III.1 Introduction

God does not exist. Still, there is something going on in the name of God that sets off passion, a longing for the impossible, a hope against hope for justice and peace, that takes us over unconditionally as a divine call. This seems to be the paradox around which John D. Caputo formulates his deconstructivist theopoetics, which he also calls “weak” or “radical” theology. Always at a critical distance to his own Roman Catholic tradition, with which he never breaks decisively, Caputo seeks to understand religion as a fundamental openness to something that can never be determined in advance. This “messianic” aspect of religion remains at odds with the constituted historical traditions, which are always in danger of closing down. Caputo is thus not just after a kind of faith that would withstand deconstruction or postmodernity, but after one that becomes uniquely possible by deconstruction, indeed that calls for it.

While Caputo’s earlier work, much of it on Heidegger, is typically more philosophically dense, and laid the crucial foundations for his later work, I will here mostly focus on his publications since his 1997 The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida.¹ According to Calvin Ullrich,

what Caputo learns in these conversations with Heidegger and the Scholastics is a way of reading, which ends up turning on and delimiting Heidegger himself. It is in staging the combination of these gestures in relation to his reading of Heidegger, where Caputo’s theological project first draws a certain rhythmic impetus. A rhythm which is “productively repeated” with respect to Derrida and theology.²

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² Calvin Dieter Ullrich. “‘Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders:’ The early Caputo and the later Heidegger.” Delivered at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 27 October 2017, p. 3.
Where Kearney draws strongly on Ricoeur, Caputo’s work of the last two decades gathers around a reading of Derrida. Before proceeding with Caputo, it is therefore necessary to briefly establish the terms and issues of Derridean deconstruction that are most significant for Caputo’s reading.

Derridean deconstruction can itself be described as a subversive practice of reading. It hinges on the internal contradictions or aporias within a text, attempting to show how one element of a dichotomy comes to collapse into its opposite. First principles fail—purity, stability and unity do not precede disturbance, instability and difference. A crucial term in Derridean deconstruction is différance. With this—audibly indistinguishable from the French diff´ erence, difference—Derrida points to the way meaning is produced in the play of differentiations, references, and gaps between terms. This engenders a certain structural deferral or instability in the structure of meaning and reference, as each term depends not on some inner semantic essence but on an endless chain of differential references. As this is a response to the “structuralism” of Ferdinand de Saussure, deconstructive philosophy is often called “poststructuralist.”

In the words of Homi Bhabha, “[i]t is this ‘difference’ in language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent.” In this is where deconstruction could be said to start its work.

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.

In Derrida’s more recent work, alongside a greater interest in religion, a greater attention arises for the impossibility of some of our crucial terms: Hospitality, the gift, and forgiveness, to name a few, are shown to be only possible when they are impossible, for these terms do not represent an element within a functioning system but rather the breach of systems of reciprocity. As this breach, they cannot be made present but merely haunt the systems they render deconstructible.

Justice, to name another example, can only work if it remains unattainable. For it is in the space between justice and a legal system that “justice”

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3Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 53.
can be done—otherwise it would simply be an application of the legal system. But this distance also makes the legal system deconstructible, for it never is justice by itself. It is indeed in the undoing or reinterpreting of the legal system in light of this impossible ideal, which always remains to come (à venir), that we can ever say that justice was done. In this sense, “justice in itself, if such a thing exist[s] (s’il y en a), outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. . . . Deconstruction is justice.”6 And elsewhere: “Deconstruction is hospitality to the other.”7

Though Caputo’s theopoetics thus emerges from a reading of Derrida, he inscribes this reading with his own distinct priorities, as will become clear below. Caputo notes the affinity between his and Keller’s8 and Kearney’s projects. Of the latter, he says they share “the same concerns and . . . many background practices and assumptions,” though they play their “hermeneutic tunes” in “different keys.”9 The same could be said of his relation to Keller’s panentheism, about which he seems to have mixed feelings: “[M]uch as I love it, I do not subscribe to ‘panentheism,’ which . . . is more a metaphysics, unless it is a poetics [which it is], which is perhaps why I love it.”10

As in the previous chapter, I will start by explaining three aspects of Caputo’s work that I consider life-giving or helpful for embracing what I have called the “anarchy” of religious difference. First, this will be the embrace of deconstruction with affirmation, second, faith in a “perhaps,” and third, a subversive loyalty to tradition. In the second part, I will take a look at what Caputo has himself written about religious diversity. While the “religious other” is always a background concern to Caputo, it does not appear a prominent foreground issue in his discussions. I will thus both explicate matters Caputo leaves implicit and seek to clarify some of his more ambiguous formulations.

III.2 Resources

III.2.1 The Affirmation of Deconstruction

I will start by discussing a central piece of Caputo’s argument: the idea that deconstruction is not a merely negative work of critique, but is alive with a profound affirmation. This affirmation, Caputo argues, is a kind of open-ended expectation or aspiration, one that can be described as religious.

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Indeed, the argument continues, this is what is always going on in religion when it truly lives up to its name. The expectation or aspiration at the heart of religion thus calls for deconstruction—for without such deconstruction, the tradition closes in on itself.

In arguably his most influential book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Caputo thus sets out to show a certain religious structure of hope or expectation at work in Derridean deconstruction. While this is at root a scholarly work on the structure of deconstruction, it comes to lay the foundation for a number of subsequent works, directed at Christian and secular audiences, that make a case for a certain kind of religion, a religion “without” religion, or a “weak” or “radical” theology.

**A Religious Aspiration**

Caputo’s root intuition is inspired by Derrida’s intimations, later in his life, about his religion. Derrida admits he has never stopped praying all his life, addressing himself to God,¹¹ and writes:

> that’s what my readers won’t have known about me, the comma of my breathing henceforward, without continuity but without a break, the changed time of my writing, . . . almost with every letter, to be bound better and better but be read less and less well over almost twenty years, like my religion about which nobody understands anything, any more than does my mother who asked other people a while ago, not daring to talk to me about it, if I still believed in God . . . but she must have known that the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist.¹²

These are not just personal confessions to surprise the reader, Caputo holds. Deconstruction, he argues, needs to be generally understood as animated by a desire beyond desire for what can never be made present—deconstruction is *for* something unpresentable, for justice, for the unconditional demand the wholly other places on one with urgency.

> What we will not have understood about deconstruction, and this causes us to read it less and less well, is that deconstruction is set in motion by an overarching aspiration, which on a certain analysis can be called a religious or prophetic aspiration, what would have been called, in the plodding language of the tradition . . . a movement of “transcendence.”¹³


¹²Ibid., pp. 154–155.

The movement of “transcendence” Caputo finds in deconstruction has something to do with in the name of what deconstruction takes place. “For deconstruction sees itself as a pact with the tout autre, with the promise of the different, an alliance with the advent, the event.”\textsuperscript{14} For deconstruction is always about openness to the other.\textsuperscript{15} Deconstructing systems of thought, language and meaning means opening them to the excluded other.\textsuperscript{16} Not because this “wholly other” could ever be made present (that would be the end of deconstruction), but because this movement sets structures in motion and liberates them unto their own future. Deconstruction is an affirmation of “something whose coming eye hath not seen nor ear heard [1 Cor 2:9].”\textsuperscript{17} It is not a nihilist word-play but a passion for the other, for the impossible, for the excluded, and it is in the name of such un-presentable aspirations that it takes apart systems of thought and meaning.

This passion for the un-presentable, Caputo argues, can be called religious. For religion, too, is ultimately about openness to something that cannot be contained or pinned down. Caputo’s argument is thus, on the one hand, that there is something “religious” to deconstruction, and on the other hand, that this understanding of a deconstructive religion can serve to illuminate and challenge confessional religion. Deconstructive religion is what Caputo envisions religion should be, what religion is when it is at its best.

By religion I mean a pact with the impossible, a covenant with the unrepresentable, a promise made by the tout autre with its people, where we are all the people of the tout autre, the people of the promise, promised over to the promise. Hear, O Israel (Deut. 6:4), you are the people of a call, constituted from the start by a call, a solicitation. Deconstruction is a child of the promise, of the covenant, of the alliance with the tout autre, of the deal cut between the tout autre and its faithless, inconstant, self-seeking followers who are in regular need of prophets to keep them on the straight and narrow and to remind them of the cut in their flesh, to recall them to the call that they no longer heed. Derrida’s religion meets the most rigorous requirements of Johannes de silentio’s delineation of the traits of the religious, where to make a pact with the possible is mere aestheticism, and with the eternal, a mere rationalism, while expecting the impossible, making a deal with the impossible, being impassioned by the impossible, is the religious, is religious passion.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 15. 
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 17.  
\textsuperscript{17}Caputo, \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida}, p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. xx. See also note 50 on p. 131, below.
In a little book for a Christian audience titled *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* Caputo illustrates this with Charles Monroe Sheldon’s 1896 novel *In His Steps*, subtitled *What Would Jesus Do?* In Sheldon’s novel, a congregation is shocked and unsettled by the appearance of a stranger in the Sunday service, who confronts them with their lack of compassion, and dies soon after. The rest of the novel details the effect this event has on various members of the congregation. On Caputo’s take, this kind of disturbance is exactly the kind of deconstructive event he is after.

An incongruous and unsettling figure, uncomely and uncanny, disturbs the Sunday serenity. Hitherto comfortable lives are turned upside down. Jobs are lost, careers are abandoned, fortunes given away, businesses go under, divisions are introduced among friends and families, parents are turned against children; harmony becomes cacophony. What would Jesus do—if he ever showed up some Sunday morning? Turn things upside down. . . .

In the view I am advancing here, deconstruction is treated as the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God, as an interpretive style that helps get at the prophetic spirit of Jesus.19

Deconstruction, Caputo maintains, is the good news, the shock of the “other” delivered to the boring old “same.” “What would Jesus do? He would deconstruct a very great deal of what people do in the name of Jesus, starting with the people who wield this question like a hammer to beat their enemies.”20

**Negative Theology?**

Caputo finds a hint of this embrace between faith and negation in negative theology, such as in mystic Meister Eckhart’s exhortation, “I pray God to rid me of God.”21 I will discuss negative theology, the ancient Christian mystical discipline that seeks divine ineffability through negation and silence, in greater detail in the next chapter (see pp. 177ff.). Caputo, certainly, is appreciative of the wonder and mystery of negative theology.

For the texts of the negative theologians are to be treasured, not because they have been given privileged access to the Secret Godhead, but because they elicit passion, set off sparks, invoke holy names, tell marvelous stories, draw us down labyrinthine

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20 Ibid., p. 31.
There is an important difference between Derridean deconstruction and negative theology, however, and Derrida always rejected the comparison of *différence* as quasi-transcendent anteriority with the hypertranscendent God of traditional negative theology. This is important, for if this comparison were accurate, it would suggest that *différence* is a first principle, the condition of possibility and organizing foundation for all that is—which would severely undercut its deconstructive punch. *Différence* is not the principle beyond all principles the negative theologians are looking for, Caputo argues, for while apophatic theology rests on the idea of a *hyperousia*, a superessence, exalted and too much for human knowledge to take in, a *surplus* of meaning, *différence* gives us too little, connoting a (quasi-)fundamental lack of meaning or knowledge. The God of negative theology “does not merely exist; *différence* does not quite exist.”

Caputo thus shares Derrida’s concerns with negative theology: Ultimately, it continues to be about ascending to Truth, it remains committed to a metaphysical world-view in which there is such a thing as a highest essence or supreme being, and “lends itself to a consummately dangerous political and ecclesiastical absolutism.” This highest essence may always exceed human capacity to understand it, but its excess hinges on its overwhelming supremacy—not on the kind of indeterminacy Caputo is after. For the faith of deconstruction, for Caputo, isn’t about letting the metaphysical cat out of the bag, rather, it is to describe and interpret how “we are always in a bag,” how the “bag” that keeps us away from the way things “really” are is in fact the very condition of being-in-the-world. Any faith that Caputo deems worthy of the name must thus admit to this structural unknowing, but also allow itself to be impassioned by it, for this unknowing is also the structure of hope.

So in Caputo’s view, *différence*, the quasi-principle that makes meaning and reference always unstable, is not the address of faith itself, rather it is its “quasi-transcendental” condition of possibility. Without a regular reminder of this in the form of deconstruction, religion closes in on itself.

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23 This rejection hinges on an understanding of negative theology as necessarily depending on such hypertranscendence, and is thus similar to Kearney’s assessment of Nicholas of Cusa (see above, note 110 on p. 88). Catherine Keller’s reading of negative theology, however, follows a different path (see also below, pp. 177ff., especially note 90 on p. 180), which means the distinction between the dark clouds of apophasis and the indeterminacy of *différence* becomes less sharp (see below, p. 174).
25 Ibid., p. 10.
26 Ibid., p. 47.
27 Ibid., p. 290.
28 Ibid., p. 12.
In order to name these two tendencies in religion, one towards openness, the other towards closure, Caputo follows Derrida’s suggestion in *Specters of Marx* and distinguishes between the *messianic*, which is the structural open-ended expectation with which religion is alive, and *messianisms*, the determinate historic traditions that form around this expectation and fill it with content.29 He thus distinguishes between “the determinate content of particular messianic promises and the messianic form of the promise itself, messianicity itself.”30 These two moments remain at odds: “Once the messianic is given determinate content, it is restricted within a determinable and determining horizon, but the very idea of the messianic . . . is to shatter horizons.”31 While messianisms hope for something concrete, the structure of messianicity relates it to the expectation of something that cannot be determined in advance, that comes to disrupt the horizon of expectation.

### Negative Propheticism

One of the recurring ways Caputo expresses this messianic faith in the un-presentable is by the phrase “*viens!*” or “come!”32 Passion for the wholly other is expressed by imploring justice, or radical democracy, or the Messiah to come and dwell amongst us, even, or especially, when this is not possible. They are “words of event and advent, supplying the very opening within which words take place, . . . *Viens* is not an a-letic opening, a clearing made by Truth and old Greeks, but an opening of and for justice, where justice precedes truth.”33 It is an exhortation to come directed at what cannot possibly be present, thus maintaining a structural openness. *Viens* thus connotes both the passion for justice of deconstructive faith, its desire for the un-presentable, its urgent responsibility towards the excluded, and the structural cut away from ever definitely achieving what it is after. Saying *viens*, one does not know precisely what one is asking to come, the prayer is destinerrant, unsure of its destination. It thus stands for a kind of faith that is neither absolutist in the sense that it has God “on its side,” or that it can speak for God directly, be He present or coming, nor a relativist agnosticism. Doubt and passion embrace.

In Caputo’s framework, any relation to the “wholly other” is caught in a paradox: On the one hand, to truly include it would mean reducing it to the Same, on the other hand, leaving it “other” would mean excluding it. *Viens* expresses this aporetic structure—it means to prepare for what cannot structurally be prepared for. This preparation itself looks like de-

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31 Ibid., p. 118.
III.2. RESOURCES

construction, it makes space for what is to come. While some “at-home” is required for hospitality, structures and traditions need to be shaken up, broken open, to loosen them for the coming of the other. Openness to the wholly other thus means to work for the translation and improvisation of the Same, as “[b]y respectfully inventing, inventively respecting, respecting with a little bending or mimicking, we can twist free of the same, altering it just enough to let a little alterity loose.”\(^{34}\) As this openness is directed at the impossible, this is an interminable task, as justice can never be said to have completely arrived.

The messianic idea turns on a certain structural openness, undecidability, unaccomplishment, non-occurrence, noneventuality, which sees to it that, in contrast to the way things transpire in ordinary time, things are never finished, that the last word is never spoken. Were the Messiah ever to show up, that indiscretion would ruin the whole idea of the messianic.\(^ {35}\)

Even with this tenuous navigation, it would be easy to understand Caputo’s loyalty to the impossible as either a kind of absolutist radicalism or nihilist relativism. That is certainly not Caputo’s interpretation, however. The viens opens a kind of “messianic time,” a temporality which is always to come and at the same time wrought with passion and urgency. He thus recounts Maurice Blanchot’s story of the Messiah in his 1980 *The Writing of the Disaster*.\(^ {36}\) On arriving to Earth, the Messiah is asked the question “when will you come?” The Messiah responds “today.” For Caputo, this is the breaking up of regular time by messianic time, opening it up to what is coming, structurally coming.

So when the Messiah says “today,” now, he means “now, if only you heed me, or if you are willing to listen to my voice.” The messianic “today” means: if you will begin, now, to respond to the call that the Messiah himself addresses to you, begin to answer the demands he places upon you, if, in other words, you are willing now to say *viens* as a response to the Messiah’s call, and to call for the Messiah not with hollow words but with virtue. There is a way of waiting for the future that is going on right now, that begins here and now, and places an urgent demand upon us at this moment. That is why Blanchot says that merely calling *viens* would not be enough, if the call were hollow, full of sounding brass [1 Cor 13:1] but unaccompanied by virtue and repentence.\(^ {37}\)

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 75.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 78.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., pp. 79–80.

To prepare for the coming of the *tout autre* means to do justice, to *do* the truth (more on that below). The urgency and the deferment of the longed-for “to come” thus somehow coincide: It is because the other is *structurally* coming that we are *now* called on to act.\(^{38}\) The structural exhortation of *viens*, that something is still coming, justice is not yet here, is not an invitation to quietism, but to activism. Saying justice is *already* present would be “[t]he most unjust thing of all.”\(^{39}\) Caputo argues, as it is a way to close yourself off from the calls of the excluded, such as when we maintain our societies are not racist, “right in the middle of American apartheid!”\(^{40}\)

The intense ethical urgency of the faith of deconstruction is therefore a further distinction between traditional negative theology and Caputo’s schema. The emphasis on the emancipatory aspiration of deconstruction leads Caputo to describe it as a “negative propheticism, a negative or apophatic messianic, whose most vivid and perfect illustration or exemplification (or repetition) is to be found in the biblical, prophetic notion of justice, so long as we add the little proviso which throws everything into undecidability.”\(^{41}\) Deconstruction has an emancipatory aspiration, which means it has a *political* aspect. Attempts to achieve closure are not only theologically problematic (they close us off from what makes religion religion), but also and especially politically dangerous. The problem with closure or with thinking one has a fix on the way things are is that it excludes all the others. Messianicity, or faith, or religion without religion, might be in one sense a breaking up or weakening or opening up of ethical rules, but this always happens for the sake of a justice that cannot be definitively caught in rules or names. The point of Caputo’s ethics is not so much to find a set of shared principles, or to construct a just system, but rather, that no system is ever just *enough*, no principle can adequately represent justice. Any system of justice or any principle of ethics needs to be open to reconjugation, to being said differently, to open up and change, for the sake of those who are otherwise trampled underfoot.


\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 81.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., p. 81.

\(^{41}\)Ibid., p. 196. Curiously, Caputo sets this negative propheticism off against Nagarjuna and Buddhism, which he appears to read as a simple nihilism: “Events happen, open up and close off, arise and fall back, come to be and pass away. Gifts, like falling stars, flicker for an instant against this greater night. And then you die. But that is not the biblical gift, or the prophetic drift of the religions of the Book, nor does it quite capture the tone that Derrida has recently adopted, which is distinctively more messianic, more biblical, more prophetic, a little more Jewish than Buddhist, tilted more toward the *tout autre*. That messianic tone puts Derrida’s gift more in touch with hospitality toward the stranger. For Derrida’s gift has less to do with a cosmic play than with the *Augenblick*, with the chance of justice for the *tout autre*. Derrida’s gift—and Derrida is thinking these days in more Jewish and prophetic terms—is concerned with the possibilities that open up for the outsiders, the political, social, national, sexual outsiders, the victims of racism, nationalism, and xenophobia.” Ibid., pp. 186–187.
Derrida’s democracy is a radically pluralistic polity that resists the terror of an organic, ethnic, spiritual unity, of the natural, native bonds of the nation (*natus, natio*), which grind to dust everything that is not a kin of the ruling kind and genus (*Geschlecht*). . . . His work is driven by a sense of the consummate danger of an identitarian community, of the spirit of the “we” of “Christian Europe,” or of a “Christian politics,” lethal compounds that spell death for Arabs and Jews, for Africans and Asians, for anything other.\(^{42}\)

So if no interpretation of justice can ever be said to be *just*, if no shared identity should unite a society for fear of reducing the other’s singularity—what kind of community does Caputo envision? He hopes for a “democracy to come,” that could not be “co-opted by the special interests of the ‘super’-powers,” a “democracy without its current limitations . . . so that we cannot define the politics and ethics to come.”\(^ {43}\) The kind of democratic “Kingdom of God” Caputo envisions is something like a kingdom of deconstruction, not bound by a single identity:

To these conflicting visions [of various exclusive messianisms], Derrida opposes a community, if it is one, of the blind, *une communauté aveugle*, of the blind leading the blind. Blindness makes for good communities, provided we all admit that we do not see, that in the crucial matters we are all stone blind and without privileged access, adrift in the same boat, without a lighthouse to show the other shore.\(^ {44}\)

He suggests a “community without community, open-ended networks of interrelated mortals.”\(^ {45}\) One way he describes this is along the lines of Derrida’s take on *khôra*, the original spacing in which creation is said to take place in Plato’s *Timaeus*.\(^ {46}\) Caputo calls this a “placeless place of absolute spacing,” the “stuff of a new tolerance,” that would be a “respectful reserve before the *tout autre*.”\(^ {47}\) In *khôra*, Caputo finds a way to think spacing without any *archê*, a complete indeterminacy where everything and everyone is let be. In Caputo’s khôraic vision, “[e]very singularity is a wholly other whose alterity should be respected, not assimilated into the same, not subsumed under the universal.”\(^ {48}\) I will return to Caputo’s reading of the

\(^ {42}\)Ibid., pp. 231–232.
\(^ {43}\)Ibid., p. 55.
\(^ {44}\)Ibid., pp. 313–314.
\(^ {46}\)See also below, pp. 235ff.
Kingdom of God below, and to more detailed reading of khôra in Chapter V.

Fin

For Caputo, deconstruction and a religious affirmation are intimately intertwined. Caputo offers a way to think faith in a way that is not only not threatened by negation, deconstruction, or suspicion, but for which these are vital conditions of possibility—if faith is to be a faith worthy of the name, a faith infused with hope and love. For Caputo, the embrace between negation and affirmation is closer than in Kearney’s anatheist movement, indeed so close that they become indistinguishable. For Caputo, deconstruction is not followed by affirmation, but already is affirmation: In deconstructing the present or solidified past, one affirms an immemorable unpresentable future, justice to come, which is necessarily indiscernible, is most affirmed when discernment breaks down.

This is relevant for discussions of religious difference for at least two reasons. First, perhaps most obviously, rather than giving the religious other an assigned place within the Christian worldview, the political pendant of Caputo’s approach is primarily to critique and open up structures of exclusion—precisely seeking a “pact” with what subverts those structures. Caputo’s deconstructive theology would see the way religious difference challenges Christianity as good news. If interreligious encounter is difficult—great. If it makes our categories waver—even better. The embrace between the messianic affirmation of justice, and the deconstruction of the structures of (in)justice is, in Caputo’s work, so tight that they are nearly indistinguishable.

Second, this is guided by a vision of a radically democratic community, where everyone would admit that they are “blind.” Instead of a search for shared values or interreligious consensus comes a shared sense that no value is ever definite. I will discuss this at greater length below, while considering Caputo’s own statements on the interreligious, but also in Chapter V.

That said, it is important to note that Caputo says justice to come, and democracy to come. While justice and democracy are themselves always contested and up for interpretation, they do point in a certain direction. They are words with some kind of meaning.\(^{49}\) The faith of deconstruction is not after an annihilation of all values—it just seeks to emphasize that neither those values, nor the justice we may hope for, ultimately, has a solid foundation to back them up. This fragility or weakness of deconstructive faith will become one of the focal points of the next subsection.

III.2.2 Faith in a “Perhaps”

Drawing on Kierkegaard’s reading of Abraham’s impossible decision to sacrifice Isaac, Derrida had argued that this is “the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion, or explication. It structurally breaches knowledge.”

For Caputo, this is what deconstruction is all about, for it is “a quasi-theory of undecidability,” as its effort is always to show that nothing is “safe, pure, clean, uncontaminated, monochromatic, unambiguous.” Deconstruction shows things, concepts, ideas, to coincide with their own opposite and not with themselves, yet that “decisions must be made and indecision broken, that paralysis is a condition of possibility and impossibility of motion.” Deconstruction shows how things are “endlessly reformable, revisable, reconfigurable . . . and a little anarchic” (!).

So, paradoxically,

Undecidability is the condition of possibility of a choice; otherwise, the choice is rule-governed and it’s easy to know what to do, there’s no problem. The opposite of undecidability . . . is not a decision but programmability, which means that a choice is dictated by a program or rule. Then it’s not much of a choice.

Without such undecidability, Caputo thus argues, faith is nothing. If faith knows what it is hoping for, knows the way forward without ambiguity and structural indeterminacy, it “is not a battle, not through a glass darkly [1 Cor 13:12], but a high road assured of success.” Undecidability constitutes “the haze of indefiniteness with which decision must daily cope . . . which conditions even very ordinary decisions, in which the urgency and passion of decision are nourished.” It thus opens the space for faith to be faith at all.

It is therefore important to emphasize that undecidability does not mean indecision or a kind of structural uncertainty that would call for a restrained reluctance. The haze of indefiniteness does not occasion a non-committal calm on the side of the faithful.

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50Derrida, The Gift of Death, p. 77. Derrida’s argument here is itself a reading of Søren Kierkegaard’s (or Johannes de silentio’s) Fear and Trembling, in which Kierkegaard develops a reading of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Kierkegaard’s argument is too elaborate to reproduce here, but one aspect of it is that Abraham can offer no justification for his actions. He acts on faith, which means he “acknowledges the impossibility and at the same moment believes the absurd, for if he imagines himself to have faith without acknowledging the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and his whole heart, then he deceives himself.” Søren Kierkegaard. Fear and Trembling. Ed. by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 40.


Undecidability as the vital condition for any decision becomes central to Caputo’s understanding of faith. If Abraham, the “father of faith,” would have known all along that he would receive his son back, thus allowing him to calculate whether it was worth the journey and the effort, he “would not be the father of faith but of good investments and estate planning.”

The Weakness of God

The corollary of an understanding of faith predicated on undecidability is that the divine call cannot be understood as an overwhelming or obvious command. While it takes us over unconditionally, it does so in the midst of indeterminacy. Caputo thus describes the divine call as a “weak force.” In his 2006 *The Weakness of God*, he unpacks this for a more theological audience. He suggests

the event that is astir within the name of God is stationed, not on the side of the *arche* and the *principium*, or of timeless being and unchanging presence, or of the true, the good, and the beautiful, but on the side of the an-archic and subversive, as the driving force of a divine subversion.

Theology is not so much saying things about God, which, though irresistible, is always impossible, but “the logos of a passion, the logos of a desire for God,” for “something astir in the name of God, a desire for something I know not what.” Its task is to release the “event” harbored by the name of God.

The name of God, Caputo explains, but not only this name, sets off an event that is “uncontainable,” it makes the name “restless with promise and the future, with memory and the past, with the result that names contain what they cannot contain.” Names are *haunted* by the event stirring within them, and although “the voice of events is ever soft and low and is liable to be dismissed, distorted, or ignored,” this haunting calls for a deliteralizing “poetics.”

The divine event is thus, in its own weak manner, marked by “excess.” "[I]f it is nothing absolute, an event is an excess, an overflow, a surprise, both an uncontainable incoming . . . and something that requires a response from

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56 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, p. 84.
57 Ibid., p. 34.
58 Ibid., p. 1.
59 Ibid., p. 2.
60 Ibid., p. 2.
61 Ibid., p. 4.
It ruptures our horizon of expectation, “constituting an experience of the impossible.” In this excess, however, it remains ambiguous, offering “no guarantees about the course that events follow.” The divine call ultimately is given over to human response: It is “not an essence unfolding but a promise to be kept, a call or a solicitation to be responded to.” It does not so much exist itself but disturbs that which exists, it “releases us from the grip of the present and opens up the future in a way that makes possible a new birth.”

It is important to stress here that Caputo’s effort goes beyond mere epistemic humility. It is not only about the weakness of any human discourse about God, but the venture that the divine call itself is conditioned by frailty. The name of God is thus the name of “a call rather than of a cause, of a provocation or a promise rather than of a presence,” a “weak force that lays claim to us unconditionally but has no army to enforce its claims.”

This weak force that is stirring in the name of God becomes eminently visible in Jesus’ narratives about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is about an “anarchic field of reversals and displacements,” a “sacred anarchy,” where “weak forces play themselves out in paradoxical effects that confound the powers that be.” First is last, the outsiders are in, who loses their life will save it—a kingdom of a God without sovereignty, a deconstructive call more than a political situation that could ever actually arrive. Instead of a stabilizing metaphysical presence, Caputo argues “the sense of ‘God’ is to interrupt and disrupt, to confound, contradict, and confront the established human order, . . . the authority of man over man—and over women, animals, and the earth itself.”

Paradoxically, in the kingdom of God, to belong is to not belong. The outsider is privileged. “The conditions of admission to the kingdom are quite unaccountable: the ones who get in are the ones who are out; on the other hand, the ones who end up left out are the insiders who did not take the invitation to heart.” The borders are ambiguous and unclear, “waving in a kind of ‘holy undecidability’ between theism and atheism, among

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62Ibid., p. 4.
63Ibid., p. 5.
64Ibid., p. 5.
65Ibid., p. 6.
66Cf. ibid., p. 8. Caputo further refuses to enter into questions of the “causal question of the caller,” as that would restrict the event. This does not mean, he maintains, an “anti-realism,” but instead a “magnifying hyper-realism of the event.” Ibid., pp. 122, 123.
67Ibid., p. 12.
68Ibid., p. 17.
70Ibid., pp. 27–28.
71Ibid., p. 34.
72Ibid., pp. 261–262.
Christian, Jew, and Muslim . . . religion and ‘religion without religion.’”

The title of The Weakness of God stems from 1 Corinthians, where Paul argues something quite close to what Caputo is proposing: that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness [KJV: the weakness of God] is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25). However, Caputo argues, Paul flinches at the last moment: Ultimately, he remains committed to a divine potence backing up this weakness. Divine frailty, for Paul, is only for show. Paul’s “hymn to the weak and lowborn, his eulogy of the weakness of God, belongs to a larger economy of power and wisdom. . . . Worldly weakness is a good long-term investment in real power.”

God’s weakness is thus stronger than human strength not because it is weak, a weak call that truly puts us in a position of responsibility because God cannot do it by Godself, but because it is true power, not doomed to perish (1 Cor 2:6), and our cooperation with the divine call is but a good investment in our own afterlife situation.

For Caputo, this does not take seriously the way divine weakness becomes tangible on the Cross. For Caputo, to take the Cross seriously must mean that Jesus was not “holding back” as the classical account teaches, but truly undergoing it—against His will. For it is this weakness that truly protests this divine execution, and every execution, instead of making it part of a terrible necessity. “[I]n the powerlessness of that death the word of God rose up in majesty as a word of contradiction, as the Spirit of God, as a specter, as a ghostly event that haunts us, but not as a spectacular presence. That is God’s transcendence.”

“Perhaps”

Caputo describes this particular version of God’s transcendence, understood as a mere call or weak force, as God’s “insistence.” In his 2013 work The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps, Caputo expands on this, laying out a theology in which “God does not exist; God insists, and it is our responsibility to bring about something that exists.”

The thematic of faith in undecidability here appears under the word “perhaps.” The “perhaps” is at once a radical qualification of confessional theology—all of this, perhaps—but it is also a radical expression of hope, a but perhaps, the insistent hope in the impossible. This perhaps thus both causes trouble for any belief system, but it is also precisely the condition of possibility for any hope worth its salt. Perhaps, all things are possible.

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74 Ibid., pp. 48–49.
75 Ibid., p. 44.
76 Ibid., p. 45.
77 Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 49.
III.2. RESOURCES

The perhaps, Caputo argues, is itself a weak force, it takes place on the “order of ‘hauntology,’” not ontology but a spectral haunting of what is.

The haunting specter of “perhaps” provokes a more radical opening in the present. It prevents the present from closing down upon itself, ... leaving it structurally exposed to the future, not the future present but the very structure of the to-come.

The “perhaps” is thus not the “safety of indecision,” but saying “yes to the future,” an “affirmation more elusive than any positive position, deeper than any positively posited belief,” a “word of desire for something, I know not what, something I desire with a ‘desire beyond desire.’” To affirm the perhaps is a “leap of faith” more faithful than “what passes for a ‘leap of faith’ in ‘orthodoxy,’” which is merely an assertion, “vainly trying to contract a more abysmal affirmation into a creedal assent.” The perhaps, removing the “armor of metaphysics,” opens us up, exposes us to the future. For the “perhaps” offers no guarantees; it is always a “perhaps not” as well, which means we are never quite sure what precisely we are praying to when we pray to God.

Once I say I know the name of the event, once I can say, this is God, the event is God, then the event ceases to be an event and becomes something that I have added to my repertoire. ... For the event, names are always lacking, even the name of God.

So faith is, on the one hand, conditioned by an uncertainty or “perhaps,” without which it would not be faith, and with which “radical” theology thus needs to “spook” confessional theologies, in order to dislocate and displace them, to put them under the modality of the “perhaps not.”

But on the other hand, faith for Caputo is also a faith in this uncertainty or “perhaps.” The decision is conditioned by undecidability, but it is also a decision to embrace undecidability, which means embracing the openness of the future. For Caputo, “to say ‘God, perhaps’ is to link God with the perhaps, to let ‘perhaps’ cut into the very name of God, as the possibility of the impossible. ... [It] signifies the trouble with God.”

God is not only marked by undecidability, God is also the paradigmatic name of undecidability.

78Ibid., p. 5.
79Cf. Derrida, Specters of Marx.
80Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 5.
81Ibid., p. 5.
82Ibid., p. 7.
83Ibid., p. 7.
84Ibid., p. 10.
85Ibid., pp. 76ff.
86Ibid., p. 103.
87Ibid., p. 34.
Caputo describes the relation of the religious tradition to “events” as seeking to “give existence”\(^{88}\) to what is calling. The event is the point of contact between the messianic future and the present, as the interface of the haunting of the impossible with the haunted: “The event takes place as the insistence of the possibility of the impossible.”\(^{89}\) Or, “the event insisting in the name of God takes place in the form of a solicitation, a call, to which we are the response.”\(^{90}\)

So the divine call, in all its weakness, leaves all the work up to us. We are called to bring it into existence, even if it will always exceed and surprise us, even what we bring into existence will always again be criticizable, deconstructible, much as what passes for justice in our legal systems will always again be criticizable and reformable in the name of “justice,” if there is such a thing, which “is not deconstructible,” but also remains unpresentable.\(^{91}\) In fact, what we bring into existence in the name of God “may, perhaps, be a disaster.”\(^{92}\)

It is this distance between insistence and existence out of which prayer emerges, “the precarious way God’s insistence seeks existence” or the “act of calling upon and responding to God’s call.”\(^{93}\) The divine call and our response are both wrought through with the precariousness of the perhaps, each putting their trust in the other without knowing what the response will look like. But the divine insistence and human existence also give each other strength, each in their own way. “In prayer, we are made strong by the insistence (or weakness) of God, and the insistence of God is made strong by our existence.”\(^{94}\)

**Fin**

Faith, for Caputo, can never fall back on guaranteed foundations, but remains a response to a weak force, a choice for a “perhaps,” and this fundamental qualification relativizes each of the determinate religious traditions. With Caputo’s faith in undecidability, both senses of *in* apply: Faith must happen in the context of undecidability, otherwise it is not faith. But also faith *in* undecidability: Faith means a pact with the impossible, the subversion of what is, the *anarchic*. We might thus say this gives us some way to resist bringing the “anarchy” of the interreligious under control, for it is precisely anarchy that, at least according to Caputo, the divine call is *about*. We are not called to “make sense” of the interreligious; instead, we

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\(^{88}\) Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 82.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., p. 96.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., p. 135.


\(^{92}\) Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 15.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., p. 27.

\(^{94}\) Ibid., p. 31.
are called precisely to where it does not make sense, for there, Caputo might argue, is the kingdom of God—if perhaps not under that name.

In doing so, Caputo describes this faith of the perhaps as haunting confessional theology. He thus does not offer a simple choice between confessional theology and his own program: Instead, at most, he can call for confessional theology to be disturbed or haunted by this “perhaps.” In the following, I will therefore discuss this relation at greater length.

III.2.3 Subversive Loyalty

Caputo’s thought often hinges on a distantiation from dogma and religious tradition. For this reason, I will spend a few more pages to show that neither his “radical” or “circumfessional” theology, nor the kind of “messianicity” or religion without religion he envisions, can stand by itself without a determinate tradition or community. Faith tradition, even if it is a construct without solid ground, is not replaced but merely “haunted” by Caputo’s religion. So this “religion without religion” is very much also religion “with” religion—the “without” is not a rejection, but a subversive moment within it. Below, I will also discuss a remarkable paper in which Caputo gives something of an ecclesiology, supplementing Tillich’s “protestant principle” with a “catholic principle,” rejecting sola scriptura for the sake of the tradition, but also identifying the subversion of that tradition as the movement of the Spirit.

The Debt to Tradition, Flesh and Blood of the Event

Above, I discussed Caputo’s reading of Derrida’s distinction between the messianic, as an open-ended faith in the to-come, and messianism, as a historical religion with beliefs, clergy, and institutions. While, on the one hand, this distinction serves to distinguish Caputo’s deconstructive religion from religion as it is more commonly understood, on the other hand, Caputo argues it is this messianic that makes religion, including common confessional religion, religious. Much as they try to deny it, the thing that makes religions so powerful is that they contain something they cannot contain, that they have a messianic structure. As I will show, this dependence is mutual: The messianic does not stand by itself without messianism, but only appears in the context of some determinate religious form of life.

In Derrida’s Specters of Marx, where the messianic appears first and most clearly, Caputo finds Derrida describing it along the lines of a “universal, formal structure upon which the very movement of justice, and hence of deconstruction, turns.” Caputo is quick to remark that neither the idea

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95 Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida.
96 Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida, p. 124; Derrida, Specters of Marx, p. 33. As I have done throughout this chapter, I will leave an evaluation of whether
of a universal structure, nor a strict form-content distinction, sits entirely comfortably in a deconstructive framework. This introduces a number of questions.

On the one hand, it seems problematic to suggest the messianic is a universal, of which religions are various culturally conditioned expressions. That would simply take us back to Wilfred Cantwell Smith. On the other hand, does that mean the messianic is merely an abstracted way of speaking about something going on in determinate religions, simply a descriptive category? In short, what is the relation between the messianic and messianisms, if oppositional pairs such as form/content or universal/particular cannot be trusted? In a deconstructive framework, both a supposedly rational theology of the messianic opposed to a “revealed” theology of a messianism and the idea of a universal structure appear deeply problematic. Caputo lists two distinct possibilities of what Derrida could be on about: “[I]s the messianic merely an abstraction . . . derived from the concrete messianisms or is it their origin?”

For Caputo, the only way the messianic could stand by itself would be if it would precede the messianisms, as a kind of universal experience of humanity, something embedded in human nature or in reality that gets filled with content in different cultural contexts. The alternative, that the messianic is merely a way of talking about some things we find in historic messianisms, would mean “the messianic in general is a distillate, an aftereffect, . . . about which, without the historical messianisms, we would neither know nor suspect anything.” This would make of the messianic a “conceptual ghost, a specter of philosophy.” No-one could be expected to live in or with such a messianic; without its concrete messianism, it is an inhospitable, even impossible, desert. And it would leave the question unanswered where messianisms come from. Caputo cites Derrida that this would mean “the events of revelation, . . . the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, have been absolute events, irreducible events which have unveiled this messianicity.”

Derrida admits to his hesitation between the messianic as a universal structure and conceptual abstraction. Caputo is more certain: he thinks the idea of a universal structure with particular cases is based on distinctions between fact and essence, or particular and universal, that would not survive deconstruction.

Caputo’s reading of Derrida is quite accurate for another time. I will note, however, that Derrida remains watchful and does not use this precise formulation himself; indeed argues that this messianicity in its universality remains indebted to the particular tradition of Marxism.

98 Ibid., p. 136.
100 Although he elsewhere calls “the religious” a “basic structure of human experience,”
not cases of a larger category, the historical messianisms constitute "irreducible singularities." This means the messianic is not a "garden variety universal," which would encapsulate the particular messianisms, but a "formal indication," a "light sketch of a region that can only be entered, engaged, existed, leaving philosophy and its conceptuality back home in the security of its academic chairs." It would make the Messianic a "pale" formal structure, which does not really stand by itself but can only point back towards the "excessively rich" tradition.

So in a sense, the messianic is a concept that must fail, that is nothing without the messianism from which it seeks to abstract. Without a messianism, it is merely a sketch, an inhospitable desert where no-one can be expected to live.

I have no desire to twist free from such historical situatedness in the name of some purely private religion or of some overarching ahistorical universal religious truth. . . . A God without historical flesh and blood, a religion without the body of a community and its traditions, is a bloodless abstraction.

There is no messianic without some kind of messianism; even the distinction between the two cannot be made neatly: "there cannot be a clean-cut and well-maintained border between the two messianic spaces." Even Derrida’s faith is rooted in traditions, Jewish, academic, Marxist.

However, religious traditions are profoundly ambiguous towards the messianic: On the one hand they are impassioned by messianic longing; the "point" of religion, the "(un)essence" is this "messianic-in-general." On the other hand, they constantly seek to oppose the radicality this entails, to "screen out . . . the possibility of something absolutely new," establishing "checkpoints" and "patrol[ling] their borders." The messianic therefore

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Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 9, see also pp. 157ff., below.

102 Ibid., p. 141.
103 Ibid., p. 141.
104 Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 34.
105 Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 141. This undecidability between “form” and “content” may also explain Caputo’s apparent switch between the two in later discussions. If initially the messianic was the pure form, without the determinate content of messianisms, later this appears to reverse. Particularly when he speaks of the “event,” it appears more as the content to which the determinate messianism acts as a form: “The modest proposal I make in this book is that the name of God is an event, or rather that it harbors an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event, its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free” (Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, p. 2). There thus appears to be a fluctuation or translatability between form and content. God or the event can be the pure form of the messianic, devoid of content, at one time, and then feature as what “stirs within historical theological reflection” (suggesting a content in a form) in another context. Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 60.
107 Ibid., p. 130.
requires repeating and reconjugating the tradition to bend it towards justice.

**Sans**

So, as it appears, messianisms are something the radical theologian is stuck with. If religious traditions are irreducible singularities, messianicity “without” messianism means messianicity *within* messianism. But the particulars of a given messianism do not matter much by and of themselves to Caputo.

>[A]s long as one’s passion is for the impossible, for a justice to come, … then what translation you take up, what translation has taken you over, is your business… According to *diff´ erance*, it does not make much difference.\textsuperscript{108}

At the same time, the relation of faith to tradition is one of being “indebted”:

> ... To have the memory of a tradition, to be inspired by one of its spirits, is to owe the spirit of that tradition a debt. But this debt is not a matter of a balance sheet or a calculation, it is rather a matter of a responsibility to that tradition which selects and interprets among its several spirits, for we are always indebted to something highly polyvalent that keeps its secret to itself. To have a debt to a tradition is to be on our own with this debt and to have to sort our way through it for ourselves. As the affirmation of responsibility, deconstruction takes place in the space of several debts.\textsuperscript{109}

While tradition gives one the language in which to express oneself, even one’s dissociation,\textsuperscript{110} the debt we hold to tradition involves a critical relation to it. Being part of a tradition requires a discernment between the complex and multivalent voices of the past and opening them up to a future. The debt creates a responsibility. “To have a tradition—sans avoir—is to have resolved neither to go it on one’s own nor simply to repeat the tradition.”\textsuperscript{111}

For the gift of tradition can just as well be *Gift*, poison. It poisons when it oppresses, when it closes us off from the other—for example, when the name of “tradition” is invoked to exclude women or LGBT people from the clergy. In those cases, tradition is something that needs to be interpreted and interrupted *in the name of what goes on in that tradition*, among whose various spirits one needs to discern, and which thus provides the occasion for an “event,” for the in-coming of the other, to occur.\textsuperscript{112} Our debt towards

\textsuperscript{109}Ibid., p. 222.
\textsuperscript{110}Ibid., p. 181.
\textsuperscript{111}Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{112}Ibid., p. 182.
a tradition requires us to question it, so that the tradition does not solidify and come to a standstill, but might have a future. For when they are not open to an at least somewhat unforeseeable future, traditions cease to be traditions worthy of the name.

Traditions happen when quasi-systems of traces—not just books, of course, but institutions, laws, works of art, beliefs, practices, whatever you need, whatever is around—are fluid, open-ended, supple, flexible, reconfigurable, and reinterpretable. ... The highest gratitude would always involve in-gratitude about such monumental debts, which opens up the possibility of letting a new gift loose.\textsuperscript{113}

Traditions happen at the interface between systems (or “quasi-systems”) and subjects—they are worth their salt when they on the one hand give actors a space to act (upon), and on the other hand take those actions further than their own control. “It is a question of ... learning first to operate within the most traditional institutional codes and then to push them to their limits, to mime and mimic them into something different.”\textsuperscript{114}

In fact this is the only way to be part of a tradition, as it is neither conceptually possible to be outside of a tradition, nor to simply enact it as a pre-set formula—for how would we know which of the “many traditions and counter-traditions competing for a voice in ‘the’ tradition, if there is one” to enact?\textsuperscript{115} Appealing to “the” authority of a tradition is to appeal to a “confusion and profusion” of different voices and strands in a tradition, “so that one is not sure who is saying what to whom, not to mention who got silenced.”\textsuperscript{116}

In that sense deconstruction is a deeply “conservative” force, where fidelity to an institution requires a certain infidelity, while rigid fidelity to rules and regulations spells rigor mortis for the corporate body.\textsuperscript{117}

Instead of a decisive break with tradition, which is never possible, Caputo thus envisions little subversions and changes, an interminable work of weaving and undoing threads of tradition to keep it from solidifying and closing down its future. Caputo’s view of messianic faith is of something that struggles with tradition, but on the final analysis that happens in traditions, that makes the tradition come alive, open up, towards justice and the other, but never simply leaves it behind. It is the appeal to the coming of the tout autre, justice to come, that allows the faithful to discern “selectively and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{113}Ibid., p. 182.\textsuperscript{114}Ibid., p. 183.\textsuperscript{115}Ibid., p. 184.\textsuperscript{116}Ibid., p. 184.\textsuperscript{117}Caputo, \textit{What Would Jesus Deconstruct?} p. 136.}
judiciously” between the differing voices of an always “polyvocal” tradition. In so doing, the tradition changes, “which is the only way to be grateful to a tradition. For literal gratitude to a tradition paralyzes everybody and makes the tradition look like a monster.”118

With the messianic, or radical theology, Caputo is, on the one hand, identifying something happening in religion that is not exhausted by its dogmatic, ritual and textual traditions, something both more and less than this, to which a religious tradition shouldn’t assume it has privileged access, or indeed something about which it makes no sense to say one would have privileged access. On the other hand, however, the “hauntological” nature of this “something” means that this something does not exist as a being separate from the tradition that names it. Caputo describes this ambiguous relation, separate but not separate, with a notion from Derrida’s reading of Blanchot: “sans,” without.

Deconstruction regularly, rhythmically repeats this religiousness, sans the concrete, historical religions; it repeats nondogmatically the religious structure of experience, the category of the religious. It repeats the passion for the messianic promise and messianic expectation, sans the concrete messianisms of the positive religions.119

Sans, or the “without” of Caputo’s “religion without religion,” does not refer to a kind of distilled, enlightened, or secularized kind of universal religion. That would be a “bloodless abstraction.”120 The “without” is “not a simple negation, nullification, or destruction,” but a “reinscription” or “reversal of the movement.”121 of religion. Religion “without” religion is not an attempt to let the messianic stand by itself as a purged or improved version of religion without the bells and whistles, but rather Caputo’s way of saying religion is not exhausted by those bells and whistles—they contain something they cannot contain.122 “This sans is not the scene of a loss but of an opening that lets something new come.”123

The Catholic Principle

In a talk given at a conference dedicated to continental philosophy and “Catholic intellectual heritage,”124 Caputo expands on what this means

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119 Ibid., p. xxi.
120 Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 34.
122 It is true that Caputo has recently called for a “faith without beliefs,” apparently attempting a more rigorous distinction. I will discuss this below, see p. 157.
for the Church. He complements Tillich’s “protestant principle”\textsuperscript{125} with a “catholic principle.” Tillich’s protestant principle consists of, on the one hand, \textit{semper reformanda}: the Church must live in a constant autocritique, as it is but the conditioned response to the unconditional. Any historically conditioned faith, which he calls “catholic substance,” needs to pass through the principle of protest. On the other hand, it is \textit{justus et peccator}, which on Caputo’s reading means that although we are always “on the short end of the unconditional stick,” we can be “saved” by “confessing just how short we fall.”\textsuperscript{126}

Caputo argues, however, that Tillich’s “catholic substance” does not recognize that in the historical process of tradition, there is a principle at work: the \textit{hermeneutical} principle. Tradition is not simply handed down to the next generation without alteration and without remainder. Neglecting that there is always discernment and interpretation going on is “lethal”:

\begin{quote}

it leads Protestantism astray into an ahistorical biblical inerrantism, even as it leads Catholicism astray into an ahistorical doctrine of infallibility which confers unconditional status on a conditional-historical doctrinal formulation. A Pope or a paper Pope! An inerrant book or an inerrant institution! Pick your poison—or your idolatry!\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

It is this hermeneutical principle of interpretation and discernment that Caputo calls the “Catholic Principle,” “the principle of \textit{historicality and temporality, materiality and carnality},”\textsuperscript{128} or the Spirit in the world. In its appropriate radicality, the Catholic principle proffers that there are “no uninterpreted facts of the matter.”\textsuperscript{129} In a play on Tillich’s “Courage to Be,” Caputo calls it the “courage for what may be,”\textsuperscript{130} for it is this discernment of plural voices of the past that opens the tradition to a future.

The tradition alters under our feet, whether we resist these changes, like the conservatives, or embrace them, like the progressives. … It is in fact disingenuous to speak of “the” tradition or “the” Church because upon closer inspection history discloses to us multiple traditions and many churches, which we cluster together in a kind of grand intellectual shorthand when we speak of them in the singular. The radical hermeneutical point can be

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{126}] Caputo, “The Challenge of God and the Catholic Principle,” 7. All page numbers from unpublished manuscript.
\item[\textsuperscript{127}] Ibid., p. 8.
\item[\textsuperscript{128}] Ibid., p. 9.
\item[\textsuperscript{129}] Ibid., p. 9.
\item[\textsuperscript{130}] Ibid., p. 9.
\end{itemize}
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summarized by saying that a tradition does not have a meaning
or an essence; it has a history.\textsuperscript{131}

As the history is on-going, what passes for a meaning or essence of the
tradition is not definitely definable yet, as the future interpretations are still
to come. Going even further, Caputo holds that the Church or any tradition
“does not have a history; it is a history.”\textsuperscript{132} Religious tradition is “a concrete
and conditioned response, an historical response, made under the contingent
conditions of space and time, to an unconditional call.”\textsuperscript{133} In our case, that
unconditional call is the event that broke in (or out) in Jesus’ teaching on the
Kingdom of God, an earthy Kingdom of mustard seeds and leaven and dinner
parties, and, considering Rome “won” in the conventional sense of the word,
a promise more than a prediction.\textsuperscript{134} The Spirit speaks through \textit{ta me onta},
and is as such often powerless before the power (\textit{arché}) of the institutional
church. A radically catholic principle, attending to the “unfolding of spirit-
in-History”\textsuperscript{135} would involve understanding “the Church as the \textit{populus dei},
not the hierarchy, one of the most important pronouncements of the Vatican
II.”\textsuperscript{136}

\textbf{Spooking the Faithful}

What all of this means for theopoetics or “weak” theology is that it lives in
a subversive sort of loyalty to the tradition it finds itself in.

[It] will always be parasitic upon the confessional forms, . . . all
the while depending upon the worldly body and the spiritual
voice that these institutions give to religion. I am not arguing
against the confessional faiths but only insisting that they ought
to be disturbed from within by a radical non-knowing, . . . and
that they ought to confess like the rest of us that they do not
know who they are.\textsuperscript{137}

Weak theology is interested in the “how,” not the “what” of religious belief,
according to Caputo, doing no more than “interrupt or intercept, deflect or
modify” confessional theology, “introducing modalities, conditions, degrees,
and exceptions.”\textsuperscript{138} The relation of weak theology to confessional theology
is one of “an insistence and an existent, as a spook or spectral shadow and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 10.
\item Ibid., p. 11.
\item Ibid., p. 14.
\item Ibid., p. 3.
\item Ibid., p. 2.
\item Caputo, \textit{On Religion}, p. 33.
\item Caputo, \textit{The Insistence of God}, p. 9.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
an actuality.”\textsuperscript{139} The distinction is “far from clean and binary.”\textsuperscript{140} The kind of work Caputo has in mind for radical or weak theology is to attend to “the event that stirs within historical theological reflection.”\textsuperscript{141} Radical theology “inevitably betrays its own historical roots, its confessional and existential pedigree.”\textsuperscript{142} Radical theology is the “perhaps not” for confessional theology: “perhaps all this really is through a glass, in the dark, and perhaps the darkness goes all the way down. Perhaps we really do not know at all what we mean.”\textsuperscript{143} If confessional religion is the gathering of a community, through time and in space, bringing the faithful together, radical theology wants to spook the faithful with the suggestion that we do not have it together.\textsuperscript{144} In the confessional communities, radical theology has a job of “dislocating dissociation,”\textsuperscript{145} in order to release “the event of faith” from in between the inherited “beliefs.”\textsuperscript{146}

Fin

In sum, Caputo’s “religion without religion” is very much a religion with religion. The messianic, in its various nominations throughout Caputo’s work, does not stand by itself, but is always at work in and through a historically conditioned community, of which it invites the reconjugation, discernment, and critique, but never the wholesale rejection. The subversion of tradition is not out of hatred, but out of love: It is a loyalty that believes the tradition can be more, that there is something worthwhile to be had from calling the tradition to continue its figurations into an unforeseeable future.

While much of Caputo’s work rests on a distinction between the messianic and messianism, or faith and belief, it is thus necessary to also see the impossibility of this distinction. It sometimes appears as though Caputo wants to make this distinction rigorously: faith and belief, neatly separated, faith as universal and belief as historico-culturally conditioned. However,

\textsuperscript{139}Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{140}Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{141}Ibid., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{142}Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{143}Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{144}It is true that, in the same book, Caputo equivocates this a bit, suggesting radical theology is “without ties to a confessional community,” which means it is “more free and unfettered.” The radical theologian reports to “anyone willing to listen.” Radical theology has a more universal appeal in the sense that it recognizes the need to open up tradition to the excluded and other. This “universality” of radical theology is, however, more an aspiration than an achievable goal or platform. Caputo further admits it is “a bit of a fiction,” since “reflection always begins where we are and when we reflect we always reflect our beginning,” which in the case of radical theology means, simply, theology. “We too have a community . . . to report back to.” Ibid., pp. 69–71.
\textsuperscript{145}Ibid., p. 78.
\textsuperscript{146}Ibid., p. 80.
this is a distinction that always again collapses in on itself. Faith may always be haunted by a “I know not what,” but perhaps the haunting itself is in turn haunted by a determinate content: “But I think it is Christ.”

This is relevant for our question because it on the one hand admits no schema of the interreligious can ever truly be universal. It will always somehow be indebted to one or several traditions. The appropriate response to Caputo’s deconstructive faith, to the weak force exerted by the event stirring in the name of God, is then not to abandon one’s tradition for some universal faith or non-committal individualism. Rather, it is an intensified identification with that faith community, which is to be deconstructed in the name of the invitation to the other.
III.3 Caputo on the Interreligious

In this section, I will discuss what Caputo has written directly about religious diversity and the interreligious. At face value, the appearance of the interreligious in Caputo’s work is less explicit than was the case with Kearney, above, or will be the case with Keller, below. However, for Caputo, the deconstruction of Christian “strong” theology is always already in some way concerned with Christianity’s others:

We cannot forget that the distinction between the messianic and the concrete messianisms is always a political distinction for Derrida, one that spells the difference between war and peace, the war that Christianity has waged relentlessly on Judaism, and all the wars among the determinate messianisms. That is perhaps the point of this distinction in the first place. For the history of Western politics, and of the relations between the West and the Middle East is and has been, from time immemorial, a history of wars waged in the name of the several messianisms, the incessant battle to take Mount Moriah. The concrete messianisms have always meant war, while the meaning of the messianic is, or should be, shalom, pax.147

I will discuss and develop Caputo’s approach to the interreligious in two relatively distinct parts. First, I will discuss the deconstructive effect Caputo suggests the interreligious can have on the perceived stability of religious signifiers, paying particular attention to “translatability.” Then, I will discuss where Caputo’s formulations indicate a more comprehensive quasi-schema approaching a theology of religious pluralism. In each of these, it is important to Caputo that the interreligious cannot be predicated on a coming together around a shared divine referent that would be the “same,” but instead can serve to deliver the shock to constituted traditions that the names they employ are themselves “not the same” but astir with the restlessness of an event.

III.3.1 Deconstructive Encounters

Caputo sees interreligious encounters and the confrontation with religious diversity as potentially having a salutary deconstructive effect on Christianity. The simple fact that there are multiple religions should already de-center illusions of the supremacy of one’s own religion:

We need to spare ourselves from the extremism and madness that are involved when the faithful get it into their heads that “we” – Jews or Christians, Hindus or Muslims, whoever – have

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been granted a privileged access to God in a way that has been
denied to others, or that we are loved by God in special way [sic]
that God just cannot bring “himself” (sic!) to feel for others, or
that we have been given certain advantages that God just has
not granted others.\footnote{148}

The idea that the revelation of truth at one particular time, in one particular
language, to the exclusion of all the others, as part of “a Great Divine
Mystery” is an affront (“bull”). Caputo has some pretty strong feelings
about this:

It sounds much more like our ways, not God’s, our own very
unmysterious and human all too human ethnocentrism and ego-
centrism, our own nationalism and narcissism, our own sexism,
racism, and self-love writ large, in short, a gross human weakness
that is being passed off as a Great Divine Attribute. The nerve
of some people!\footnote{149}

The idea of deconstruction is in particular to deconstruct any nation or
community that would place its own identity above the other. Without
such deconstruction, Caputo worries that Christianity poses a distinct threat
to its others. It is “driven by a sense of the consummate danger of an
identitarian community, of the spirit of the ‘we’ of ‘Christian Europe,’ or of
a ‘Christian politics,’ lethal compounds that spell death for Arabs and Jews,
for Africans and Asians, for anything other.”\footnote{150} So deconstruction is always
already concerned with religious difference, we might say, for it is concerned
with what is excluded as “other.”

Truth

For this reason, Caputo addresses interreligious disagreement by suggesting
an alternative, non-exclusive, understanding of religious truth, not unlike
what Kearney suggests (see pp. 108f., above), if in a different key.

There are many different religions, and the one we belong to is
to a great extent an accident of birth. One would not want to
say that any one of them is true at the cost of the truth of the
others, the way these more conservative Christians do, no more
than one would say that one language is true. There are multiple
religious traditions, each of which is true in its own way, and with
a truth that does not subtract from the truth of the others.\footnote{151}

\footnote{149}Ibid., p. 114.
\footnote{150}Caputo, \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida}, pp. 231–232.
\footnote{151}Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 201.
The vocabulary in which this transformative messianic call is uttered is an accident of birth. So “religion . . . is like having a language . . . or wearing a hat,” meaning it is a factor of our linguistic and cultural horizon, something we are born into that allows us access to the world but therefore cannot be said to be better than other horizons.

Indeed there are “many ways for God to be revealed . . . and many ways for religions to be true.” For “religious truth is not the truth of propositions,” but belongs to a “different order.” The truth of religion is one of “transformation not information.” Rather than an informative or referential understanding of religious truth, which inevitably means the employment of truth as a means to exclude or regulate, the truth of religion is about “truly” loving God. “The idea of one true religion or religious discourse or body of religious narratives makes no more sense than the idea of the one true poem or one true language or one true culture.” Religious truth is the truth of the event, which means it is about figuring an insistent call. “[I]t wants to become true, to make itself true, to make itself come true, to be transformed into truth, so that its truth is a species of truth as facere veritatem.”

Religion is thus “true” when it is alive with the event, when the divine call truly affects those who are called to respond. It must be thought of as, and can be identified by, the effect it has on its believers. Truth in religion is the virtue of “being genuinely or truly religious, of genuinely or truly loving God.” Religions are true, Caputo argues, insofar as they call for “serving the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.” The question of which religion gets it “right” is thus not only wrong-headed, it is even “impious, irreligious, and insolent,” as the various religious practices are “integral and mutually irreducible forms of life. Each form of prayer is the issue of its own intensity, heartfelt sincerity and humility, its own good will, and makes sense inside the historical form of life that nourishes it.”

One term Caputo uses to describe this understanding of religious truth is theopoetics. Theopoetics is not “theopoetry,” Caputo stresses. Rather, as poiesis it is “creative discursive construction,” an “evocative discourse,” evoking an unnamable faith in the to-come. It gives voice to a “symbolic

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152 Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 99.
156 Ibid., p. 118.
158 Ibid., p. 114.
159 Ibid., p. 131.
161 Ibid., p. 115.
discourse,” with “a passion and a desire”\textsuperscript{163} for the impossible. For Caputo, it is the place where the divine call communicates with our desire of God. It is not supposed to make sense in a way that would allow us to figure out the deep truth “behind” religious discourse, but it is supposed to make us sensitive to the Divine, to evoke a desire for what is “behind” it, which would also call us to make it real, to giving existence to the insistence of God.

This has an anti-realist ring to it, especially when Caputo remarks that when in the Gospel someone walks on water or is raised from the dead, that of course does not mean that this really happened,\textsuperscript{164} or that he views the Scriptures as “hermeneutically explicative or phenomenologically disclosive or revelatory about a mode of being-in-the-world, not real-representational.”\textsuperscript{165}

Both literalism and historical-critical readings, however, would be an impoverishment of religious truth, which Caputo instead approaches with “hyper-realism.”\textsuperscript{166} Caputo’s weak theology does not seek to find out “what really happened,” but rather to expose ourselves to the wondrous hope that is in these stories. Poetics are deeply deconstructible, which is to say, they are open to the coming God,\textsuperscript{167} living “on the edge of the gaps opened by the insistence of God.”\textsuperscript{168}

In The Insistence of God, Caputo unfolds his “poetic” understanding of religious discourse as a “headless” Hegelianism.\textsuperscript{169} Hegel had described religious discourse as Vorstellung, “an imaginative-sensuous presentation . . . of something that required conceptual clarification.”\textsuperscript{170} With this, religious truth is wedged between art, which is purely imaginative-sensuous, and philosophy, which is purely conceptual. Philosophy thus serves to elucidate in terms of Begriff what religion could only say as Vorstellung. Caputo appreciates Hegel’s moves particularly because Hegel finds a way of talking about the relation of philosophy to the truth of religious revelation, without simply submitting the former to “the mythic supernaturalism of classical orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{171} In Hegel, Caputo finds a notion of “truth as the process of becoming true of the truth.”\textsuperscript{172}

However, Caputo suggests adopting this idea without the possibility for

\textsuperscript{163}Caputo, \textit{The Weakness of God}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{164}Ibid., p. 106.
\textsuperscript{165}Ibid., p. 118.
\textsuperscript{166}Ibid., p. 123.
\textsuperscript{167}Ibid., p. 110.
\textsuperscript{168}Caputo, \textit{The Insistence of God}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{169}Ibid., pp. 92ff.
\textsuperscript{171}Caputo, \textit{The Insistence of God}, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{172}Ibid., p. 89.
philosophy to clarify, elucidate and definitely conceptualize what is being said in religion (hence “headless”). “My own idea is that religion is a Vorstellung of which there is no Concept, a figure that does not admit of metaphysical elucidation.” Instead of the Begriff, Caputo thus suggests the event. Religious Vorstellungen are moments of becoming-true (of a call or promise) without ever getting to a definite Truth. It is a symbol, but we cannot peek beyond it to see what it is symbolizing, as the event it evokes is a promise, pointing, deferring, calling forward.

Caputo hopes that such a “weak” understanding of religious truth can help move Christianity towards a less hostile and more hospitable attitude towards its others. Indeed, he wonders if the inverse may not also obtain: if interreligious encounter and hospitality could not serve to propel Christianity towards a more deconstructive understanding of itself.

Hospitality

Caputo spends a few pages on the subject of interfaith dialogue in his recent Hoping against Hope. There, he calls it a “concrete work of hospitality,” and distinguishes between a “conditional” and an “unconditional” form. While “conditional” interfaith hospitality, seeking an “overlapping agreement” and then agreeing to disagree for the rest, may be “commendable,” it is “more concerned with maintaining intra-faith composure than inter-faith exposure.” It is “inclusive, trying to widen the circle to include the other in the space of the same, but without allowing that space to be altered.” Unconditional hospitality, on the other hand, puts one’s presuppositions at risk and radically challenges the fundamental positions and status of one’s beliefs. Something “happens to ‘truth’ under the impact of this hospitality.” In this “unconditional” interfaith encounter, Caputo sees something happening akin to his own theological project: It spooks the faithful.

It is worthwhile at this point to briefly step back and look at Derrida’s discussion of hospitality, and how it is at work in the background of Caputo’s (admittedly brief) argument. For Derrida, hospitality is not hospitality unless it is unconditional, unless it welcomes without a horizon of expectation. This, however, is impossible, leading to an aporetic situation.

If, in hospitality, one must say yes, welcome the coming, say the “welcome”; one must say yes, there where one does not wait, yes, there where one does not expect, nor await oneself to, the

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173 Ibid., p. 92.
174 Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 91.
175 Ibid., p. 92.
176 Ibid., p. 92.
178 The following paragraphs draw on van Hoogstraten, “Offenheit gegenüber dem Anderen.”
other, to let oneself be swept by the coming of the wholly other, the absolutely unforeseeable stranger, the uninvited visitor, the unexpected visitation beyond welcoming apparatuses. If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the hôte as invited, there is no hospitality.  

Openness to the other is risky business; it demands we not know what might come, that we expect without a horizon of expectation. This is already a powerful point for interreligious encounters: Often, when we say we are open or hospitable, we are not that open after all. Even if we are not exclusively looking to meet people who are like us, then at the very least we like to have some kind of structure in place to make sure the door is not open to just anyone. “Hospitality means welcoming the other... But as Derrida’s well-known analysis shows, normally it ends up meaning welcoming the same, inviting a short list of insiders while discreetly keeping the uninvited... in the dark.”  

That is not really openness to the other, say Derrida and Caputo. That is openness to the same. Openness to the other starts where this structure breaks down—even where host and guest become indistinguishable.

Now, of course, such unconditional hospitality is simply impossible, in the sense that it cannot reasonably be demanded of anyone. But it is also impossible on a more structural level. There is a structural aporia, a contradiction or restlessness, in the concept of openness. Hospitality requires mastery of the home, but there where there is such mastery, there is no hospitality. Hospitality requires the intentionality of an invitation, of a welcome, but if we invite and welcome, we always invite and welcome the same.

This is not merely a tension to be navigated, but an internal contradiction, an “always imminent implosion” within the concept of hospitality.

This means hospitality in its unconditional variant is closely aligned with Caputo’s deconstructive faith in general, as a “pact with the impossible.” Derrida even defines deconstruction as hospitality: “Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than ‘its other,’ to an other who is beyond any ‘its other.’” Under the exposure to the impossible, the conditional order of knowledge and meaning is structurally “opened to the other,” rendered deconstructible, spooked.

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When Caputo makes this distinction between “conditional” and “unconditional” interfaith hospitality, he is therefore not saying that we should somehow strive for the absolutely open doors of unconditional hospitality.¹⁸⁵ “Unconditional” interfaith hospitality means the “at-home” of religious tradition is opened up to the call or demand for its reconjugation and revision. This is not to say that is what always happens in interfaith hospitality—much interreligious engagement is “conditional,” and that is fine with Caputo. But interfaith hospitality really worth its salt does something more unsettling.

What is revealed, is that “every revelation is a special revelation.”¹⁸⁶ “There are multiple forms of life and they are all special, but no one has any special privileges.”¹⁸⁷ It makes us not a community of common ground, but “une communauté aveugle.”¹⁸⁸ While “conditional” interfaith hospitality is about coming together on something we can all confess, “unconditional” interfaith hospitality could be said to be about confessing not common ground, but the groundlessness of all our attachments. “[It is not] enough to say we each have our own identity. What’s truly interesting is that we are not even identical with ourselves, that we are all inhabited from within by the other.”¹⁸⁹

So we might formulate it like this: Interfaith hospitality is only really hospitality in this unconditional sense when it not only welcomes the stranger, but when it breaks with the very structure that makes the stranger strange. It is worth its salt, so to speak, when it not only questions who is in- or excluded, but when it breaks with the very structure of in- versus exclusion: When, instead of merely offering a choice between in and ex, it questions the exclusion, when it opens up and exposes the very structures of closure.

Translatability

A similar expositive effect of the confrontation with religious difference goes under the name of “translatability.” Translation is an “elemental demand of hospitality,” as we need to speak in a language or idiom the guest can understand.¹⁹⁰ Caputo introduces this term as a way of displacing interreligious disagreement.

Derrida aims particularly at delimiting the hegemonic rule of a Christian Europe, of the privileged site of Greco-Euro-Christianity, of which the Pope [John Paul II] is dreaming . . . , which led the

¹⁸⁶ Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 94.
¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 95.
¹⁸⁹ Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 100.
pope, in his recent best-seller, to oppose Christianity to Buddhism as an “atheistic system.”\textsuperscript{191} The Pope’s complaint about Buddhism means that Buddhists do not agree with the Pope about how to use the word God, which is their business; but it also means that the Pope does not admit that the name of God is translatable, and that in general the meaning of the name of God should be fixed by popes who are in charge of authorized translations, which is serious business.\textsuperscript{192}

With translatability, Caputo appears to refer to the general uncertainty between various “positions,” “beliefs” or “names” in which we seek to capture the event. Translatability is one of the core theses of the deconstructive project, that “translation cannot be stopped,”\textsuperscript{193} that closure is impossible. The name of God is “exposed to endless translatability into other names of comparable excess, other names with comparably bottomless or overreaching powers of surprise and solicitation.”\textsuperscript{194}

Such translation is not a question of conserving the meaning and changing the words one uses. With translatability, Caputo is not saying various words might refer to the same deeper meaning, or that an “inner semantic essence” would be “transferred,” but rather that the words we use never quite get at what they are trying to say. “Names are asked to carry what they cannot bear toward a destination they do not know.”\textsuperscript{195} Translatability is therefore necessarily always untranslatability, as a translation never seemlessly transposes meaning from one language to another. “We cannot translate—something idiomatic is always lost—but still we must; and furthermore, it is no loss, because a translation is an expansion and the incoming of something new.”\textsuperscript{196}

Translatability means there is always another way of saying what one is saying, that the language one uses is not the definite and last word, but that everything could be said otherwise. Saying the same thing differently, however, means one is saying something else, meaning something that is “translatable” is not the same thing as itself. The translatability of “God” thus sheds doubt on the stability of God’s identity as a metaphysical constant. In Caputo’s view, what we “share” with other religious traditions is not so much the \textit{same thing} that could be said differently; rather, the

\textsuperscript{192}Caputo, \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{193}Ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{194}Caputo, \textit{The Weakness of God}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{195}Ibid., p. 3.
interreligious is a challenge showing that our own ultimate concern, what we hope and pray for, is “not the same,” does not coincide with itself, can slip away into other translations and interpretations.

The precise relation of this translatability to undecidability, however, remains somewhat ambiguous. Above, I discussed how Caputo argues faith must always be conditioned by undecidability. One way this could be considered promising for questions raised by the interreligious or religious plurality would be to suggest translatability means there is an undecidability between different religions: There is no obvious reason for one religion against another, so we make a choice, all the while knowing that it may well have been otherwise. Caputo appears ambiguous or unsure about this: On the one hand, he describes undecidability as translatability: “The ‘undecidability’ of the name of God means translatability; it means that when we say ‘God’ we might have something else in mind, or that others might have other names for what we do have in mind.”

On the other hand, he argues that the undecidability that makes faith truly worth its salt is on the level of an “underlying affirmation,” not on the level of “positions.” When he is speaking of “undecidability,” he appears to be saying, he is not speaking of an undecidability between one religious system and another (or none at all), but rather the openness of an unpresentable affirmation.

[S]ometimes people make dramatic, famous conversions from one position to the other—atheists become theists, and theists become atheists. So what? There’s no ... significance for the underlying depth dimension of the “affirmation” I am speaking about. ... I want to emphasize the distinction between a presentable position and an unpresentable affirmation.

Such positions or “beliefs” are to be distinguished from “faith,” or the “unconditional.” In this schema, it is the translatability of beliefs that suggests their relative unimportance: It is what they seek to name that is unconditional. Their translatability reveals that these names contain something they cannot contain. So it would seem that translatability as the “lateral” dimension of fluctuation between different names for the unconditional, the future, or the event would need to be distinguished from undecidability, which is about a more structural uncertainty.

Caputo does not appear to be conclusive on the matter, and my sense is that this is related to the failure of the distinction between “faith” and

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197 Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 34; See also Caputo, The Weakness of God, pp. 9, 288.
198 Caputo and Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” p. 216; See also Caputo, Hoping against Hope, pp. 96–102; Caputo, The Insistence of God, pp. 80–82.
200 Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 97.
201 Ibid., pp. 54–55.
“belief,” or the separation of the messianic from messianism, in the first place. On the one hand, the choice between religious worlds and languages is of the least possible importance, as they are each but vocabularies for something that can never quite be put to words. On the other hand, however, this choice is of the utmost importance. It may be that this aporia is precisely laid out in the equivalence and non-equivalence of translatability of divine names and undecidability of the unconditional “I know not what” that faith affirms. Translatability is the perhaps that casts into doubt any name we may give to the messianic hope, the beliefs and confessional theologies that host and house and engender that hope, which itself also remains undecidable and impossible. Interreligious translatability confronts us with this aspect of the event the name of God engenders: There is another way of saying what religion tries to say, that Christianity is not uniquely capable of reaching for what it reaches for. Translatability suggests that the interreligious is less about all of us believing in the same, but that our own religious vocabularies are, in a sense, not the same.

Fin

For Caputo, religious difference is never absent from the background of his deliberations on the faith of deconstruction. He outlines an understanding of truth that is non-exclusive and yields both interreligious hospitality and translatability. Though Caputo’s remarks are limited, they point towards an understanding of interreligious encounters as deconstructive, spooking religious certitude and placing them at the heart of his larger project. I hope it has become clear that I find this analysis generally compelling. I will particularly return to translatability in Chapter V.

In the previous chapter, I criticized Kearney’s approach to the interreligious as hospitality, because it reinscribed narratives of belonging and not-belonging and silenced the (violent) history Christianity already shares with its others. Caputo’s position also in part remains within a discourse on hospitality, but, in my view, his emphasis that hospitality must be a “deconstruction of the at-home” means it fares better. In Caputo’s Derridean schema, hospitality also involves the deconstruction of the host-guest relationship: Their roles are not reinscribed, but become undecidable. Interreligious work thus means a subversion of the power dynamics at work in religious difference.

Translatability further unearths the “anarchic” character of the interreligious. Interreligious translatability reveals something of the shaky ground of all religious names. Not only are interreligious fault lines themselves unruly—they draw out and de-center the “centers” of our beliefs as well. Where Kearney seemed to stabilize his interreligious translation into a shared divine alterity (the commonality of alterity as a shared Absolute), Caputo goes further, making translatability into the alterity of the common or the
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difference of the same. In Caputo’s Derridean understanding of “translatability,” interreligious encounter is not about finding shared ground, but about the groundlessness and eventuousness of all our religious language. It contains something it cannot contain, which is why it cannot be brought under control, but can only be responded to, “praying, weeping, dreaming.”

I have one question for this non-exclusive understanding of truth, and it is the same one I voiced in response to Kearney’s schema. Under what conditions does it itself become exclusive? If it separates those who are seeing enough to know that they are blind (such as Caputo himself) from those who are blind enough to believe they are seeing—might we be in danger of drawing a line between us, who are wise and postmodern, and them who are backwardly (pre)modern? This is not so far off from Caputo’s own rhetoric, distinguishing himself from “these more conservative Christians” (and presumably a great many others) who are still so primitive to believe in an existent actor God.

Such a postmodern Truth could devolve into an exclusivism in postmodern guise, if it is not careful to always again deconstruct the dichotomies it itself erects.

Such a deconstruction is, thankfully, never far off in Caputo’s schema. However, in the next section I will discuss a number of formulations in which Caputo does appear to seek clear dichotomies, expressing what appears as a simple universalist understanding of “faith” in many different religions.

III.3.2 Quasi-Pluralism

Much of the above already appears to place Caputo in the vicinity of the pluralist camp, perhaps not in an affirmation of interreligious commonality, but certainly in his emphasis that Christianity is not privileged compared to other religions. Caputo makes his proximity to pluralism more apparent in a number of statements I will discuss here. While these often allude to a more solidly pluralist schema, they remain ambiguous and are surrounded by equivocation. It is clear that he affirms something is also going on in other traditions, something we know not what, in no way less full or complete than in Christianity. While he maintains this does not mean he believes in a universal deep truth, it is easy to get the opposite impression, as much of his writing in this direction seems to imply a comprehensive pluralism of a shared core or essence to various religious traditions.

Pluralist Equivocation

Some of Caputo’s expressions sound solidly pluralist. While discussing religious diversity with Richard Kearney, for instance, Caputo affirms an “underlying depth dimension” to the various religions.

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In a matter like religion, ... the thoughts we have, the stories we
tell, the narratives we recite are all contingent and inherited. ... They are accidents of birth. That is fine. I don’t think that under-
damines their value, by any means. ... [But] those differences
cannot count in the long run. What does count is the under-
lying affirmations that are enacted or deployed in the several
traditions.\textsuperscript{204}

Caputo hopes differences between “positions” can be “relativized,” by means of

some deeper “affirmation” beneath them, something that is more
affirmative than positions are “positive,” something which runs
beneath both theism and atheism, which prompts us to drop the
discussion, to displace the distinction ... So I would relativize
those positions not in the name of some arbitrary caprice or
relativism but in the name of a prior affirmation, or a deeper
sense of confession, of genuinely confessing that we’re “lost.”\textsuperscript{205}

So Caputo now affirms “some unobjectifiable and unrepresentable affirmation
that runs throughout all these positions, each of which is an attempt
to present something ultimately unpresentable.”\textsuperscript{206}

In his 2015 \textit{Hoping against Hope}, he suggests faith or hope are “the
fundamental momentum of our being-in-the-world,” and can “come about
under many names and many different forms of life.”\textsuperscript{207} He also distinguishes
between “faith” and “belief” much more sharply than was possible in his
discussions of the messianic and messianism, which did not allow for a neat
separation.

As a terminological matter, I have distinguished the multiplicity of particular beliefs from an underlying “faith.” ... A belief (\textit{doxa}) expresses a “position” and it comes accompanied by
supporting propositions, like buttresses that keep orthodoxy’s
cathedrals from tipping over. Orthodoxy is uprightness, which
is alright on a flat earth, but in a global world it means we are
all pointing in a different direction.\textsuperscript{208}

There is thus something “going on in ... the various religions, in all their
countless varieties, known and unknown.”\textsuperscript{209} He now calls for a “faith with-
out beliefs,”\textsuperscript{210} where “faith is a more underlying matter,” “a deeper fidelity,
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a deeper responsibility to what is calling upon or visiting itself upon us un-
conditionally, wherever we live and whatever we believe.”

This call for a “faith without beliefs” is worth contrasting with Caputo’s
argument some twenty years earlier in The Prayers and Tears of Jacques
Derrida. There, he had still written of “religion without religion.” The
double use of “religion,” if admittedly employed in two discernible senses, is
telling: As I discussed above (see pp. 137ff.), it is not quite possible to make
a clear distinction between what is deconstructed and what is intensified in
this deconstruction. Caputo also calls his religion without religion a “faith
without faith,” and emphasizes the “debt” all articulations of faith hold
to tradition.

In 2015, he writes instead that “[f]aith cannot fall back on millennia-
old traditions, ancient manuscripts, Gothic cathedrals, liturgies, and prayer
books.” Caputo now sounds almost verbatim like Wilfred Cantwell Smith,
a crucial influence on John Hick. Smith had proposed a bifurcation between
“faith” as an inner experience or involvement distinct from “cumulative
tradition.”

So it is easy to see how Caputo can be understood as arguing there is
something like a deeper, universal faith “beneath” or “below” the various
religions. However, it appears Caputo is aware of the inadequacy of this
vocabulary, as he accompanies many of these statements with equivocation:

I hasten to cut off a possible confusion. I am not saying that once
we get past these culturally different empirical belief systems we
will come upon a deeper faith that is the same across all cultures.
... I do not think that there is an underlying, universal, cross-
cultural religious truth that can finally be unearthed with enough
empirical digging into the different traditions.

But the proximity of what he here disavows to what he is saying is at least
confusing. I asked him how one is to understand his remarks about a “deeper
affirmation” that would “relativize” the positions if not as a pluralism or
universal faith akin to Smith. Caputo responded that this “underlying af-
firmation” is to be understood “without claiming that this is a universal,
an a priori, a concept, etc.” He stresses he “would never say that an
accident of birth, the concrete confessional tradition in which I wake up in
the world, is relativized to the point of becoming ‘unimportant,’ only that it
is deprived of any claim to exclusivity and absolute truth.” It only “comes

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211Ibid., p. 97.
213Ibid., p. 222.
214Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 98.
215Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, p. 156. See also above, pp. 59ff.
216Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 98.
217Personal Correspondence, May 2016.
unhinged or displaced,” but it remains the only thing that “exists.” “Each
tradition is a ground, otherwise there would be pure chaos, but the ground
is groundless, otherwise there would be pure terror.”

This is closely connected to my view that there is no deeper
common core in what we call in Christian Latin the “religions.” I
fully embrace the work that has been done to show that the word
“religion” is a modern, western and even colonial construction.218

So how are we to make sense of this? In spite of Caputo’s apparent equiv-
ocation in recent years, I propose sticking with the deconstructive distrust
of universal structures and neat dichotomies of The Prayers and Tears of
Jacques Derrida: “I think, in accord with a fundamental gesture of decon-
struction, that . . . the borders between our most important distinctions are
porous, and that applies as well to the distinction between the messianic
and the messianisms.”219

A Quasi-Pluralism

In sum, Caputo’s pluralist intimations bring forth, on my reading, at most
a quasi-pluralism. This can perhaps best be made clear with a formulation
from The Insistence of God:

There is no event of events, only so many events, so many even-
tive traditions, so many promises, so many calls, so many plural
ways in which events insist upon existing. The traditions that
we in the West describe in Christian Latin as “religious” are so
many ways of figuring the event, so many ways the event takes
the form of narratives, parables, figures, images, and sensuous
presentations of the promise, of the gift, of the call, . . . which
does not so much “define” them as point to why they cannot be
defined but simply treated as complexes of overlapping cultural
practices.220

Caputo’s quasi-pluralism thus means we can see the eventuousness of other
names, and allow that translatability to affect the status of our own be-
liefs. But to suggest other names address the same determinate God as ours
would be a metaphysical endeavor, implying that faith addresses a determi-
nate God at all. In “unconditional” interreligious hospitality, rather than
determining a shared referent, the determinacy of the addressee of one’s
faith is precisely what is called into question.

On this reading, when in the above citation Caputo speaks of “the”
event when he describes religions as “so many ways of figuring the event,” it

218 Personal Correspondence, May 2016.
must be noted that this is in immediate proximity to “the promise” or “the call,” and should be understood not as a reification but as a shorthand for a certain kind of quasi-universal phenomenon, whose universality is always undone even as it itself undoes the privileging of any single home or name it might take. There is no one phenomenon that all religions have in common, but neither are they privileged in their particularity. The challenge of the interreligious is that it leaves us open, exposed, without recourse to a universalist faith, nor to the safe walls of our constituted traditions.

So, although Caputo talks about “religion” along the lines of promise, call, and hope, this is immediately undone by the failure of the constructed word “religion.” When we speak of religion, “we are already speaking Latin,” we are already using a specific type of words, which can be opened up and deconstructed. So finally, in this citation, Caputo settles on “religions” as “simply . . . complexes of overlapping cultural practices.” The relation of religious traditions to each other is not that they can be abstracted into the same category based on some essential features, or that they intend the same transcendent reality, but, as we saw above, a relationship of translatability: Rather than a pluralism that hinges on all religions expressing the same underlying meaning, it refers to the unprivileged status of any name we might have given to the address of our faith.

This is related to Caputo’s agnosticism on the matter of the causal identity “behind” this apparent relatedness. “Is it really God who calls, or is it some hidden power in my own mind? . . . To pursue that question is to treat the call like a strong force with a definite place on the plane of being or power, not a weak one that solicits me from afar.” A few pages onwards, he describes the refusal to identify an ontological ground or cause for an event as “ascetic rigor.” Making metaphysical statements about what is really going on behind, or within, or below this affected-ness of faith is a temptation, he appears to be saying, which we must resist or suspend. This implies, we might say, a suspension of any theology of religions that seeks to say anything about whether what affects those of other faiths is the “same” as what affects Christians. It is the stuff of an “epoche,” or “bracketing the causal question of the caller.” Something gets itself called—that’s as far as we can go. There is clearly something going on in other religious traditions—that’s as much as we can say.

Fin

In sum, Caputo’s quasi-pluralism appears more interested in de-centering Christian privilege, or indeed any privilege, and that it wants to stick with

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223 Ibid., p. 122.
224 Ibid., p. 119.
this de-centering rather than find new comprehensive solutions to the way it may be. However, several of his formulations suggest a more solidly pluralist understanding: a universal faith that is expressed in various religions, that gets called under various names. Above, I have argued that these formulations are perhaps somewhat careless, but should not be taken as paradigmatic for the consequences of radical theology for a theopoetics of religious difference.

At the same time, I wonder if a mere de-centering is not rather too thin to gather disparate others together. Much of my above critique of Kearney’s “conditional” pluralism could also be brought to bear on Caputo, who proposes “an inter-faith gathering of non-knowers, each of whom begins by confessing that we are all in this together... that we are all equally lost, all in need of guidance, because we do not know who we are, where helping one another is the blind leading the blind.”

We may wonder if this gathering is as inclusive as Caputo’s depictions of the kingdom of God, or if one would first have to show one’s deconstructive credentials to be admitted.

III.4 Fin

In this chapter, I discussed the poststructuralist deconstructive theology of John D. Caputo as a resource for grappling with religious difference. I started with a discussion of the religious affirmation Caputo finds in Derridean deconstruction. Deconstruction, Caputo argues, is not a purely negative endeavor, but is alive with a passion for an unpresentable to-come. This passion is religious, for this is what messianic religion is about when it is at its best. Christianity’s messianic expectation thus requires the deconstruction of Christianity, without which it would close off. A theopoetics of religious difference in Caputo’s key would thus prioritize not an inter-religiously shared affirmation, but the deconstruction of what is exclusive and oppressive, in the name of an elusive affirmation. If the anarchy of religious difference makes the categories of Christianity waver, as was argued in Chapter I, Caputo might thus say, well—great!

Second, I discussed how Caputo proposes to think faith as conditioned by undecidability. Faith cannot fall back onto guarantees or knowledge, but remains a response to a weak divine call. But it is also faith in a “perhaps,” a madness for the impossible or sacred anarchy, as Caputo nicknames the kingdom of God. Where “strong” theology might thus seek to bring religious difference under control, weak theology would celebrate its anarchy and repeat that all religious names, including the name of God, are alive with something they cannot contain. Yes, God, perhaps.

Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 99.
Finally, I investigated the precise relationship of Caputo’s messianic expectation to constituted religious tradition. It cannot be maintained that Caputo simply calls for a faith without traditions, communities, and institutions. Instead, the “without” represents a critical moment within constituted tradition. The relation of radical theology to one’s own tradition can be described as subversive loyalty: a deconstruction that does not intend to depart from tradition, but to set it alight with the sparks of the to-come. For the interreligious, this is an attitude that would not be content with an individualist, non-committal spirituality, but would hold the determinate traditions accountable to the promise around which they gather.

In the second part of this chapter, I discussed Caputo’s own words on the interreligious. First, this involved his readings of interreligious encounters as in some way deconstructive: As the “deconstruction of the at-home,” veritable interfaith hospitality reveals a translatability at the heart of our religious vocabularies. Instead of coming together on shared ground, translatability reveals the shakiness of our own foundations, the groundlessness and instability of our own religious language. Second, I discussed a number of Caputo’s statements that seem to suggest he seeks to dissociate a universalist “faith” from particular “beliefs.” Ultimately, I argue these formulations, though perhaps careless, cannot be taken as paradigmatic for the consequences of Caputo’s radical theology for a theopoetics of religious difference.

As has hopefully become clear, I find much of this highly compelling. At the end of this chapter, however, it must be noted that it is peculiar that Caputo does not formulate something akin to a theology of religious difference as called for by Kwok Pui-Lan. Caputo’s analyses of the interreligious still seem primarily concerned with identity, even if that identity gathers around a groundless, unstable, unrepresentable event. A deconstructive theopoetics of religious difference would, it appears to me, quite self-evidently need to pursue the path of a theopoetics of religious différence, in which religious identity is revealed to always already be made possible by an unstable chain of differential references and dissociations—sensitive to the ways, to put it simply, the religious “other” does not simply appear as a stranger, but is produced as other. I discussed a similar focus in the work of Kearney, above, in conversation with his analyses of the mutual dissociative construction of identity of Britain and Ireland. Differential relations do not fall from the sky whole, but have a history.

The absence of such an understanding of religious difference in Caputo’s work is odd, considering his general fluency with the deconstruction of the primacy of identity over difference. When introducing différence, he remarks the emergence of identity through differential reference and deferral “holds, mutatis mutandis, not only for linguistic signifiers but also for the concepts they signify, and more generally still for the whole range of our
beliefs and practices, cultural and institutional.”226 In an email, Caputo responds affirmatively to the idea of a theology of religious difference that would investigate how difference has been constructed: “I don’t know Kwok, but that seems to me exactly right.”227 A philosophy of religious *différence* is “exactly” what he thinks.

“Christianity” is an “effect,” relatively stable but also relatively unstable, generated in the play of cultural, linguistic, historical, political, sexual (the list is endless) differences. Its identity is to be without identity, and hence endlessly reinventible. Identity is the effect of difference. Difference is not an inflection of identity. There is no universal a priori, the a priori is constituted after the fact and will have to be revised on the occasion of the next encounter with difference.228

This will thus be amongst the main themes of the final chapter of this study. Ultimately, the question does remain if Caputo’s de-centering, deconstructive, translatable quasi-pluralism is enough to not only question but also build interreligious relations and affirm, if not a shared universal faith, then at least our interdependence. Weak theology may be *too weak* to perform the kind of *gathering* required by interreligious work, and perhaps by all religious work.229 This may be unfair, given that I have, throughout this study, mostly been interested in theologies that challenge and de-center. And Caputo admits his theology has little to do with comforting piety, indeed tries to avoid it.230 This may be a question of approach and personal preference—readers that find Caputo’s weak theology altogether too desert-like may be more amenable to Catherine Keller’s rather more verdant relational theology, which I discuss in the next chapter.

227 Personal Correspondence, May 2016.
228 Personal Correspondence, May 2016.
229 Caputo considers his own theology to be closer to life, in all its difficulty, than classical orthodoxy. According to Caputo, his theology is the result of a question “what theology would look like were it written by the outlaws, the outliers, the out of power, the troublemakers, the poor, the rogues” (Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 26). Writing as a preacher in a small congregation made up of out-of-power survivors of Stalin’s efforts, my sense is that this is far from accurate. The actual poor and outliers may favor a stronger God, who brings some backup to his promise of justice, or at least whose presence occasions a togetherness a bit tougher than a “*communauté aveugle*.” Caputo’s thought is perhaps more suitable for privileged progressive intellectuals—such as myself.
Chapter IV

Catherine Keller

IV.1 Introduction

“God” is a name for the irreducible multiplicity of relations that make up the universe. Divinity is therefore never static, but made and remade in a process of becoming and decay. This seems to be the starting point for Catherine Keller’s poststructuralist relational process theology. Less enamored with the death of God than Kearney or Caputo, Keller seeks to understand divinity as enfolding everything, and unfolding everywhere—a divinity conceived rather differently from the traditional omnipotent sovereign Lord.

While, for Keller, theology itself is always “an incantation at the edge of uncertainty,”\(^1\) she is less shy about metaphysics, if with the all-important caveat that all words and phrases of metaphysics remain “metaphors mutely appealing for an intuitive leap.”\(^2\) She thus suggests a *panentheism*, in which all (pan) is *in* God, and God is *in* all, without precisely identifying one with the other. Keller’s work is marked by two all-important theoretical commitments: *relationality* and *process theology* or process thought.

*Relationality* here means a shift in focus from identities, substances or individuals towards *relations* as the fundamental “unit” of the universe. Relations of differentiation and interdependence make everything into what it is, from human identities to ecosystems and galaxies. This is ineluctable: Even difference is best understood as a relation.\(^3\) However, relations are often disturbed and out of touch. Taking seriously the divine nature of interdependency therefore means moving into *right relationship*, guided by a vision of an interdependent universe. “God” (among other symbols) en-


codes at once, and paradoxically, the abysmal plenitude of relations and the rightness of some relations. Panentheism and relationality are closely intertwined as “the divine all-in-all yields the creaturely each-in-each.”

Process thought has to do with a similar shift in focus, this time from being or substance to becoming or process. It “signifies the intuition that the universe itself is not most fundamentally a static being or the product of a static Being—but an immeasurable becoming.” Process philosophy and process theology stem famously from Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead’s relation to poststructuralism, on which Keller also draws, is not self-evident. According to John Cobb,

Many of the specific criticisms of modernity by Whiteheadians and by the great postmodern philosophers in France are similar. But there was a major difference. Whiteheadians were articulating systematic alternatives to modern thought. Their focus was the construction of a comprehensive new vision. The French saw in all such efforts a kind of intellectual imperialism that was not separate from cultural and economic colonialism.

Keller herself notes the affinity between her project and Kearney’s as well as Caputo’s. However, the character of her writing appears more theological than Kearney’s or Caputo’s. Her work is rich with biblical readings, often taking time to discuss insights from biblical studies and the connotations of the Hebrew and Greek. At the same time, Keller’s commitment to ecofeminist politics and progressive social movements is much more obvious in her writing than is the case with Kearney or Caputo (who are, to be sure, no less progressive). Keller describes her relationship to the Christian tradition in

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5Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 89.


10Ibid., p. 29.
similar terms as I have used Caputo’s relationship in the previous chapter: She calls it a “critical fidelity,” elsewhere an “ambivalent fidelity,” with a “fluid relation” to both text and tradition.

As was the case with Kearney, the sheer number of authors Keller is in conversation with means she does not always discuss the philosophers she draws on in great detail. This can make it difficult to pinpoint whether, for example, Gilles Deleuze is a major resource or merely a major conversation partner. The Deleuzian term “multiplicity,” for instance, appears frequently in her work, but it remains unclear to me how much of a Deleuzian “framework” she imports as well. One hint that this import remains limited may be found in Deleuze’s feelings about metaphor, another crucial term for Keller: He considers it redundant, since it implies that there is some hidden “true” meaning “behind” or “below” the metaphor, whereas “all meaning and identification derive rather from the unstable interplay of figures, from configurations of sense.”

The influence of Whitehead, however, is abundantly clear in all of Keller’s oeuvre. While the main influences of Caputo and Kearney—Derrida, Levinas, and Ricoeur—were thus relatively well-known to a continental European academic audience, Whitehead’s relative obscurity in continental Europe means Keller often treads terrain that may be new to the readers of this study. This includes myself. I will therefore attempt to note Keller’s influences and conversation partners where relevant, but will generally stay close to a discussion of her work on its own merits.

As in the previous two chapters, I will start with a discussion of the elements of Keller’s thought that I think are most fruitful in grappling with what I have called the “anarchy” of religious difference: first, the “Deep” or groundlessness; second, apophasis or “unknowing”; and finally, political theology. In a second part, I will discuss the conclusions Keller herself draws for religious difference, again in three parts: first, a non-absolutist understanding of the truth of Christianity; second, a discussion of the politico-theological aspects of Christianity’s relation to Islam; and finally, the “relational pluralism” she formulates. I will argue that Keller largely avoids the

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13 The philosopher Jonathan Roffe describes Deleuze’s concept of multiplicity as follows: “A multiplicity is, in the most basic sense, a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity. Multiplicities are not parts of a greater whole that have been fragmented, and they cannot be considered manifold expressions of a single concept or transcendent unity. On these grounds, Deleuze opposes the dyad One/Many, in all of its forms, with multiplicity. Further, he insists that the crucial point is to consider multiplicity in its substantive form – a multiplicity – rather than as an adjective – as multiplicity of something. Everything for Deleuze is a multiplicity in this fashion.” Jonathan Roffe. “Multiplicity.” In: *The Deleuze Dictionary*. Ed. by Adrian Parr. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 188.
difficulties of Kearney’s and Caputo’s underdeveloped (quasi-)pluralisms, and that her work offers crucial stepping stones towards the philosophical investigation of religious difference I will undertake in the final chapter.
IV.2  Resources

IV.2.1  Groundlessness: The Deep

I will start by discussing Keller’s reading of the “Deep” or tehom in the creation story of Genesis 1. Instead of the traditional doctrine of creatio ex nihilo or creation from nothing, Keller reads creation as happening ex profundis, out of an indeterminate Deep of potentiality. Creation is thus not from nothing but from everything preceding, with God merely luring and enticing, not commanding. Creation is largely self-organizing. John Caputo had relied on this reading in The Weakness of God to show the biblical plausibility of a God who works as a weak force.15 But there is more going on: in Keller’s reading of the Deep, there is an understanding of divine creativity without a clear foundation. The ground is groundless, bottomless, and it washes out hard demarcations or hopes of divine exclusivity or omnipotence.

On one level, Keller’s Face of the Deep is an exegesis of the first lines of Genesis. She asks what has given rise to the ex nihilo doctrine, for the biblical text is not unambiguous: According to the annotation to Gen 1 in the New Oxford Annotated Bible, “the text does not describe creation out of nothing . . . Instead, the story emphasizes how God creates order from a watery chaos.”16

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep [tehom], while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Gen 1:1–3)

But the book is also a more general philosophical reflection on divine power, first principles, and, ultimately, groundlessness. Given the character of this study, then, I want to focus on the role the Deep plays for Keller in her wider theology, how it affects her understanding of God’s power and creativity, and the phenomenon she calls “tehomophobia”: the fear and hatred of the chaos, especially of the salty, watery chaos identified with women and unruly others. Underlying this discussion is my suspicion that a theology in which God does not create out of nothing en archè, whose creative nature is itself therefore not “archic” but “anarchic,” who does not create from a first principle in an orderly, controlled way, can help us embrace the unruly, anarchic nature of religious difference, too.

Tehomophobia

The question of creation is, for Keller, fundamentally one of control. The Genesis text implies something uncreated, preoriginal (“tehom”), from which

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16 Coogan et al., The New Oxford Annotated Bible, p. 11.
the Creator fashioned heaven and earth. As Christian theology developed, however, this preexisting Deep appeared to represent a “constraint upon God’s power,” at odds with “the growing Christian imaginary of mastery.” The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is thus, for Keller, a function of the desire for a God who shares power with no-one: a virile God in complete control.\(^\text{17}\)

Keller finds in the biblical canon both “tehomophilic” and “tehomophobic” strands: valuations of the Deep both as creative potentiality (notably Psalm 104 and Job) and as a haunting evil.\(^\text{18}\) Keller argues it was tehomophobia in particular, marked by a “fear of death and femininity,” that became the fuel for the *ex nihilo* doctrine in early Christian theology, making the doctrine a bulwark against a wide range of threats to be brought under control:

> the creation doctrine guards God’s unity against gnostic complexity; unconditional omnipotence against constraining conditions; masculine symbolic privilege against the affective, sensual and unruly femininity; the prestige of the disembodied Father against all maternalized chaos; a Creator who “begets” against any who procreate; the monosexual celibate elite against same-sex temptation; the closure of canon against uncontrolled multiplication; the ascendancy of the imperial narrative of a single Logos against the confusion of competing narratives.\(^\text{19}\)

In modernity, Keller finds a most prominent case of tehomophobia with Karl Barth. In Barth’s interpretation, creation is not from nothing either, but *against* the Chaos or materialized nothingness. This nothingness represents not just the salty waters of indeterminacy but evil and sin itself. In Keller’s estimation, “[i]f the early fathers repress the dark waters, . . . Barth’s opus performs their demonization.”\(^\text{20}\) Here the stakes of a *creatio ex profundis* become clear: How much space are we willing to allow for what we do not control?

Barth’s account of creation against the “malignant and perverse” *Nichtige* is directed against the possessive, self-certain subjectivity of modernity.\(^\text{21}\) However, Keller argues Barth’s critique of modern subjectivity reinscribes too much of that same subjectivity, simply projecting it onto God. “Thus the dogma of creation as a relationship of ‘grace,’ i.e. unilateral dependency, rests upon the identification of God as absolute Owner and Origin. . . . Against the certainty claims of human rationality, Barth pits—absolute


\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 28.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 64.


IV.2. RESOURCES

The consequences of Barth’s preference for order over disorder become most overtly problematic in his opinions about women protesting abuse (he thinks they should not). Barth’s tehophoblic creation story, while not ex nihilo, thus remains predicated on sovereignty, domination and separation. At the same time, Barth’s account offers necessary footholds for a tehomic theology: It wrestles with the question of tehom as a primordial reality “independent of God,” and Keller grants that Barth’s estimation that “there is real peril in the deep” is, while incomplete, not incorrect.

Be it in the form of repression or of demonization, then, Keller argues the fear and hatred of uncontrollable, feminine, chaotic tehom runs through theology and western civilization more broadly, which prefers unjust order to disorder, and whiteness to darkness, with all of the racist connotations. The question is, then, if a more “tehomic” theology can remedy some of these ills. But such a theology cannot simply be an exoticizing naive idealization of Chaos as innately good. That would simply be another way of reducing tehom to something manageable. Rather, a tehomic theology must embrace chaotic potentiality in all its ambiguity.

Ex Profundis

One element Keller draws on for her tehomic theology is Edward Said’s distinction between origin and beginning. While “origin centrally dominates what derives from it, the beginning . . . encourages nonlinear development.” An origin determines the flow of things that stem from it, whereas a beginning is merely the first step, leaving the further development open. Reading Genesis as an origin, as the ex nihilo doctrine appears to do, thus secures “God’s unfettered sovereignty.”

Beginning, contrarily, is neither sovereign nor absolute. According to Said, it is the production of difference and the interplay between the new and the customary. Beginning thus always presupposes something that was already there, “a tangled complexity of relations.” This is not so different

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 89.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 96.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 85–86.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., pp. 6, 200–212.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 85.  
\textsuperscript{28} Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, p. 159. For Said, to be sure, origin is divine and theological, while beginning is secular and human. A tehomic theology would need to question this: On the one hand, is a theological “beginning” possible? But on the other hand, it would also question if secularity is really such a solid guarantee against ex nihilo thinking. For modern understandings of creativity are no less predicated on origin, original thinking, and the author as \textit{Urheber}, “a creator a se, unconstrained by creaturely interdependencies.” Ibid., p. 160.  
from tehom, a “matrix of possibilities,” if we understand it as “not before but of beginning.”

Beginning from such a matrix of possibilities means actualizing some possibilities. Beginning is not stable and given, like origin—things may well have turned out differently, meaning beginning is ceaselessly reexamined. It therefore includes loss, the loss of “missed possibilities,” of potentialities not actualized. “The cries of loss—de profundis—disrupt the confidence of total origin in a secure end.” Importantly for this study, Keller relates this to the creation of Christianity as an own tradition, which happened through the defeat and loss of its own Jewishness. “So in the creatio ex profundis Christianity not only confesses this guilt; it mourns the lost Jews and its own lost Jewishness.”

So Keller proposes to read Genesis 1 as “a beginning-in-process, an unoriginated and endless process of becoming: genesis.” Such an understanding of divine creative activity “provides an affirmative possibility: the chance for a creativity that does not confuse itself with control, for an order that does not effect homogeneity, for a depth that is not identifiable with subjectivity.” In this becoming, God is also in the process of becoming differentiated, Elohim as plurality, complexity or “pluri-singularity.” There is no original one, no absolute original unity, “behind” the plurality, multiplicity, and difference of the world we inhabit.

From this tehomic matrix of possibilities a plurisingular Divine not so much causes as calls forth, evokes, a differential creativity. “Let the earth put forth vegetation” (Gen 1:24)—“[t]he earth is agent of Elohim’s creation,” Keller notes. God does not create through masterful acts, but through cooperation, indeed, the process of creation seems to be more about emergent “complex self-organization.” Creation, in this key, is not from nothing but from and through everything preceding.

“As complexity emerges at the edge of chaos, so the spirit of Elohim vibrates upon the face of the waters.” It is not so much tehom itself as its face, the edge of ambiguity, in the interplay of organization and chaos, where life and creativity emerge. “The ethics of becoming must articulate itself in that borderland, where the flowing potentiality of each actuality,
each creature, realizes itself in limitation.”

This, in turn, can be related to Whitehead’s “much earlier notion of becoming,” which also presupposes “no subject, no consciousness, no transcendental presence; the novel entity synthesizes the effects of the past—but only in the form of ‘contrasts,’ for whose operation difference remains irreducible.” In Whitehead’s process metaphysics, things do not exist so much as are always becoming, not constant through time but always in process. “Whitehead repudiates ontological simplicity in favor of a differential pluralism of becoming.” The Deep thus stands not merely for the specific salty waters of biblical mythological beginnings, but for the uncontrolled chaos and depths out of which new creation is constantly arising.

On Depth

In poststructuralist circles, “depth” is often associated with a stabilizing kind of interiority or underlying, defining essence, “an origin of transcence, or the inner life of a masterful subject.” Said, Homi Bhabha, Deleuze and Derrida have all placed a depth dimension under suspicion as stabilizing the surface play in which meaning begins. “As depth is to surface, so origin is to beginning,” Keller summarizes. However, she wonders whether such a surface espousal is not itself a tehomophobic gesture, a means to create a clean field not threatened by unruly monsters.

Keller therefore takes care to distinguish tehomic depth, as unruly chaos, from depth as an underlying essence or unity of origin, looking for what she calls “poststructuralist depth.” This non-essentialist, chaotic depth does not “sink along a vertical axis, as a single dimension; it would no longer be containable within an interiority, a subjectivity; it would not function as the property of a soul, a mind, or a work. It would no longer serve to homogenize, to unify, the clutter of its surface.”

The Deep is thus neither an evil abyss, nor an idealized original harmony, nor indeed an underlying essence, but rather a space of ambiguity and potential. Tehomophilia is thus not an idealization of chaos: “I read the tehom not as the evil, but as the active potentiality for both good and evil. So the capacity to resist any order, even a divine order, belongs to its indeterminacy.” Keller identifies it with two names of indeterminacy we have seen in the previous chapter: khôra and diﬀérence.

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40 Ibid., p. 7.
41 Ibid., p. 164.
42 Ibid., p. 164.
43 Ibid., p. 163.
44 Ibid., p. 162.
46 Ibid., p. xviii.
47 Ibid., p. 91.
48 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
Similarly to Derridean *différence*, “tehom precedes the ontological differ-
ence of a Creator from a creation.” The “dark difference of tehom within
‘the beginning’ disrupts the origin just by being *always already there*.” Like
*différence*, tehom is thus not a first cause or original principle, but rather the
interminable frustration of any search for, or establishment of, a first cause
or governing principle. “Spurred on by the more recent grammatology of
Derrida’s beginnings, we need no longer derive these swarming, fluttering,
bifurcating multiples from the undifferentiated Origin of a simple Creator.
Difference marks an originative and *originated* beginning. . . . In other words
the attempt to discover the true origin is doomed.” A bottomless endless
deferral “opens abysmally at the beginning.”

Tehom’s proximity to khôra is perhaps even greater. Keller cites Der-
ridda’s descriptions of khôra as the “the opening of a place ‘in’ which every-
thing would . . . come to take place,” as a spacing or placeness without site
or location itself. Keller notes also khôra’s “quasi-femininity, like that of the
womb-watery tehom,” *quasi* of course because it cannot simply be identified
with any essential *femininity*, instead khôra “wash[es] out its boundaries.” As “abyssal chasm” the “formless matter of form,” as “receptacle, mother,
nurse, imprint-bearer of the creation: matrix indeed,” it is almost exactly
tehom, if a bit colder, a bit less alive, a bit more desert-like.

Between these points of reference, a notion of a Deep emerges that is
neither an original presence, nor a unifying essence, neither verticity nor
interiority, but a “layered complexity, a multidimensionality of becoming,
in which differences are neither kept separate . . . nor fused . . . but held
in contrast.” The Deep is not so much an origin as a beginning, always
already ‘complex, and as such relative/relational.” Poststructuralist, heter-
egeneous depth can thus be read as “a liberation of the surfaces from a
*homogenizing* depth—from the foundationalism that grounds the orthodox-
ies of origin.”

**Divine Chaos**

A certain ambiguity remains between the Deep and God. Tehom is not in-
dependent of God, but also not God, and not created by God either. It is
the potentiality for both good and evil, but is neither strictly. While main-
taining an apophasic vigilance prohibiting too much direct speech about

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50 Ibid., p. 10.
51 Ibid., p. 10.
52 Derrida, *On the Name*, 104; (see also below, pp. 235ff.)
54 Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 104.
56 Ibid., p. 164.
57 Ibid., p. 169.
IV.2. Resources

God (see below), Keller names the relation *panentheism*: Not that all *is* the Divine, but that the Divine is *in* all and all is in the Divine. The “en” (“in”) of panentheism does not “designate some clearly lineated space of intersecting substances, let alone of mutual containment.” It “designates an active indeterminacy, a commingling of unpredictable, and yet recapitulatory, self-organizing relations. The ‘en’ asserts the difference of divine and cosmic, but at the same time makes it impossible to draw the line.”

Tehom is thus “neither God nor not-God but the depth of ‘God’.”

The depth of God, tehom, in whom the universe unfolds, gives birth to “God,” “Elohim, Sophia, Logos, Christ,” as the divinity who unfolds in the universe. Creation thus becomes incarnation, echoing “the trinitarian intuition of complex relationality *immanent* to an impersonal Godhead and personalized in the the *oiikononia* of the creation.” The relation between tehom and Sophia/Logos, finally, can be named Spirit, connecting “our depths to our differences.”

**Tehomic Hermeneutics**

A tehomic theology also includes some notes for hermeneutics, of crucial importance to this study. For text, too, present a multiplicity of potentialities and indeterminacies, both “within” and “between” texts as they intertextually refer to and rely on one another. Tehomic hermeneutics would embrace these indeterminate gaps and cracks, viewing them not as lack but as possibility. “[B]etween the cracks” of (inter)text, there is a “potentiality burbling” which may “suggest already a tehomic Deep.”

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58Ibid., p. 219.
59Ibid., p. 227.
60Ibid., p. 219.
61Ibid., p. 219.
62Ibid., p. 238. With tehom as its first person, the Trinity can thus be read, Keller suggests, as precisely this kind of multiplicious “enfolding” of God and creation, a “trinity of folds, plis, indicating a relationality of intertwining rather than cutting edges.” For the first person, traditionally the Father, Keller thus uses “Depth” or “Womb” to name the way the universe is “folded together” in God. The second person, traditionally the Logos or Word of God, through whom all things are made (John 1:3) and who incarnates in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14), she names “Difference” or “Word” as the “unfolding” or “explication” of creation, or its “realization,” which is also the way God appears to us as different from ourselves, as capable of being encountered. The third person of the Trinity, finally, names the way what is different can be brought together without obliterating that difference into a relation that can be called “very good” (Gen 1:31). Traditionally named Spirit, Keller names this capacity “Relationality” or, closer to the tradition, “Wind.” The Trinity can thus be read as three dimensions of divine proximity: the way all the universe is “in God,” the way God can be encountered, and the way God is in each loving relationship. Ibid., pp. 231–235.

This Trinitarian reading, which Keller does not return to in later works, serves to supplement the idea that Godself is always already difference and relation: there is no nonrelation or absolute unity or hyperessence hiding “behind” the multiplicity of creation.
63Ibid., p. 118.
does not mean deducing a given and fixed meaning, but inversely, meaning is also not made by the reader from nothing. Like creation, reading is co-production: “It will make meaning through a cooperative interaction in history—meaning not from nothing but from everything preceding. That meaning lives only in the relationships constituting the present signifying process.”

To explicate this, Keller draws on historian of religion Daniel Boyarin, for whom the biblical text is always intertext, full of “cumulative tensions and transformations.” The text is not a unity; indeed, it lives and breathes by its openings, tensions and gaps. As Keller paraphrases Boyarin, the “intertextual pressure of conflictual memories has fissured the already sedimented surface of the text. The intertext is the gap” calling for interpretation, not merely explication. Where Boyarin primarily sees the gaps as just that, gaps, nihil o, Keller notes they they are better read as spaces of potentiality. The “gaps” that make meaning possible are alive with indeterminate possibility: tehom. “Do we make meaning—from nothing? . . . God, it seems, has left interpretive gaps in the universe itself, and therefore also in the Torah. The world and the text await interpretation.”

A “tehomic hermeneutic” would thus be wary of the drive to know and appropriate, instead insisting upon “hermeneutics as always first of all interpretation and only secondarily and tenuously knowledge.” Rather than finding out the way it “is,” a tehomic hermeneut presum es an “endless and affecting play of perspectives,” which neither relies on a foundational truth to be uncovered, nor is brought to a halt by a final understanding or reification. It “pursues understanding as a creative negotiation with the past, not as novelty ex nihilo.”

Fin

So here we have something approaching what we are looking for: groundlessness thought as a central element of a theology. This groundlessness does not imply a free-floating nonfoundationalism, however, nor a relativism. Keller considers this emerging tehomic theology an “impure alternative,” a “third way, neither nihilism nor ex nihilism,” facing off both absolute relativism

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64 Keller, Face of the Deep, p. 119.
67 Keller notes Boyarin’s “gesture of gap-filling will at any rate hardly satisfy feminists of any tradition.” Ibid., p. 118.
68 Ibid., p. 119.
69 Ibid., p. 104.
70 Ibid., p. 105.
71 Ibid., p. 105.
72 Ibid., p. 106.
73 Ibid., p. 10.
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and absolute truth.

In place of a “tehomophobic” fear of the unsettling indeterminacy of religious difference, Keller offers a theology (or theopoetics) that embraces that very washing out of boundaries as, in some way, divine. Keller’s work is thus particularly helpful for embracing the “anarchy” of religious difference because, here, Godself is not “archic.” No absolute beginning or first principle founds creation as a defining origin: \( \text{En arch`e is already in process}. \)

Indeed “tehom” and “anarchy” here might mean almost the same thing: An uncontrollable “space” that appears to precede what it differentiates, without grounding it in an origin, calling into question the self-sufficiency of a divine \textit{ex nihilo} by its mere unsettling being-there, which much of theology seeks to inoculate itself against.

Tehomic theology instead sees this Deep as the Depth of God, as a space of potentiality. There is an \textit{unruliness} to religious difference in part because God is not an omnipotent \textit{ruler}. In the interreligious, we may strive for common ground, but \textit{etertz tohu vabohu}: The common ground is groundless.

In this light, the desire of theologies of religions to bring religious difference under control may appear as a factor of their tehomophobic assumption that God has everything under control. This also lends further credentials to the warnings of comparative theologians and others that theology of religions must not be “a priori.” For in a tehomic theology, \textit{nothing} is a priori: The beginning does not define the outcome. Typical models for assessing religious difference are rather static, but in a tehomic theology of becoming, \textit{everything} is still happening—not even God knows what is going on or has a “God’s-eye-view.”

In Keller’s interpretation, God is not an omnipotent ruler but instead acts as a creative force luring chaotic potentialities into actualization. Concomitantly, the need to have religious difference under control comes to appear superfluous: The relational chaos, as the “inter” of the interreligious, can be the Deep from which radically new possibilities continuously emerge. Not to be feared, but to be embraced in all its ambiguity. I will return to this idea of a tehomic “inter” in Chapter V.

IV.2.2 Apophasis or Negative Theology

In her most recent monograph, \textit{Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement}, Catherine Keller turns to the ancient Christian mystical discipline of negative theology. Apophasis, from the Greek for “saying no,” classically refers to speaking about God not by affirmative, but

\footnote{In Caputo’s words, Keller’s tehomic reading means the “beginning had always already begun, before the first verse of Genesis began. . . . The pure beginning, an absolute ‘origin,’ is an ever-receding horizon; the \textit{arche} is inevitably haunted by an irreducible \textit{an-arche}.”\textit{Caputo, The Weakness of God}, p. 58}

\footnote{Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, p. 184.}
by negative statements—for anything affirmative would reify, and thereby fall short of, divine ineffability. Keller especially focuses on the work of the fifteenth-century Nicholas of Cusa, seeking to connect apophatic theology to poststructuralist and relational theologies.

I will discuss a number of aspects of Keller’s interpretation of apophasis. After a more fundamental discussion of apophasis as an embrace of negation and affirmation, I will discuss Keller’s folding-together of apophasis with deconstruction, with relational theologies, and with the logic of social movements. It will hopefully become clear that apophasis, in Keller’s reading, offers a version of what Caputo had called “negative propheticism”: a way to think together negation or “unknowing” with affirmation or socio-political activism. I will reserve a more explicit discussion of the implications of this for the political and the interreligious for my more dedicated discussions of those themes, below.

**Apophasis: Negation and Affirmation**

According to historian of religion Michael Sells, apophasis “is a discourse in which any single proposition is acknowledged as falsifying, as reifying. It is a discourse of double propositions, in which meaning is generated through the tension between the saying and the unsaying.”

Keller had already discussed apophasis in *Face of the Deep*. There, she had written:

> If then Genesis 1 darkly radiates a *chaotic episteme*, a theology of becoming may depend upon the apophatic gesture for any credibility of affirmation. For it would articulate a faith with which to face uncertainty, not a knowledge with which to eliminate it.

The apophasic gesture, casting doubt on the certainty of any affirmation, is thus not deployed to undermine those affirmations but paradoxically to make possible their credibility in the face of ultimate groundlessness. Affirmation is only credible if it is in some way marked by its own unsaying, “spooked,” in Caputo’s vocabulary, by an insistent perhaps. Only on the condition of such an unsaying can anything be said at all. Apophasis thus comes to play a central role in any faith conditioned by groundlessness—the darkness of our nonknowingness is paradoxically identified not with sin or evil, but with Godself.

Keller’s main point of reference in her discussion of apophasis is Nicholas of Cusa, a fifteenth-century theologian and bishop from the German town of Bernkastel-Kues (hence “Cusa”). Cusa emphasizes the need for a “learned

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known” (docta ignorantia) in doing theology: In order to approach divine truth, we must “unsay” or let go of what we thought we knew about God. “[A]ny language might name [divinity], but only in the recognition that all this language is ‘falling away,’ being unsaid: none of it will ever mirror such an entity, represent it by an image or a concept. Nor, however, is the truth captured by the not.”

According to Cusa, if we fail to make this move of “unsaying,” we run the risk in believing not in God, but in our own idea of God—“God would not be worshiped as the infinite God but as creature, and such worship is idolatry, for it gives to an image that which belongs only to truth itself.” However, negation taken by itself does not suffice to approach the Divine, either. It is precisely in the contradiction between each pair—that God is both light and dark, creator and created—that God opens up. Cusa thus seeks “their mutual enfolding in the coincidentia oppositorum,” the coinciding of opposites.

Divine infinity, Cusa maintains, can only be approached through such a coinciding as the divine all-in-all resists being grasped by reason, which is only capable of thinking the world in substances and opposites. The negation of reason is thus required to approach the Divine. God’s oneness is not subject to the principle of contradiction but precedes or exceeds it. The Divine “is not a substance which is not all things and to which something is opposed, and is not a truth which is not all things without opposition.” In his later De Visione Dei, Cusa describes the realization of this paradox as the defeat of a personified reason guarding the wall to paradise. God “cannot be seen elsewhere than where impossibility appears and stands in the way.” This wall of contradiction surrounds the divine dwelling place, and cannot be passed unless a “most lofty rational spirit” is “vanquished.” On the other side, at the collapse of this aporetic situation, the Divine can be approached, in Keller’s words, “[t]he impasse of the impossible ... turns into passage itself.”

Negative theology is thus “the speech that unspeaks itself.” As opposites coincide, the apophatic “unsaying negates the substantialized signifier, but not that which dis/closes itself before or after congealing into a sub-

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78 Keller, Cloud of the Impossible, p. 73. As it is not the purpose of this study to evaluate Keller’s reading of Cusa, I will simply follow Keller’s interpretation.
79 Ibid., p. 93.
80 Ibid., p. 93.
82 Ibid., p. 697.
83 Ibid., p. 697.
85 Ibid., p. 3.
The unsaying is of the reification or limitation words inevitably entail; what is not negated is the elusive underlying affirmation those words attempt to name. Not in the sense that words might have an essential meaning which would thus be preserved, but as the attempt to prevent an “icon” from hardening into “idol.”

In Keller’s wording, it is thus “in subverting (and so anachronistically queering) our most convenient binary oppositions, those dualisms that structure our certainties, that divinity opens.” The experience of the Divine in the *coincidentia oppositorum* is thus one of the impossible becoming possible, even actual. As this becoming-possible, God can be described under the “experimental name” of *posse ipsum*: possibility itself, “the ultimate condition of the possibility—of any activity.”

Keller notes Cusa hereby in a way anticipates the Derridean experience of “the impossible,” but the connection of negative theology, which arguably relies on a neoplatonic metaphysic, to poststructuralist indeterminacy is far from self-evident. Keller is aware of Derrida’s rejection of this comparison (see also above, pp. 124ff.) and admits Cusa did not write with poststructuralist indeterminacy in mind, but wonders whether the two may not widen one another. “So if we let Derrida supplement Cusa’s necessary impossibility with the event of the indeterminate, Cusa may simultaneously deepen Derrida’s impossibility with its own apophatic potentiality.”

Read through such a poststructuralist supplementation, the apophatic gesture does not remain merely an epistemological question of *unknowing* but is radicalized. The need for a discourse that unsays itself is not only conditioned by epistemic limitations of (human) knowledge and language attempting to grasp an infinite Divine, but also slips over into the (quasi-*)ontological*, switching registers from uncertainty to *indeterminacy*. The Divine itself is not yet fixed. “[T]he apophatic is more readable as the

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87 Ibid., p. 5.
90 Ibid., p. 100. Keller emphasizes reading the apophatic as (proto)-deconstructive is not about “an identification or a competition so much as a strategic entanglement” (ibid., p. 71). Cusa anticipates structuralist and poststructuralist insights into the primacy of difference over identity, as difference between things is what prompts us to impose different names on them. “[In other words it is the play of difference that constructs meanings in language.” Keller, *Face of the Deep*, p. 205.

Keller further disagrees with Caputo’s interpretation of Derrida’s disavowal of negative theology (see above, pp. 124ff.), arguing that Derrida “mistranslates” negative theology’s move beyond essence or *hyperousia* as *hyperessence*, whereby “language used to move beyond being is reduced to an inflation of being.” In response to Derrida’s later intimation that he “trust(s) no texts that is not in some way contaminated with negative theology” (Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 69), Keller reciprocates that neither does she “trust any theology that is not in some way contaminated with deconstruction.” Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 45.
indeterminate than as the uncertain, as becoming, rather than enigma.”

**Apophasis and Relationality**

The main question driving Keller’s *Cloud of the Impossible* is whether such apophasis can be thought together with the relational commitment of contextual theologies, or, in Keller’s poetic language, “how the cloud surrounding what we say about ‘God’ here enfolds the entire crowd of our relations.”

This is not a self-evident alliance. On the one hand, negative theology is not necessarily progressive: It can indeed serve to strengthen hierarchies through mystification. On the other hand, relational theologies—process, feminist, ecological—are profoundly affirmative, perhaps offering an “all too knowable God.”

So Keller seeks to fold these two together into an “apophatic entanglement,” an apophasis of relationality, in which it is the indeterminate, dynamic relationality of the Divine in all creation that precipitates its ultimate unknowability:

> The manifold of social movements, the multiplicity of religious or spiritual identifications, the queering of identities, the tangled planetarity of human and nonhuman bodies: these in their unsettling togetherness will exceed our capacities ever altogether to know or manage them. In their unspeakable excesses they press for new possibilities of flourishing.

Since God and the universe enfold and unfold into each other, a radical, dynamic, processual interrelatedness of all creatures becomes recognizable. It is this interrelatedness that entails no single thing—including the Divine—can be known definitely, separately from the others. Keller thus presents an apophatic theology that does not hinge on God’s radical transcendence over the world, but on God’s radical immanence in the world, on a divine processual differentiation and gathering that can impossibly be known definitely because it is *in-fini*, unfinished.

Leaping through the centuries, Keller finds a relational ethics with affinity for apophatic unknowing in Judith Butler’s more recent work, where she finds expressed “the relation between unknowing and relationality itself.” Butler’s relational ethics of the human, on which Keller here focuses, emerge against the backdrop of the former’s poststructuralist gender deconstruction. I will not discuss this at length here, but it can be summarized

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91Ibid., p. 10.
92Ibid., p. 5.
93Ibid., p. 6.
94Ibid., p. 7.
95Ibid., p. 5.
as arguing that (gender) identity is never simply given, but performed: It is constituted in its own repetition. Underlying such performance is not a supposedly stable or given biological “sex,” as—drawing on Hegel—the distinction between “gender” and “sex,” between the “cultural” and “natural” aspects of identity, is itself constituted in discourse. Sex is always already gender, and comes to appear “natural” only in its regulated repetition. Repetition, however, inevitably also resignifies, opening it up to subversion. Paradoxically, the very phenomenon that gives identity its apparent stability also undermines that stability.98

Or, in Keller’s words, “[r]epetition grants human identity adequate stability and, at the same time, permits the destabilization of any identity.”99

Such destabilization or subversion is itself already an “undoing,” in a sense. However, it is also the social construction of identity that “undoes” the self-sufficiency of the I:

Or does it turn out that the “I” who ought to be bearing its gender is undone by being a gender, that gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality I do not fully author?100

Ethics, then, may take its starting point from such undoing. Keller cites from Butler a formulation that may well be all I am trying to say:101

It may be that what is “right” and what is “good” consist in staying open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require, to know unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and to recognize the sign of life—and its prospects.102

Poststructural apophasis: The foundation for human solidarity and action is not found in the right beliefs or in a solid basis of fact, but rather in an openness to the unsaying, the necessary vagueness and processuality of our most fundamental categories (though we do “require” such categories). No I is simple, but always already wrought with complexity, multiplicity, and difference.

But the agent-I is already an intra-active we. Already I am an ensemble, tuned to the pluralities, the assemblies, the social systems, that amplify or muffle my action. If the apophasic infinite

99 Keller, Cloud of the Impossible, p. 222.
102 Butler, Undoing Gender, p. 227.
If neither an “I” nor an identity is simply given, this also holds for the “human,” which for Butler becomes a central question, and a further apophatic moment in her relational ethics: “This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.” With Whitehead, Keller argues it is precisely because the “self” is relationally constituted and constructed that it is undone and always confronted with a profound unknowing towards itself and the collectivities it is part of. “Whitehead was arguing ontologically that our being—and by the same logic God’s—is never seamless unity, our doing never purely active. Never immune to you, or to the loss of you.” We “emerge complicated by a past that we cannot fully know, implicated in its distortions, its pathologies intimate and collective.”

Anything that might be named universal—such as the human, for Butler, or the divine complicatio, for Keller—must thus always again be able to be unsaid for the sake of the universal, lest it fall prey to what Whitehead calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, producing “the illusions of enduring substances self-consciously presiding over their properties.” Or, paraphrasing Cusa, we might warn against giving to a particular formulation what belongs only to the universal itself.

The Aporetics of Pluralism

In an earlier piece, Keller had connected this need to unsay any too definite affirmation to “the aporetics of pluralism”: the way social movements, too, may find they need to both unsay their own potentially excluding essentialisms and be willing to embrace apparent contradictions between different enunciations. This takes place “in the interest of an elusive affirmation”: What feminism—the movement Keller is most committed to—ultimately seeks cannot be named definitively.

This particular reflection is occasioned by a dissatisfaction with “pluralism” to grapple with the difficulties of intersecting differences within the feminist movement. Keller does not specifically define what she means by pluralism here, but it appears to be broadly similar to how I have been using this term. Pluralism, in Keller’s view, “is an improvement over relativism,

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103 Keller, Cloud of the Impossible, p. 219.
106 Keller, Cloud of the Impossible, p. 229.
107 Ibid., p. 231.
but may fail to capture the radicality of the relations among and between
the plurality of ones. It misses the mess and the depth of our sociality."  

According to Keller, apophasis is better suited to help us think theologically about the way feminist theology has developed over the decades. For this movement has gone through remarkably similar movements of saying and unsaying: it (kataphatically) brought women in religion to speech, who often then had to (apophatically) become silent in turn to hear the critiques of those women whose liberation had not yet been considered. Above, for instance, we saw how a liberal white feminism had to be “unsaid” in order to make space for non-Christian women and women of color (see p. 50). Keller argues these contradictions often appear as stalemates or aporias, but if we see them as folds in an apophatic movement, their “elusive affirmation” can come into view. Keller thus considers

four possible folds, not to be confused with stages, of feminist theology: the gender fold, the color-fold, the queer fold, and the manifold. Each involves a certain undoing of gender, indeed a negation of “woman,” in the interest of an elusive affirmation. These will show themselves as movements of the apophasis of gender. . . . The fourfold apophasis of gender itself only becomes theological as an act of faith, a trust that the contradictions that obstruct us—the most pressing, the most difficult of our contradictions, shot through as they are with intimate discomforts and political energies—can yield to radiant possibility. The very wall which obstructs proves in the Cusan vision to be woven of the famous “coincidence of contradictories,” the coincidentia oppositorum.  

Keller traces the first three “folds” through the history of feminist theology: Each fold is a historical “unsaying,” of “woman” as naturally subservient (“gender fold”), then of “woman” as considered exemplarily through white, middle class women (“color fold,” introducing the idea that oppression is “multifaceted”), and then the third, the “queer fold,” which undoes the idea that women are essentially defined through heterosexuality. Each of these folds is not simply a rejection of previous feminisms, but a negation in the interest of what those very previous feminisms sought to affirm. In the midst of these movements of unsaying, a “poststructuralist relationalism”  

110 Ibid., pp. 909–910.
111 Ibid., p. 919.
112 Ibid., p. 920. Keller does not explicitly name class as a fold or axis of oppression, apparently considering it implied in the color fold. Perhaps this is exemplary for the need to unsay the North American character of this analysis, if it is to be made at home also in Europe and elsewhere.
113 Ibid., p. 920.
114 Ibid., p. 924.
IV.2. RESOURCES

comes into view:

A new kind of solidarity becomes possible: “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you,’ by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you.”\textsuperscript{115} A feminist apophasis ... begins to come into its own: the break up of language into a knowing ignorance, and unknowing that opens into a beyond that I cannot ever fully construct, author, or control.\textsuperscript{116}

The fourth “fold,” then, is “not analogous to the prior three” but a more fundamental orientation towards this kind of relationality. Keller calls this the manifold or multiplicity. The manifold refers to a kind of community constituted not by a shared identity but by relationality in difference, making it more than a simple collection of unrelated members. Mere difference is moved into relationship. The manifold is here “a place holder for the open sequence of intersecting, entangling and asymmetrical social contexts (gendersexraceethnicityclassspecies ... ).”\textsuperscript{117}

I am suggesting that the apophasis of gender—not its cancellation, not even its Aufhebung—opens feminism itself to its own multiple unfoldings. Only if the negation is an activity of self-overcoming, an avowal of one’s own irreducible edge of uncertainty, do the many become the manifold.\textsuperscript{118}

The final name or program of such a feminism thus remains open, as any attempt to affirm its identity necessary closes something else down. The point is then not to find a kind of program or identity that would name every possible particular context, that would subsume them all in a successful universal, but rather, to be attentive and open to the inevitable challenge of each formulation. “We always leave some out, and they, or we, negated, roar self-affirmingly back, briefly silencing us/them again. And what about ageism? The differently abled? Religious difference? Animals? Or pardon, nonhuman animals? The earth itself?”\textsuperscript{119} Cusa’s docta ignorantia thus gains an activist flavor; it becomes a “critical non-knowingness,”\textsuperscript{120} a term Keller takes from Trinh Min Ha, connoting a refusal to accept any formulation of political (or ecclesial) community as final.

The kind of inclusivity that this manifold can thus claim is one that, while alive with a universal aspiration, accepts that it never quite gets off

\textsuperscript{116}Keller, “The Apophasis of Gender,” p. 925.
\textsuperscript{117}Catherine Keller. “‘And Truth—So Manifold!’—Transfeminist Entanglements.” In: \textit{Feminist Theology} 22.1 (2013), pp. 77–87, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{118}Keller, “The Apophasis of Gender,” p. 927.
\textsuperscript{119}Keller, “‘And Truth—So Manifold!’—Transfeminist Entanglements,” p. 82.
\textsuperscript{120}Keller, “The Apophasis of Gender,” p. 927.
the ground enough to truly be universal. As it is with God, so it is with ethics, community and, ultimately, politics (more on that below): Affirmation, spiritual ascent, or solidarity ultimately depend on negation and non-knowing. The insufficiency of any name for God, or the universal, or the human, comes forth from their unfinishedness, from their entanglement in an unknowable and unstoppable multiplicity of difference and relations.

Fin

In Catherine Keller’s readings of negative theology, in conversation with poststructural indeterminacy, the oft-heard “no-one has a God’s eye view” takes on a central role. Apophasis radicalizes such epistemic humility into a process of unknowing and unsaying of even the core elements of our theologies, without thereby abandoning the affirmations they sought to name. For unsaying here specifically means a move that is neither simply negation nor Aufhebung but retains the affirmation of what was named while negating its reifications and exclusion. Such apophatic moves become a vital part of any approach to God and to solidarity. Moved by more profound concerns than mere epistemological uncertainty, Keller locates the grounds for apophasis in a fundamental indeterminacy, precipitated not by divine hypertranscendence but instead by divine immanence or nonseparability from the universe in all its relationality and difference. The Divine is thus not only infinite, but itself unfinished.

With all this, I do not so much intend to say that Keller’s highly specific panentheist processual relational metaphysic is a desirable gathering place for all religions. Instead, I mean to show how Keller roots apophasis into the heart of an otherwise affirmative theology. Above, I wrote that the anarchic character of religious difference unsettles or de-centers fixed categories and requires a re-thinking of what constitutes Christianity, the religious other and “religion” itself. With Keller, we might say that such requirements of unsaying are not so alien to the Christian tradition. Apophasis does not render the unsettling unsaying precipitated by the interreligious harmless, nor does it assign it a delimited location; instead, it is brought into view as a necessary move in the coming-to-know of God, the world, and their entanglement.

A theopoetics of religious difference based on negative theology would thus not so much purport to know what is going on in another’s tradition, as give a central place to the realization that we don’t really know what is going on. The foundation for interreligious understanding, solidarity and action may thus not be best found in shared beliefs or in a solid basis of fact, but rather in an openness to the unsaying, the necessary vagueness and processuality of our most fundamental categories.
IV.2.3 Political Theology

In a way, Keller’s work has always been politically inclined. In her more recent work, however, she formulates a more explicit “political theology.” The term “political theology” was famously coined by Carl Schmitt, who argued that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”\(^{121}\) Fundamental to Keller’s discussions is a similar sense that the theological structures the political: Politics “always has a depth-dimension.”\(^{122}\) The way we imagine or understand ourselves in relation to the Divine, implicitly or explicitly, conditions the way we imagine or understand ourselves in relation to one another as a political community. “There is nothing wrong with a strong interaction between faith and politics,” she writes. “The biblical text is saturated with what we call ‘politics.’”\(^{123}\) However, she contends this has insufficiently been taken on by radical or poststructuralist theology.\(^{124}\)

She most clearly formulates a political theology with that name in her recent *Towards a Political Theology of the Earth*.\(^{125}\) However, before discussing it, I will briefly discuss Keller’s work on apocalypse, particularly as it pertains to how apocalyptic expectation and/or deferral structures the urgency and possibility for justice and community.

**Political Apocalypticism**

The political features prominently in Keller’s book on the Revelation of John and the history of apocalyptic expectation, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*. Western political imaginaries are wrought through with an “apocalypse script,” Keller argues: a tendency to expect absolute ends and radical new beginnings.\(^{126}\) This structures the political, offering both great hope and great indifference in times of oppression, as well as a powerful totalitarian energy. For apocalyptic expectation is profoundly ambiguous. While on the one hand it represents a “totalizing threat which lurks just beneath mass consciousness,”\(^{127}\) on the other hand this threat is intimately connected to a promise, to hope: Apocalypse “rages out of the bitter heart of systemic suffering: if history itself must end to staunch the tears, to stop the time of suffering, so be it.”\(^{128}\) It is this apocalyptic ambiguity Keller seeks to trace.

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\(^{123}\)Ibid., p. vii.

\(^{124}\)Ibid., p. viii.

\(^{125}\)Ibid., pp. 174–192.

\(^{126}\)Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, p. 4.

\(^{127}\)Ibid., p. 6.

\(^{128}\)Ibid., p. 85.
throughout Christian history, on the paradoxical fold between totalizing movements of final solutions and hopeful promises of new beginnings.

In this investigation, Keller argues not for an “anti-apocalypse,” which, as the absolute end of any absolute end, is itself paradoxically apocalyptic. Instead, she proposes counter-apocalypse as the enactment of hope without, or despite, totalitarian expectations of absolute ends or new beginnings. Counter-apocalypse seeks the hope that a radically open future instills, but is wary of the closure that “straightforward apocalypse” entails.

Wherever overtly apocalyptic hope has been literalized it has been proved literally wrong; the normative hope, however, cannot be falsified. It can be named: hope for mutual respect in proximate and in political relations, for justice and mercy upon the land and within the city, for transnational, trans-species healing and renewal. This hope can only be verified, however, by being made true: spirit practiced, materialized, spun, performed.

The history of apocalypse in Western Christianity begins, early on, with a neutralization: The Revelation of John had been initially received as a profoundly anti-imperial text by a marginalized community, which quite obviously saw Rome in the “Babylon” in the text. As Christianity started cozying up to the Roman Empire, this interpretation needed to be re-worked. So, paradoxically, the Church (of Rome), now wedded to empire, came to represent the promised Millennium, with any expectation for justice strictly contained.

During the Crusades, Western Christianity then accomplishes the “conversion of apocalypse into imperial aggression.” Through the Iberian Reconquista, a line can then be drawn to the colonial project, where hope for a new age becomes desire for new lands. “[H]ope for a radical realization of the new age seems to have fueled the progress into a future in which real—European—bodies did (violently) find new space for themselves.”

This gives the interaction of colonial appropriation with gender and religious difference, where Keller’s argument is broadly similar to Kwok’s (see above, p. 57), a particular undertone of political theology: “the transmutation of paradise into an erotic place of commodification.” The object of apocalyptic hope, New Creation is read as “already created—and therefore available to ‘discovery.’”

129 Keller, Apocalypse Now and Then, pp. 12ff.
130 Ibid., p. 19.
131 Ibid., p. 308.
132 Ibid., pp. 96–97.
133 Ibid., p. 162. See also below, pp. 200ff.
134 Ibid., p. 141.
135 Ibid., p. 156.
136 Ibid., p. 159.
But apocalypse has also fueled rebellion and resistance to the status quo. Keller is particularly interested in how community is constituted and transformed in such apocalyptic movements. For “only in the mode of rebellion and epiphany does [community] become intentional and self-conscious. . . . [O]riginally grounded in an organic and place-bound past, it comes in the anti-state, the state of resistance, to orient itself to the future, . . . that coming time which has yet no topos.” Keller thus discusses a range of revolutionary communities, including the Anabaptists of Münster, the Diggers of England, and the Muskogee rebellion of North America. In each case the expectation of an apocalyptic situation translated into a radical transformation of life together, marked by a radical opposition to life under the status quo—if not always to salutary effect. Of the Anabaptists of Münster, who left a sobering impression on my own Anabaptist forebears, she thus writes that “male supremacy flares into a savagery bearing no resemblance to the hopes which had gathered the new Gemeynde.”

Apocalyptic expectation thus appears capable of creating new ways of living together by radically relativizing the present. The affirmation that another world is possible, indeed is on its way, can give communities the courage to preempt that coming already today. But the implicit totalitarianism of the apocalypse script also extends to this remaking of togetherness. Instead of radically new possibility, unfettered by preexisting structures of domination, the apocalyptic remaking of community is always in danger of falling into radically new domination, unfettered by preexisting structures that might delimit its violence. In counter-apocalypse, Keller thus seeks a break not quite so radical, one that may open up new possibilities of togetherness without effecting the violent closure of totalitarian once-and-for-all revolutions. “[T]he opening of the present as the only site of memory and hope grounds—without founding—the political work of dis/closure.”

She summarizes the arc of her analysis:

The Augustinian mainstream sublimated the Apocalypse, making its final vision apply to a strictly supernatural hell and heaven, while it transferred millennialism to a realized eschatology of the church. The radical traditions . . . took up again the Hebrew resonances of prophecy, thus anticipating a “third age” of the Spirit within history and so within real terrestrial places—not a realized but a performative eschatology.

She then traces a line, drawing on philosopher Ernst Bloch, from these explicitly religious movements to more secularized hopes, such as the French revolution. Keller argues the political theology of apocalyptic Christianity

\[137\] Ibid., p. 182.
\[138\] Ibid., p. 192.
\[139\] Ibid., p. 30.
\[140\] Ibid., p. 152.
and its secularized versions are not so different from statist absolutism. Both “derive from something outside, from a transcendent unifying center. In the New Jerusalem, the tearless citizens are not shown communing with each other. The practice of mutuality finds biblical representation in the Gospels’ ethic of the commonwealth of God . . . but not in Revelation.”

John, “like his Marxist heirs,” simply replaces one form of centralized authority with another.

Keller favors a sense of community less absolutist, and more attentive to the interdependence of its members. “Regarding community, counter-apocalypse again invokes a healing ambivalence rather than a position ‘for’ or ‘against.’” When community is too clearly demarcated, it may sabotage “the fragile possibility of the larger solidarity.” Instead of the noun, she therefore proposes community as a verb: to commune, a way of “congregating,” of “gathering together,” that “stays in process, that need not purge homogeneity and requires no idealized and stable community. For it does not posit a single end.”

Instead of a political theology founded on the certainty of an inevitable future, be it one that maintains order or seeks to replace it with a radically different order, Keller reads apocalypse as disclosure: the opening of the future. It does so not from a standpoint of a universal historical necessity, but instead from a place rooted in particularity: “To stand in some particular fragility of place and time, with one’s fragments of community and materialities of gender, and to love life: that is perhaps the only real basis of action against the end of the world.”

A Political Theology of the Earth

In a recent series of lectures, Keller formulates a “political theology of the earth,” prompted by philosopher Bruno Latour’s recent Gifford Lectures, in which he formulates an ecological “political theology of nature.” Keller’s political theology of the earth is interested in a political theology that could face the earth’s current ecological threats. She thus discusses questions of coalitions, sovereignty, and decision in the face of (ecological) emergency. Keller takes on three aspects of Schmitt’s thoughts on political theology: first, that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception;” second, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state

142 Ibid., pp. 211–215.
143 Ibid., p. 220.
144 Ibid., p. 220.
145 Ibid., p. 30.
are secularized theological concepts . . . whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver,”149 and third, though less explicitly, Schmitt’s assertion that the political begins with the distinction of friend from enemy in territorial demarcation.150

As a political theology of the “earth,” Keller argues for a kind of planetary solidarity that would de-center any such territorial friend-enemy distinction. With Deleuze and Guattari, she understands the “earth” as a deterritorializing and deterritorialized embrace or “planetary assemblage of all assemblages.”151 Schmitt had worried such a deterritorialization would make the political impossible, leaving only the economic in place, and Keller agrees it is far from unambiguous. For already we live with a sovereignty not restricted by limits or territory, that of “neoliberal capitalism,”152 denying, importantly and dangerously, also its own ecological limitations, while creating global connections and dependencies not sensitive to our wider, more ecological, interdependency.

In Cloud of the Impossible, Keller had already noted this problematic kind of entanglement in economic globalization, producing almost a parody of Keller’s relational planetary vision: “relations of pyramidal dependency from the planetary majority living precariously close to creaturely limits,” an “ego-by-ego of corporate individualism . . . a new ruse of a separability that stays ‘connected.’”153 Neither relationality nor boundlessness are thus by themselves “good or responsible. It is mindfulness of relation that plies the ethical—as opposed to the corporate mindlessness of entanglement.”154 The entanglement of global capitalism is one that comes to “atomize, separate, and all too smoothly commodify.”155 Instead, she hopes for a “cosmopolitanism beyond that of corporate modernity,” in which “a politics of apophatic entanglement may already be implicated.”156

So is Schmitt’s territorialism the only alternative to such capitalist globalization? One may be tempted to think so, but with regard to the earth, they are actually surprisingly similar, Keller notes: Both capitalism and Schmitt continue to see it as something that is only interesting as “appropriated, ‘taken.’”157 Therefore, “an earth politics must systematically interrupt the modern bifurcation of culture and nature that structures politics, liberal and illiberal, while it delivers most of us up to neoliberal economic

149 Schmitt, Political Theology, p. 36; Keller, Intercarnations, p. 176.
151 Keller, Intercarnations, p. 177.
152 Ibid., p. 180.
154 Ibid., p. 255.
155 Ibid., p. 263.
156 Ibid., p. 257.
dominance.” Instead of the deity that “blesses corporate globalism,” such a political theology of the earth would proffer God as “a name for the precarious life of all who are entangled in it.”

Ironically repeating Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction, it thus becomes crucial to create

a network of friends across the immense differences that will sustain a strong-enough assemblage. Strong enough, that is, to take on the real foe: the neoliberal economics for which “nature” appears only as resource or as enemy. Alliances across the boundaries of religions, across the fence between secular and religious, and indeed between academic disciplines do not arise out of hopelessness.

On the question of sovereignty Keller thus seeks, in a similar rhythm to her work on apocalypse, a “counter-sovereignty,” which “is not simple anti-sovereignty.” To be sure, Keller admits ecological political work can also be done while retaining a traditional understanding of divine sovereignty not so different from Schmitt’s, such as theologian Michael Northcott or indeed Pope Francis’ Laudato Si. And she admits Schmitt’s call for decision in the exception appears highly attractive, given the exceptional ecological threats we now face. But instead of such a tempting appeal to the sovereign exception, Keller recalls Whitehead’s exhortation that God not be treated as an exception, but as an exemplification.

What does it mean to think of the political as conditioned not by omnipotent sovereignty of the exception, but by interdependency and relation in process? If political sovereignty is a secularized version of divine might, as Schmitt had argued, what kind of political sovereignty becomes imaginable if divine might is considered panentheistically? Can sovereignty be re-envisioned along the lines of a divine that is “the embodiment—of the principles . . . of a creative process in which anything that exists does so as an event of interdependent becoming?”

Keller argues that indeed, such a panentheist process metaphysic might be very well suited for such a task. Divinity itself is “the most common place,” as a “deteritorializing embrace of the multiverse.”

Keller thus opposes an economic democracy of the commons to the sovereign deteritorialization of global capital. “The socially democratic
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energetics of a planetary commons draws upon a popular power for its hope—not the theopolitical sovereignty of emergency powers.”¹⁶⁶ This popular political power is not limited to the human, but “insistently redistributes itself across the other-than-human materializations of the earth.”¹⁶⁷ The political community (apophatically) resists delineation, it remains a community in process, to come—“not as the exception but as the earthbound exemplar of what is already possible. It calls, it presses. For the becoming of the unlikely future is and was and can only be coming now.”¹⁶⁸

This cannot simply be a Christian story. “If an actually theological political theology has a current alternative to teach, it will depend upon the Christian deterritorialization of Christianity.”¹⁶⁹ Political theology requires an interreligious opening if it is to face the global state of emergency, ecological and otherwise.

**Fin**

It scarcely needs pointing out that the interreligious is, in a sense, always already caught up with the political. At the same time, the political has not featured prominently in theological discussions of religious difference. Through her discussions of community, hope, and sovereignty, Keller brings to the surface both the political charge of much of theology and the theological charge of much of the political. Keller’s discussions of the ecopolitical urgency of theologies that can facilitate interreligious coalition-building, along with her warnings about (crypto)apocalyptic hopes for a final solution, are particularly important for our purposes.

A theopoetics of religious difference will thus also need to be a political theopoetics of religious difference: It will need to address the way political community constitutes itself along religious fault lines, how political power negotiations and territorial friend-foe distinctions, along with theological conceptions of sovereignty (secularized or otherwise) play into Christianity’s capacity to relate to its others, indeed, have played into Christianity’s capacity to produce those others as others. If such questions are not addressed, a theology of religious difference will remain in an important sense toothless. Calls to “understand the other” or “welcome the stranger” already presuppose a politically charged difference between those who do the understanding and welcoming and those who are on the receiving end of these practices. If this is not questioned, they may just as easily wind up on the receiving end of less charitable practices.

Further, it will be necessary to ask how our understanding of end and beginning structure this political theology of religious difference. While Kear-

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¹⁶⁶Ibid., p. 191.
¹⁶⁷Ibid., p. 187.
¹⁶⁸Ibid., p. 192.
¹⁶⁹Ibid., p. 177.
ney and Caputo draw strongly on eschatological notions, Keller’s “counter-apocalypse” might be closer to the experience of interreligious activists: We are always *in medias res*, never quite there yet, but always beginning anew, full of hope. This hope, for Keller, may fuel a sense of gathering together not predicated on a shared identity, but relationally stronger, more resolute, than Caputo’s *communauté aveugle*. I will return to this notion of inter-religious togetherness as relational gathering emerging out of the depths of difference in Chapter V.
IV.3 Keller on the Interreligious

In this section, I will discuss what Keller has written directly about religious difference. The washing out of the hardened boundaries of Christianity, and the encounter with other traditions, is a central element of Keller’s wider theology. It is “always already interreligious.”\textsuperscript{170}

For a relational theology, the multiplicity of the universe and of our own lives within it exercises profound spiritual attraction. Getting to know other religions, participating in secular movements for social justice—these count as positive theological activities, not threatening to one’s own faith but clarifying and enriching. . . . A robust and living faith does not feel threatened by dissolution in the face of multiple possibilities. But pluralism represents a steep learning curve for the monotheistic traditions.\textsuperscript{171}

I will attempt to discuss her approach to the interreligious in three relatively distinct aspects: her relational approach to the truth of Christianity, her more political discussions of Islam, and her formulations of a more comprehensive relational pluralism. In each of these, it is important to Keller that interreligious understanding is not about coming to a shared “one,” as the universe is not one to begin with: The Divine itself is always already a multiplicity, made up of innumerable relations.

IV.3.1 Truth

Similarly to Kearney and Caputo, one way Keller faces religious difference is through a nuanced understanding of what goes on in religious truth.\textsuperscript{172} She does so at somewhat greater length than either Kearney or Caputo, however, including more decidedly biblical readings. Though she alludes to this “relational truth-telling,” which “inscribes within its self-relation the tale of its own relativity,” in \textit{Apocalypse Now and Then} and warns of the imposition of Christianity as the only possible truth in \textit{Face of the Deep},\textsuperscript{173}

\begin{footnotesize}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{170} Keller, \textit{Intercarnations}, p. 45.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Keller, \textit{On the Mystery}, p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Though Keller does explicitly frame this discussion as moved by concerns of religious difference, this subsection could arguably have been included in the previous section, as much of the discussion remains one \textit{moved by and relevant to} issues of the interreligious, but not as explicitly \textit{thematising} it as the next two. Still, I have included it here, to parallel the similar discussions by Kearney and Caputo in the previous chapters.
\item \textsuperscript{173} When imposed, however, as the only possible, the original truth, it projects chaos and nothingness onto the non-Christian or sub-Christian Others. Yet those others, inside and out, whisper to us ‘dark secrets’ (Augustine) of our own complexity.” Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, p. xvii.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
she makes the argument most clearly in her 2007 *On the Mystery*. I will thus primarily draw on this work here.

In her understanding of the truth of Christianity, Keller seeks to avoid what she calls the “absolute” as well as the “dissolute”: the “garish neon light of absolute truth-claims, which wash out our vital differences,” as well as the “opaque darkness of the casual nihilism that pervades our culture—the ‘whatever’ of indifference.”\(^{174}\) Christianity is caught in this binary, but it is a “deadly mirror game,”\(^{175}\) as neither absolutism nor relativism are particularly interested in “the fecund differences of earth’s human and non-human populations,” nor indeed in the “meaningfulness of this world in its irreducible mystery.”\(^{176}\)

To be sure, Keller is not opposed to creedal formulations or summaries *per se*, “compressed codes that [tradition] can deliver to the next generation.”\(^{177}\) It becomes problematic, however, when religious truth becomes “absolutized” as a “set of metaphysical beliefs,”\(^{178}\) the assent to which determines one’s in- or exclusion in the community. “[A]n absolute truth is deemed nonrelative to anything else, absolved of all interdependence, all conditions, all vulnerability, all passion, all change.”\(^{179}\) Scripture, however, “has no such notion.”\(^{180}\)

Instead she finds in the biblical texts an understanding of truth she describes as “resolute,”\(^{181}\) a truth better understood in terms of relation and faithfulness. For “[f]aith is not settled belief but living process. It is the very edge and opening of life in process.”\(^{182}\) It is thus less about absolute truth claims than about “honesty,”\(^{183}\) that is, the honesty to admit that we have this treasure in clay jars (2 Cor 4:7). Honest doubts, questions, revisions. But also honest affirmations, if the moment occasions it, if that is what allows relation to flourish. For it is relationality that “saves pluralism from relativism.”\(^{184}\)

The dissolute *par excellence* is represented by Pontius Pilate’s shrug during Jesus’s trial—it is hardly a question: “What is truth?” (John 18:38) Pilate’s shrug “encapsulates the pluralism of indifference. It recognizes the differences of peoples, their gods, and their truths—with a shrug.”\(^{185}\) This imperial indifference, Rome’s apparent relativism, is only skin deep. For


\(^{175}\) Ibid., p. xiii.

\(^{176}\) Ibid., p. 7.

\(^{177}\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., p. 7.

\(^{179}\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{181}\) Ibid., p. 25.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., p. xii.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., p. 21.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., pp. 28-29.
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it is indifferent to anything that does not constitute a political threat, to anything that leaves undisputed its own, hidden, absolute claim.\textsuperscript{186}

Pilate’s shrug was occasioned by Jesus’s statement that he came into the world “to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37) Keller notes the inversion to our typical approach: It is not truth that belongs to anyone; instead, one can belong to the truth.\textsuperscript{187}

And doing so asks that one “listen.” On Keller’s interpretation, this hints at a truth that is about an interaction: “The Johannine truth is an action: ‘do the truth’—facere veritatem (John 3:21) . . . Even in the high Christology of John, truth does not signify a timeless or abstract absolute.”\textsuperscript{188}

Of all the evangelists, John is the most interested in truth, but none of his metaphors quite fit a modern propositional understanding:

Testify to it, belong to it, do it, dwell in it, even in Jesus’ case to enflesh it: John gives truth multiple metaphors. Far from any abstract absolute, each sign of Johannine truth touches off a happening, a revealing interaction, a step on an open-ended way.\textsuperscript{189}

In another interaction, a thirsty Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for some water. They come to speak of religion, the “living water” of God, but also of the pain of loss and marginalization (John 4:5-30). What the woman tells him about herself, Jesus says, “is true.”

In its improper reciprocity, Jesus initiates a radically mobile sense of truth. It moves like living water. The way is a truth-flow. It bursts out of the territorialism of religion, of worship fixed here or there, mountain or Jerusalem, my group or yours, my church or your temple, mosque or yoga mat.\textsuperscript{190}

While it thus transcends religious fault lines, Keller notes this interaction is staged by a well associated with Jacob in both Jewish and Samaritan tradition. Tradition, in this case shared heritage, has not become irrelevant: It here provides the very backdrop and occasion for “new transcultural possibilities.”\textsuperscript{191}

And again: “The Johannine truth that makes free is a truth that you do, that you make. It makes the space in which our complex relationships can breathe and thrive, beyond competition, suffocation, violence.”\textsuperscript{192}

In this light, the “way, truth, and life” of Jesus (John 14:6) starts to look rather different than its tired but common interpretation as a denial of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[188] Ibid., p. 31.
\item[189] Ibid., p. 31.
\item[190] Ibid., p. 32.
\item[191] Ibid., p. 34.
\item[192] Ibid., p. 42.
\end{footnotes}
legitimacy of other religious ways. Such a denial makes of truth “not a way but a wall,” Keller notes, serving to separate the in-group from the out. Instead, if we take seriously the way John frames truth, Keller argues it is no exclusivist truth-claim. It is not addressing the problem of other ways, let alone other religions, but the disciples’ fear of getting lost. He is saying, because they know him and love him, they will always know him—in this relational sense of “knowing.”

Linguistically, Keller argues the Greek pistis means something more like “trust,” not propositional “belief.” It is thus more about “troth,” about trustworthiness, being true to one another—connotations still not entirely absent from the English.

Likewise, in the First Testament, a propositional truth is not a main concern. The Hebrew words that come closest, emet and emunah, mean faithfulness and trustworthiness as behaviors or characteristics of persons (Divine or otherwise). So to be or act “in truth” (eg. Ps 33:4) means to be or act “in faithfulness.” Biblical terms translated as “truth” are thus more about relation and “steadfast love” than about cognition and certainty.

So it is this relational trustworthiness that is disclosed in Christian tradition, opening us up, hopefully, towards “the most elemental truth of all—the delicate interdependence composing the living earth.” The resolute gives birth to a “wisdom of relationalism,” inviting towards “the work of a multiplicity connected by the pli, the fold, between each of its members.”

Fin

Keller’s understanding of truth in terms of relationality appears to be what both Caputo and Kearney are alluding to in their own similar arguments above, although they do not refer to Keller at that point. However, Keller clearly inscribes it in her own poststructural relational process theology. Truth is neither about accurately referring to a transcendent state of affairs, nor about a vague open-endedness, but a very specific but always fluid commitment to the relations that make us. What is interesting is that Keller does not say, as Caputo and Kearney seem to do, that this relational trustworthiness is what religious truth is in general (nor indeed that it is Christianity’s truth exclusively). She is making a very specifically Christian case for the overflowing and washing out of the boundaries of Christianity.

Above, I criticized Kearney and Caputo for their versions of this argument. I expressed my worry that this might too easily fold over into a

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193 Keller, On the Mystery, p. 34.
194 Ibid., p. 36.
195 Ibid., pp. 37–38.
196 Keller, Intercarnations, p. 42.
197 Ibid., p. 42.
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new fault line of religious difference, between those who understand truth in non-absolutist terms, and those who are still so primitive to believe their religious attachments are actually true. Keller notes this difficulty, too, not only with regards to absolutists but also towards nihilist relativists. “What if I have in fact manufactured a double polarization,” she worries, “[v]ersus the absolute on the one hand, and the dissolve on the other?”198

In response, Keller proposes we relativize not so much the opposition as the dichotomy, both with regards to absolutism and to relativism. We thus ought to “recognize our debt and our affinity to them [absolutists], even as we put the truth back into process.”199 Though religious absolutists might “remain enemies,” Keller invites her (presumably liberal) readers to a respect, “an agape that is more than a condescending gesture of goodwill,” towards them. “For it is the log in our own eye as religious folk that we are trying to remove.”200 Likewise, to secular relativism, we are “endebted,” both for its prophetic critique of religious absolutism, but also, more problematically, for our own positions as “beneficiaries of the global economic system.” So as we criticize the dissolve, we can “hardly protest from a perspective of purity.”201

To be aware of this issue might already be a major part of resisting its pernicious effects. However, I wonder if it is quite sufficient. A relational theology attentive to issues of religious difference must also be capable of imagining, building and valuing not just a general agape or endebtedness, but true relation to those who are on the other side of the progressive-conservative fault line. This must, indeed, involve removing “the log in our own eye,” or, to use a formulation from Chapter I, to deconstruct our own positions of privilege (Wadud): It will need to involve a suspicion or even unsaying of those moments where progressive or liberal theologies, attitudes, and communities themselves feed into structures of closure. And it may be that, for liberals and progressives, the relation to more conservative brothers and sisters is substantially more challenging than that to liberals of other religions.

If it fails to constantly reexamine the dichotomies it builds up, a relational theology will at most bring together a community of progressives of different religions, a “we” perhaps already implied in Keller’s recognition of “our” debt to “them.” It is therefore important to highlight that Keller’s relational theology should, in theory, not lend itself to strengthening dichotomies and antagonisms, as it is always also about the fluidity of those differences. More than about establishing and fixing boundaries, Keller’s understanding of the truth of Christianity is about washing them out and reimagining them. But this remains a constant process, and it may be that

199 Ibid., p. 175.
200 Ibid., p. 175.
201 Ibid., p. 176.
even a poststructuralist relational feminist theologian will be tempted by a simple Schmittian distinction between our friends and our enemies. I have frequently used sentences of the type “not X; instead, Keller proposes Y.” Perhaps there is more dichotomy in Keller’s thought than she is willing to admit; perhaps, on the other hand, these formulations also show how indebted her theology remains to the tradition.

IV.3.2 Islam: Crusades and Reconquistas

In a sense, Judaism and Jewish sources are omnipresent in Keller’s work, especially when it concerns the First Testament. But she also discusses Islam, and Christianity’s relation to that Abrahamic cousin and rival, at some length. Here, I want to discuss two such discussions: first, her pages on Islam in her 2005 *God and Power*, and second, her discussion of an fundamental anti-Islamic structure or “Crusade Complex” in Western culture.

Islam and Crypto-Apocalypse

In *Apocalypse Now and Then*, Islam had barely featured, merely showing up during a discussion of Crusader apocalyptic bloodshed. As Keller rephrases her argument for a more general audience ten years later, the world has changed somewhat: Shocked by an unprecedented attack on New York, the West has followed the United States into two wars in Muslim majority countries. Under the leadership of an overtly Christian president, they seek to root out an elusive Islam-inspired movement. Islam, as an enemy or as a potential ally, is suddenly at the heart of Western political theology.

Keller opens her discussion of Islam with a brief note on the use of the term “fundamentalist.” While she is not happy with this word, noting it is a simplification and generally a bad fit for Islam’s literalist or absolutist branches, she also notes the term “solicit[s] its non-otherness”:

First coined for Christian fundamentalism, “fundamentalism” is not a completely alien phenomenon but always already entangled with Christianity’s own dark sides.

While there are clear parallels between Christian and Islamic apocalypticism, the association of Islamic fundamentalism with apocalypse, which remains at the heart of Keller’s politico-theological readings, needs to be nuanced. Keller notes the literalism of fundamentalist exegesis is “foreign

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202 She draws, for instance, on the Tannaitic midrashim and rabbinic commentaries to elucidate a reading of the divine cloud appearing to Moses in Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, pp. 50ff.; on medieval rabbinic and kabbalistic readings of the plural form of Elohim in Keller, *Face of the Deep*, pp. 172ff.; as well as on other midrashim and especially the medieval scholar Rashi in ibid., passim.


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to the elliptical poetry of the Qur’ān itself and to the highly evolved disciplines of its interpretive traditions.” While “the apocalyptic symbolism of a final judgment of the just and the unjust pervades the Qur’ān,” it is not with the kind of timeline, “creation-to-apocalypse,” that has marked Christian apocalypticism.\textsuperscript{205}

At the same time, Keller notes Islam has seen less of a deferral of the justice promised by apocalypticism: “The concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, never falls silent in the Qur’ān.” Because Mohammed was alive long enough to govern and transform society, Islam is imbued with that memory and texts from that time. These inspire it to avoid postponing justice to a final judgment, as Christianity has tended to do. It has thus seen “endless attempts to bring about social justice within human political forms.” Indeed, she notes, Islam’s initial spread must be seen not so much as violent conquest but “must also be attributed to its relatively moderate practices.”\textsuperscript{206}

In a brief historical overview, Keller discusses the emergence of what we now call Islamic fundamentalism: The primacy of Muslim empires and kingdoms in terms of trade, social organization and science started to end when Europe reinvented itself in the ethnic cleansing of Spain, followed in the next centuries by colonial rule over Muslim majority societies. Secular modernization led to protest, and eventually to specifically Islamic or Islamist protest, which eventually turned violent and militarized. Of the Abrahamic religions, Islam was “the last to develop its fundamentalist strain,” Keller remarks.\textsuperscript{207}

Keller thus highlights the “interdependence—even of ‘Islam’ and ‘the west,’ ‘Christian’ and ‘secular,’” an interdependence that may dissipate our fear of the others.\textsuperscript{208} In order to understand what is going on in the violent strains of other religions, it is necessary to understand ourselves and our own complexes. For “we ‘ourselves’ are also partly constituted by the tensions of modern secularization and fundamentalist reaction. . . . Our own fundamentalists sound strangely like ‘theirs.’”\textsuperscript{209} What is needed is thus “a steadfast excavation of the systematic violence of the modern project of the last five hundred years.”\textsuperscript{210}

\textsuperscript{205}Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{207}Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{208}Ibid., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{209}Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{210}Ibid., p. 11.
CHAPTER IV. CATHERINE KELLER

The Crusade Complex

An important part of this excavation would be to trace the relevance of the relation to the religious other for the self-constitution of Western Christianity. This is what Keller undertakes in Cloud of the Impossible. There, she argues that Western self-constitution has always been in some sense religious, not least through the Crusades and what she calls a “crusade complex.”

The establishment of internal peace through outward war, especially with its Muslim rival.

Keller starts her argument with the call for the First Crusade by Pope Urban II. Urban’s argument is one for peace as much as it is for war: He calls feudal Europe to respect a recent internal truce, “the product of the first organized peace movement of the continental Christian world.” This internal peace is, however, immediately pivoted towards a new war, what Urban calls a “proper” fight against the “barbarians,” that is, the Muslim Turks and Arabs, “Christendom’s most disturbing religious Other.” He calls this fight, what would be the First Crusade, a “peregrinatio,” or pilgrimage.

Fusing pilgrimage with pillage, perpetrating in Jerusalem and elsewhere collective atrocities, and orienting Roman Christians again to the East of their origins, the Crusade arguably began to produce “the West.” … Let us consider that the European West thereby consolidates itself around a crusade complex.

The newfound ambition initially fails, however, leaving the “conditions for the emergence of the West” to “fester” for some time, before Europe emerges in modernity.

Keller points to philosopher Enrique Dussel’s argument that this conflict with Islam allowed not only the European self-constitution around the Crusades, but also, and more definitively, in modernity. For it was the violence of the 1492 Reconquista of the Iberian peninsula and the concomitant beginning of the conquest of the Americas, by the very same Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms and the same violent logic, that forged the modern era. The Reconquista and its massacres, evictions, and redistribution of appropriated lands formed the model for Spanish and Portuguese colonial ventures, and thereby for European colonial conquest in general. This violence is thus “definitive of modern statehood and nonetheless religious.”

211 Keller, Cloud of the Impossible, p. 240.
212 Ibid., p. 239.
213 Ibid., p. 240.
214 Ibid., p. 240.
215 For much of this argument, Keller relies on Enrique Dussel’s “Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism,” in Nepantia: Views from the South 1, no. 3 (2000), and Dussel’s and Michael D. Barber’s The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity. New York: Continuum, 1995.
216 Keller, Cloud of the Impossible, p. 247.
IV.3. KELLER ON THE INTERRELIGIOUS

At the same time, Dussel locates the origin of modernity not, for example, in the Reformation, but on Europe’s borders, indeed in its violent negotiation of those borders. “Dussel’s argument for the Iberian origin of modernity then brings to light the Islamophobic framework of Western European identity.”  

The Reconquest was not a crusade, but a new state-building deployment of Christian resentment against the Moors and the tiny, if influential, minority of Jews. Almost simultaneously with these expulsions and massacres the same aggression was applied to those new infidels without . . . the natives were branded in each case as “oriental,” as “Indians.”

Some half century earlier, pope Nicholas V had called for a new crusade, prompted by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, and had granted the Portuguese monarch “the right to reduce any ‘Saracens, pagans and any other unbelievers’ to hereditary slavery.” The Pope thus “legitimized the modern colonial slave trade in Africa, and soon in the Americas, through anti-Muslim (Saracen) affect.” With the changing power relations, in which “the success of the new Western empires finally drives the long-central Muslim into the periphery,” “the explicit crusade folds into an implicit complex.” Keller names this Islamophobic moment of modernity a “defining event, a reversal that folds history otherwise.” The (post)modern West largely “represses its resentment of Islam and the ragged old dream of convivencia,” but it remains deeply marked by it.

Political theology and a theology of religious pluralism thus need to mutually supplement and support each other. For our purposes, this especially means that without political acumen, pluralism would fail to address the historical complexes that have made interreligious relations to what they are. “After centuries of further atrocities . . . and of immense political efforts of tolerance and containment, then of secularization and pluralism, the problem and the possibility of a convivial multiplicity still presses.”

Fin

Keller thus finds an Islamophobic structure at the root of Western civilization, one that continues to affect interreligious and intercultural relations today. With this, she does not intend to shift blame or agency for the violent state of things exclusively onto Western actors, a tendency she finds in

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217 Ibid., p. 246.
218 Ibid., p. 247.
219 Ibid., p. 248.
220 Ibid., p. 247.
221 Ibid., p. 241.
222 Ibid., p. 243.
the Western Left and faults for its lack of honesty and its reinscription of Orientalist stereotypes.\textsuperscript{223} Instead, it shows the messy and political nature of the task of building interreligious relations, which does not start with a clean slate but is deeply determined by the violent past of those relations.

It must be pointed out, however, that a crucial part of this violent past becomes invisible if the construction of a Christian Europe is primarily analyzed through its establishment of a border with an external other, as a focus on the Crusades, the Reconquista, and colonialism may suggest. For the self-constitution of Europe as a “Christian” continent has always depended on the repression of difference within those borders as well, notably the exclusion, oppression, and massacre of European Jews. Considering a “Crusade complex” at the heart of Western identity would need to include this in its analysis, perhaps starting with the historically unprecedented slaughter of the Jews of the Rhineland and Danube regions during the first Crusade.\textsuperscript{224} If this is not done, this analysis could inadvertently come to contribute to the dangerous fiction of a Christian Europe imagined as a relatively homogeneous continent in perpetual war with its relatively homogeneous Muslim enemy. Even without such a Muslim enemy, a “Christian Europe” is a lethal notion, dependent on the repression of the difference within.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, the insights from Keller’s analysis remain invaluable. It is particularly important that Keller does not simply approach Islam as a “stranger” which may be “welcomed” (or not), but instead shows how Western Christianity and Islam, including the violent aspects of both, are deeply entangled and share a complex and particular history. The characteristics of a given expression of religion—in this case, Islam and Islamic fundamentalism—are not perennially given by an essence, but instead are the current state of particular (and particularly violent) historical processes. Indeed the difference between a democratic West and a violent East is itself a construct: Through careful questioning, it starts to come apart, and a more complicated (folded-together) picture begins to emerge.

Any theology of religious difference must therefore also be a political theology: It must, as Keller has started to do, trace how religious difference has fed into, indeed made possible, the constitution of the West as an entity. This is not unlike Kearney’s argument on English and Irish identity, above. According to Kearney, the English-Irish dissociation shows how identity does not precede difference, but difference always already seeps into the constitution of identity. But where Kearney did not expand this line of thinking onto religious difference, which he continues to analyze as a matter of hospitality for strangers, Keller shows how the political and the interreligious

\textsuperscript{223}Keller, God and Power, pp. 12–13.
are profoundly mutually entangled, perhaps even indissociable. This is not only good news for interreligious endeavors: If the enmity with Islam and the repression of Judaism are so deeply ingrained into what makes the West, undoing this enmity means deconstructing Christianity and Western civilization more broadly. Interreligious reconciliation will not only be the establishment of pacific relations between “us” and “strangers,” but goes to the heart of Christianity itself, as its boundaries are washed out and its depth becomes de-centered.

IV.3.3 A Relational Pluralism

Keller also formulates a theology of religious pluralism, albeit with important characteristics that, she argues, differentiate it from the pluralism of Hick and others like it. She considers Hick’s “unifying approach” ultimately insufficient, and thus seeks a pluralism more amenable to remaining difference. She formulates such a pluralism at a number of different occasions. As will become clear, the different accentuations interlock into a kind of pluralism that is less about a comprehensive schema, and more about a theological valuation of multiplicity and relation.

Polydoxy

In the introduction to *Polydoxy*, an edited volume on “theology of multiplicity and relation,” Keller and Schneider argue that difference, uncertainty and relationality “are not problems to be overcome in religious thought. They are starting points for it.” Contemporary theology should start from the realization that multiplicity and relationality, and the concomitant uncertainty or indeterminacy, are both irreducibly given and potentially life-giving for theology. Religious traditions, including Christianity, were “never merely One to begin with.” Instead, the declaration of heresy as “outer boundary markers” for orthodoxy produces a tenuous unity over against an insistent complexity. Christianity is thus “irreducible to any one voice or lineage”—it is

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225 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 251. She oddly refers to Hick’s approach as “Christian inclusivism” at this point.

226 Two important pieces on which I will draw in the following pages are written together with other authors: process theologian Roland Faber and (queer) feminist theologian Laurel Schneider. However, Keller’s imprint on both of the articles, especially the portions I am citing, is abundantly clear. See eg. Faber, Roland. *The Divine Manifold*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014; and Schneider, Laurel C. *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*. London: Routledge, 2007.


“always already polydox.”  

Any oneness “breaks boundlessly into the multiplicities that already compose it and that will recompose it in its worlds to come.”  

No one is really thus: “Each fold is a universe of others . . . The singular is already plural.”  

A commitment to this insistent “manifold of creation as it enfolds a multiplicity of wisdoms” thus becomes a “baseline requirement for theological soundness.”

Under the name of polydoxy, Keller and Schneider thus seek a theology worthy of this commitment. Being Christian in this world “requires a receptive posture toward a manifold of texts within and beyond the corpus of interpretations, practices, and spiritualities of those who claim the tradition/s of Jesus.” But they do not “intend a new orthodoxy of the Multiple to replace the orthodoxy of the One.” The ways to figure the multiple must, by necessity, also be multiple. Indeed, echoing Caputo, polydoxy remains “parasitical on orthodoxy.” It does not stand by itself as a position but remains defined by its relation to orthodoxy, highlighting in turn orthodoxy’s relation to its others.

Elsewhere, Keller argues that “when a process theology exceeds the orthodoxies of a massively Euro-Christian tradition, its intent is not to supersede any of these orthodoxies (and so merely mirror their competitive oppositions) but to highlight—in light of a connective sacredness—their own fluency.”

Polydoxy thus “seeks . . . an evolving coherence in the midst of actual, lived complexity. It remains mindful of the toxic by-products of any doxic certainty.” No metaphysics or theology, especially a theology of religious pluralism, ever quite gets off the ground enough to truly “encompass a world of contentious relations.” Indeed they remain irreducibly marked by the particular situation that gave rise to them: “[E]very such universal discourse is doomed to betray its earthy, fragile patch of the universe.”


Keller, Intercarnations, p. 146.


Ibid., pp. 4–5.

Ibid., p. 2.


Keller and Schneider, “Introduction,” p. 3.

Turning this around, this also means that any pluralism is allowed to speak a more traditionally specific language. So Keller notes the Trinity may indeed be won as an ally in the project of a relational pluralism: “For all its arcane chauvinisms, the Christian Trinity arguably functions as the formative pattern in the West for the possibility of co-constitutive relations between subjects. Thus its persons each holographically share each other’s functions, but differently. They do not become the same. . . . [Theirs is a] constitutive difference—the difference of the other as I refract it in myself; the difference
But betrayal here has a double meaning: On the one hand, any universalism is in a way particular, shaped by particular concerns and priorities. But on the other hand, universalist discourse also betrays that particularity: It is doomed to be disloyal to it, to move beyond it, to wash out its boundaries.²⁴⁰

For to remain true to this relational multiplicity that Keller and Schneider identify at work in our universe and our religious traditions also leads one inevitably to forgo the limitations of one’s particular locale. “[T]he resort to a localism, a particularism of multiple discrete context, might seem more true to polydoxy. But . . . [e]ach context, each singularity, bleeds into its neighbors.”²⁴¹ Clear-cut “religions” are not so easily found: Boundaries and identity are rarely clearly established and traditions are complex and stem from multiple sources.²⁴²

In this polydox vision, the boundaries and relations “between” traditions are therefore hardly solid enclosures, instead acting at most as shaky differentiations that do not allow for any definite separation. “It may be handy, healthy, even life-saving to draw boundaries—until, that is, we deny how relative, how fluid, how permeable the borders remain.”²⁴³ A religious tradition is not discrete and isolated, but always codetermined both by religious “others” and worldly power structures. Even the biblical text itself is “intertwined with endless other ones, and therefore intertextually absorbing but also absorbed and absorbable in them, internally contested and externally relativized.”²⁴⁴

The upshot of this is that there is both an “inherent multiplicity” to religion, which can never be brought to a simple One without being brought to a standstill, and a “religious character” to multiplicity itself.²⁴⁵ The divine reveals itself “in an irreducible polydoxy.”²⁴⁶ This irreducible multiplicity occasions an unknowing. Any naming of the divine, even as processual multiplicity, can only perform that naming apophatically, “that is, it speaks its unspeakability.”²⁴⁷ Polydox pluralism can never quite get a hold of it: There is always “leakage into the indeterminate,” which prevents this polydox pluralism from closing up into a totalizing system. Without such leakage, “multiplicity collapses into totality and dies.”²⁴⁸

which co-constitutes me, disrupting my self-sameness, proliferating possibilities.” Keller, Apocalypse Now and Then, p. 295.
²⁴¹Ibid., p. 129.
²⁴³Keller, Apocalypse Now and Then, p. 300.
²⁴⁴Ibid., p. 27. In this light she critiques George Lindbeck, along with the narrative theology of Hans Frei, who understand a religious world or language-game to be separate from the world, set apart by its particular narrative and language. Ibid., pp. 24ff.
²⁴⁶Ibid., p. 192.
²⁴⁷Ibid., p. 198.
CHAPTER IV. CATHERINE KELLER

A Comparative Indeterminacy

For a panel discussion on comparative theology and messianism, Keller revisits the theme of indeterminacy in the interreligious. She argues that any messianic openness requires some sense of indeterminacy, for without it, it would not be openness. This then also opens the way for indeterminacy regarding which Messiah precisely one is talking about. The indeterminacy required for comparative theology thus folds into the very messianic indeterminacy itself, of an open future constantly emerging.\(^{249}\) It is thus not so much that we recognize that the other religion is hoping for or witnesses to the same Messiah as ours, but rather that any such messianic hope or witness requires a suspicion towards any such recognition. So here, again, it is not so much that we all hope for the same thing, but rather that what we hope for ourselves is “not the same.” The interreligious lives from indeterminacy at least as much as from any determinable commonality.

That is not to say the comparative gesture, on Keller’s take, does not carry its own promise of an interreligious egalitarianism. “Note that the very word compare—com-pare, ‘with equals’—witnesses at its root a possible egalitarianism. Leveling hierarchy, not difference, comparison is already to hint at the messianic hope.”\(^ {250}\) There is already something about the very act of comparison, of simply placing the different hopes and claims of religious traditions into conversation with each other, that already reveals something on the one hand of a groundlessness or indeterminacy, and on the other hand promises a shared future. To voice a truth claim, in the context of religious difference, is already to delimit it and open it up for questioning. “That indeterminacy limits the certainty of the truth claims that it at the same time makes possible.”\(^ {251}\)

But comparative theology, of course, is more than merely placing claims together. On Keller’s take, “[t]o compare is to draw differences into explicit relation, that is into disclosure of the relation difference itself already constitutes.” Interreligious comparison reveals that there is no “simply bounded identity.” Dialogical activity thus reduces incompatibility, not difference.\(^ {252}\) Of course, this is not a given—the violent edges of religious difference may or may not be reconciled. But this uncertain future, again, folds into the indeterminacy that carries with it “beyond the failed fraternal reconciliations, the insecure promise of a peacable kingdom.”\(^ {253}\)

\(^ {249}\) Keller, Intercarnations, pp. 136–146.
\(^ {250}\) Ibid., p. 137.
\(^ {251}\) Ibid., p. 137.
\(^ {252}\) Ibid., p. 138.
\(^ {253}\) Ibid., p. 139. Comparative messianism is thus, again, inextricably linked with political theology. Religious difference, Keller notes, was always central to political theology: Whether it is with Paul’s Jewish messianism or with Schmitt’s National Socialism, “the Jewish/Christian linkage of comparative messianism—as an acutely inseparable difference—lies close to the heart of political theology.” The further friend-foe differentia-
Relational Pluralism

So with the centrality of multiplicity, relation, understood as nonseparable difference in process, and indeterminacy, all explicitly brought into contact with questions of the interreligious, we are moving in the direction of a more comprehensively formulated theology of religious pluralism. Keller formulates this most directly in Cloud of the Impossible and in an article together with Roland Faber.

Nicholas of Cusa had remarkably proposed something of a proto-pluralism, affirming religions to be actually “una religio in rituum varietate.” In conversation with Cusa, Keller seeks a “relational pluralism.”

Given the precarity of planetary cohabitation, a relational pluralism happens not over and against the variously separative Ones. It breaks through their walls of mutual contradiction from within a cloud that they may im/possibly recognize they share. . . . So the Supreme Complication also enfolds—in their diversity—the multiple faith practices of the world. They cannot be forced or tricked into unity, but in conversation explicate, and in practice, unfold, the ecumenical religio in which they are already unknowingly tied together.

So here togetherness, or relationality, is less about establishing or postulating a unity, and more about the suggestion that the religions are already mutually enfolded. It is not just the recognition that something, perhaps
something divine, happens within the other tradition: It is the recognition that something divine happens in the interaction. “[A] process sense of the plurality of expressions of the divine or the sacred within, between, across, and beyond religious traditions resists the deceptive unity of an already tamed plurality.”257 Rejecting a “separative pluralism,” where one encounters the other from within the boundaries of a religious and cultural identity, Keller and Faber propose a “relational” or “process pluralism.” Such a process pluralism would start from the recognition that traditions live “only in process and in interaction,” that they are “not fixed but fluent one towards the others.”258

A pluralism attentive to such entanglement needs to be more than a mere appetite for the exotic. Relational pluralism must be wary of the “voracious Euroamerican consumption of . . . whatever remains exotic after centuries of appropriation,”259 and must likewise eschew “a tidy system that will handle the plurality of traditions.”260 The “postcolonial worry must remain”: Their polydox appreciation of interaction can easily turn into appropriation. Especially within the context of global capitalism, “[t]ransgressive entanglements” come with a “risk” that must be recognized.261 For this reason, “the emerging complexity remains, always, a work of self-critique.”262

To counteract this risk of appropriation, Keller and Faber propose “a connective, a sticky logic,” “something luring us to seek new ways to understand ‘togetherness.’”263 This cohesion is about an appreciation for difference as relation and relation as difference: “The joint of relation appears . . . as the very fold of difference—difference not as separation but as process of differentiation.”264 This difference is not thought “dyadically,” as a simple self-Other relation, but as a “field of interdependent subjects.”265 The Spirit calls for this ineluctable relationality to be transformed into right relations.266 Instead of a pluralism of the one, this is a cohesion of “com-
muning,” a sociality of “gathering together,” not as a fixed description of what identities may be counted, but rather as “a depth of social and spiritual practice that stays in process, that need not purge homogeneity and requires no idealized and stable community. For it does not posit a single end.”

Fin

Keller’s relational pluralism is less about a comprehensive schema in which it would all fit together, and more about a theological appreciation for what we might call the interreligious, for the connections, borrowings, hybridizations, relations, that mark religious difference. “It honors that which interlinks, pleats, or braids the flows of their difference together; it encourages living the intensities that its differentiations release.” Its pluralism remains rooted in a profound unknowing, reluctant to say that the divine multiplicity that finds itself poeticized in different traditions is “the same,” nor lets itself be grasped as a “countable plurality of manifestations.” Interreligious dialogue remains a process of incompleteness.

Keller’s writing is saturated with classically pluralist elements: the recognition that Christianity is not privileged, that the interreligious poses a challenge to Christian supremacy, and that the Divine also finds expression in other traditions. At the same time, she recognizes a number of important caveats: that the pluralist interest in unity and commonality is problematic, that any pluralism must be accompanied by a profound sense of unknowing, and that the Divine lights up not only in what we have in common, but also in the fault lines of difference itself. Further, she is skeptical of any attempt to find a neutral vocabulary for such a pluralism: Any pluralist theology will always remain decisively indebted to the tradition that gave rise to it. Keller’s language is Christian, but her Christianity is in turn deconstructed, drawn out, de-centered by the blurriness of its boundaries.

In tandem with her understanding of the truth of Christianity as primarily about relation and her important analysis of the violent entanglement Christianity finds as its history with many other religions, this pluralism comes as an embodied hope for how our already existing interdependencies may be opened up and remade, growing into right relations.

IV.4 Fin

In this chapter, I discussed the relational poststructuralist process theology of Catherine Keller as a resource for grappling with religious difference. I

267 Ibid., p. 220.
269 Ibid., p. 199.
CHAPTER IV. CATHERINE KELLER

started with a discussion of her reading of Genesis 1, in which God creates not from nothing, but calls forth a self-organizing creation from the Deep or tehom, an ambivalent chaos of potentiality. The Deep is not a first principle, but what perpetually calls into question any attempt to establish a first principle or governing structure—even, or especially, divine omnipotence. I argued this places a certain groundlessness en archè. Tehom and “anarchy” may mean almost the same thing: An uncontrollable “space,” neither non-existent nor pure evil, but an ambivalent depth, calling into question the self-sufficiency of the identities it makes possible. There is, thus, an anarchy or unruliness to religious difference, we might say, because the Divine is not “archic,” is not an omnipotent ruler.

Second, I discussed Keller’s reading of negative theology and the way she folds this old style of theology into affirmative, relational theologies. Precisely because our relations, constituted by our difference to each other, matter, anything we say or affirm or stand for must be subject to its own “unsaying.” This can help us grapple with the interreligious because it shifts the focus of a theology of religious pluralism: Where classical pluralism is typically critiqued for its overconfidence in knowing what is going on in other religious traditions (namely the Real, or, in Kearney’s case, hospitality), an apophatic pluralism would be more interested in a shared unknowing, stressing that ultimately, we do not even know what precisely is going on in our own tradition and directing this nonknowing critically towards structures that dominate and exclude. Anything interreligiously shared, be it a pluralist hypothesis, a world ethic, or some other platform of consensus, is always at most provisional, lest it produce new exclusions.

And third, I discussed where Keller formulates more explicitly political theologies. As the theological and the political are profoundly intertwined, a theology of religious difference must also be a political theology: it must ask questions of where religious difference has played into the constitution of political community, and how Christianity has allied itself with political power to produce other religions as “others.” On the other hand, if we are to face global emergencies, notably climate change, any political theology itself must de-territorialize nationalist and Christian localism: It must be interreligious.

In the second part of this chapter, I discussed Keller’s own discussion of the interreligious. Through an understanding of biblical truth as relational, Keller argues against an understanding of Christianity as absolute or exclusive. Indeed, to belong to the truth of Christ compels one to deeper relation with the religious other. While her argument is thus similar to, if more elaborate than, Kearney’s and Caputo’s thoughts on the truth of religion, I argued that ultimately her emphasis on the fluidity of all boundaries may serve as a stronger safeguard against a renewed religious fault line between those with one conception of truth and those with another.

Second, through an examination of Keller’s writings on Islam, I have
shown the concrete consequences Keller draws from her political theology. Through readings of the entanglement of the Christian West with Islam throughout the West’s self-constitution, Keller shows how religious difference is not a matter of fully-formed religions encountering one another as relative strangers, but instead how it is part of a complex, politically charged, and violent history.

Third, I examined Keller’s more comprehensive statements on pluralism, as she formulates a pluralism that is skeptical of claims of transcendental unity, instead paying more attention to the complex relationality and multiplicity that always already seeps into any unifying metaphysic.

At certain points, I have made clear that I consider Keller’s approach to the interreligious, while perhaps less philosophically thorough in general, to be more mindful of the crucial issues and in general more developed than Kearney’s or Caputo’s. For Keller, relations are *constitutive* of all that is, including the “self” and “religions.” This goes beyond Kearney and Caputo, who mostly continue to speak of religious difference in terms of an Other, perhaps as the ultimate horizon for the self, but not in terms of a “self” qualitatively constituted through its differentiation and relation to others, relations that can be the subject of both brokenness and healing. This could be taken even further: if we view religious difference in terms of tehom (much like the “inter” of the intertext, see above p. 175), we might imagine a theopoetics as evoking new relationship and new community to arise constantly from the depth of our differences. I will take this up in Chapter V.

At some level, however, my concern remains that Keller’s relational pluralism is primarily capable of building relations with like-minded progressives of other religions. I discussed this briefly above (see p. 199): To avoid reintroducing a dichotomy, this time between those of us who are wise enough to understand the relational and multiplicitous nature of reality and those others who are not, it is crucial to constantly reexamine “the log in our own eye,” our own positions of privilege, and the way progressive or liberal structures can, again, become structures of exclusion. When Keller asserts the reality of pluralism in society “constrains the cruel exclusivisms that perpetually tempt Christianity,”271 however, it appears to me that this challenge remains limited to the “cruel exclusivism” of Christianity: In other words, that part of Christianity Keller (and I) identifies least with, leaving the rest of us high and dry. The process/feminist/poststructuralist theologian, in other words, does not seem unsettled by interreligious encounters at all. They are profoundly comfortable with change, difference, and the fluid, non-privileged status of their own tradition, recognizing the divine multiplicity everywhere they go. So I wonder if this reads religious difference as already rendered harmless to Christianity—if the discussion of religious

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difference in a cosmopolitan setting erodes or superficializes the “difference” of that difference.

To put this another way, I wonder if there is not a tension between the way religious difference is conceived in, on the one hand, Keller’s more political analyses and, on the other hand, in her more comprehensive relational pluralism. In the first, Keller reveals something like a co-constitutive violence to be at work in any encounter with Christianity’s “others.” She is thus profoundly aware of the way interreligious encounters are not first-time encounters with strangers who come out of nowhere, but are instances of long and particular (and at times particularly violent) histories of association and differentiation. To reiterate a point I made in Chapter II, Jews and Muslims and Hindus and indigenous spiritualities are not “strangers” to Christianity, and, on a deeper level, to name them “strangers” could be said to mask the violent history we have together and thus to reinforce Christian privilege. As I have made clear, I find Keller’s politicized, historicized, perspective on the interreligious extremely compelling.

Keller’s vision of relational pluralism, however, seems to rely on a kind of post-modern and cosmopolitan convivencia of yoga mats and interreligious potlucks (not to downplay the significance of either). There is a vision of dynamic reconciled difference, intentionally sharply different from the violent history of the interreligious. As I have also made clear, it appears to me that this vision has significantly more potential than (say) John Hick’s rather static approach. And perhaps such a convivencia is not so bad—certainly a postmodern, cosmopolitan vision of a multireligious society, alive with encounter and letting-be, with mixture and identifiable community, with coalitions and agonistic debate, is what most of us interreligious activists hope for.

At the same time, I wonder if some counter-apocalyptic vigilance or tehomic ambivalence has not been lost by the wayside here. If difference is harmless, if it doesn’t in some way frighten or challenge Christianity (which, I’d say, desperately needs some challenging), I fear relational pluralism may too easily fold over into a pacification, leaving uninterrogated the possible complicity of liberal/progressive Christianity with structures of injustice and exclusion.

I put this dilemma to Keller, and she responded, first of all, that such convivencia is perhaps more valuable than I give it credit for. It is experienced “all over the planet,” and it “keeps life worth living,” making “some communing possible against bleak odds.” It is so precious, however, “precisely because it is so imperfect, so tangled in histories.” And vice versa: Our relatedness to each other is also why “we damage each other so badly.” The violent history of entangled difference is thus “not different in structure than the convivial moments.” Relation is ineluctable: “[W]e are constituents in each other, for good, for evil, or for bland irrelevance.”

She also recommended a more nuanced perspective on the Christianity,
of which I said it needs some challenging: “[S]ome need scaring, as you say, but those that need it most will misplace the fear and blame more or less you and me. The Christians I spend time with need strengthening, reinforcing, emboldening, training to confront ‘different’ . . . Christian communities and their trumpisms.” Relational pluralism does not pacify, she argues, but enlivens, “keeping us mindful that we are not pure but mixed up in what we most fear—and that it is not mere evil alien but running systemically through us/our world.”

It may be that the Christians we spend time with do need encouragement to stand for a more relational Christianity. However, they (that is to say, we) will also need to be encouraged to confront the way our own structures again may become exclusive. This is a dynamic Keller laid out quite clearly herself, which I described as the “aporetics of pluralism” (see above, pp. 183ff.). Social and religious movements also depend on a capacity to “unsay” their own affirmations, to be open to critique and negation. In the case of the interreligious, this means, crucially, that no enunciation of togetherness—an certainly not a togetherness of like-minded liberals—is ever finished.

In sum, Keller’s warning of the potential “complicity” of her approach with late capitalist dissolution and relativism, as well as its unification of exploitation, must thus be taken to heart and could be amplified through a stronger deconstructive emphasis. Nevertheless, it is important to also not overlook that Keller’s relational pluralism has what I found missing in Caputo’s approach: A sense of the precious poiesis that goes into gathering, communing, building interreligious relations. In the following chapter, I will thus seek to balance these two aspects in a theopoetics of religious difference.

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272 Personal Correspondence, December 2017.
Chapter V

Anarchy, or: A Theopoetics of Religious Difference

V.1 Introduction

In this dissertation, I have explored the potential of three thinkers of theopoetics for grappling with religious difference. This has been guided by the notion, developed in Chapter I, that religious difference is marked by an unruliness for which I used the shorthand of “anarchy,” referring to the way in which religious difference unsettles and challenges efforts to bring it under control or explain it from a first principle (archē). Instead of repressing or restricting this unruliness, I proposed a pact with it: An “anarchist” theopoetics of religious difference.

Simply put, this would be an approach to religious difference and to interreligious encounter that celebrates where these are unruly and unpredictable. It would embrace the challenge that the confrontation with difference may present to settled certainties and to structures that exclude and oppress. It would see in its messiness and difficulty the very conditions for an emergent togetherness, which it would never purport to definitively name, instead preferring to keep things in process. The most valuable instances of interreligious encounter, such a theopoetics would hold, are not when everyone gets along and agrees but when things get shaken up, when we are forced to reconsider the terms of our togetherness, as it is these occurrences that can bring us into deeper relationship.

While my discussions of the work of Kearney, Caputo, and Keller have given important impulses to this discussion, what I have not done is intentionally formulate such a theopoetics of religious difference. This thus remains the task for this final chapter. I will attempt to fold together the insights I have collected on the way here, supplementing Keller’s apophatic relationality with Kearney’s narrative collective imagination and Caputo’s deconstructive vigilance. If I have so far been using “anarchy” more as a
shorthand than as a rigorous working concept, in this chapter I will also attempt to expand on its theoretical ramifications.

After a recapitulation of the main issues in the previous four chapters, the final part of this study will thus become more speculative as I attempt to sketch a possible direction such a more intentional theopoetics of religious difference could take. Fundamentally, I will start by proposing a shift in focus from “the religious other” to difference. On closer analysis, religious difference must then be distinguished from mere “diversity” as a simple plurality of contiguous and delineated identities. Difference, I will suggest, is aporetic, both constitutive and destabilizing, both omnipresent and elusive. Theopoetics may think such anarchic difference in terms of khôra or tehom, as a placeless indeterminacy that seeps into principles and identities. Interreligious encounter as a crossing of such a khôraic/tehomic non-site then becomes a matter of an aporetic translatability, problematizing not only the relation to the “other” but also to the familiar. However, as I will elaborate, this khôraic/tehomic “inter” can also become the groundless depth out of which relation and togetherness are continuously emerging. As a poetics, a theopoetics of religious difference will seek to evoke such emergence, calling forth relationship from the depths of difference.

V.2 The Argument Thus Far

V.2.1 Recapitulation

In Chapter I, I began by sketching the contemporary debate in Christian theology around the meaning of non-Christian religions and interreligious encounter. I traced a line through this debate, connecting the tremors of a rising intuition: that religious difference is unruly, “anarchic,” that it challenges Christianity and is difficult to pin down. As I discussed different voices in this debate, I argued that each began by noticing such an unruliness in a way that had not been noticed before. However, their strategies in response to this unruliness varied from containment to embrace. Pluralism, most famously represented by John Hick, thus starts with a challenge to the claims of superiority of any one religion, especially Christianity, arguing that such claims are implausibly arbitrary. It hypothesizes that perhaps no religion has privileged access to the Divine, but that all deities and religious figurations mediate transcendent reality in different, complementary ways. I argued pluralism undercuts the radicality of its own fundamental insight, as this de-centering of Christian superiority is achieved by claiming another privileged position. The assertion of a higher or deeper unity to the universe stabilizes the wavering created and brings religious difference back under control.

Next, I discussed particularist critiques of pluralism. These argue that the supposedly neutral meta-perspective claimed by pluralism is deeply
V.2. THE ARGUMENT THUS FAR

problematic. Gavin D’Costa and S. Mark Heim instead draw on the doctrine of the Trinity to explain in particularly Christian terms that there is more going on than Christianity grasps. In their own ways, both argue that interreligious encounter can challenge and explicate Christianity’s limited and incomplete understanding, not just of an anonymous transcendent reality, as pluralism proposed, but of Christ and the Kingdom of God. However, I argued, they also contain this intuition, assigning it a designated space within a clearly Christian perspective which remains normative and decisive.

I continued with a discussion of comparative theology, an interreligious reading practice whose proponents argue that the sweeping assessments of pluralism or Trinitarian particularism domesticate the threat and transformative power of encounter. Interreligious understanding, they argue, is open-ended, marked by tensions and unpredictability, and resists being thought from a priori principles. In between the two experiences of the non-superiority of one’s own tradition and the unavailability of a comprehensive schema, a sense of an ultimate groundlessness of our religious commitments insists itself. Although I argued that comparative theology ultimately seems apprehensive about allowing its insights to impact the core of confessional theology, the unruliness of religious difference here begins to come into view more clearly.

In the final section of Chapter I, I found the most radical expression of the unruliness of religious difference as I discussed feminist and postcolonial approaches. These point out the relevance of power, marginalization and violence in the constitution of otherness and question some of the most central assumptions of the debate up to this point: that there are such entities as religions, with clear boundaries and internal homogeneity; that these entities can be represented unproblematically; that religious identity is basically stable and takes precedence over other aspects of identity. They instead point out that religious difference takes place in a network of other relations and differences, ambiguous and messy but also life-giving, making a focus on “self” and “other” problematic. I found Kwok Pui-Lan’s argument for a theology of religious difference, which would trace the way Christianity has constructed difference, particularly compelling.

In sum, each “step” in the debate adds a further layer to the unruliness and instability of religious difference, which comes into view as the chapter progresses. Taken together, I argued that religious difference appears to be both destabilizing of claims of superiority and itself unstable; it does not yield to efforts to bring it under control and calls into question the grounds as well as the bounds of Christianity. Instead of containing this anarchy, repressing it, or seeking its pacification, I found in feminist and postcolonial theologies a tendency towards its embrace: a pact with this anarchy of difference, intuiting that it may present a particular kind of good news to Christianity.

This embrace of anarchy, I argued, raises profound theoretical questions,
which remain insufficiently explored within the theology of religions debate. In Chapters II, III and IV, therefore, I turned to another theological current or discourse: the theopoetics of Richard Kearney, John Caputo, and Catherine Keller. Each of these also attempts to rethink Christianity as fundamentally groundless and marked by encounter with otherness, both divine and otherwise. Each embraces the fundamental challenge to Christianity presented by (post)modernity and sees in it not a threat but an opportunity. Although they do not significantly engage with the theology of religions debate, each also names religious diversity as a significant concern. I discussed each of the three authors in a separate chapter, starting each with a discussion of three “resources” or elements in which they discuss the philosophical issues raised in Chapter I. In the second part of each chapter, I discussed their own direct work on the interreligious.

I started this exploration with Richard Kearney. In his work on narrative imagination and narrative identity, Kearney seeks to retrieve a “postmodern imagination,” dominated neither by modern autonomy nor by premodern heteronomy. On the basis of the collective dimension of such imagination, he argues that tradition, community and nation are not constituted by a founding event or factual homogeneity, but by the associative movement of a narrative gathering. This gathering is in turn marked by multiple processes of transition, critique, and re-telling, and must remain so, lest it become ideological. Further, it is always already invaded by dissociative movements, as became particularly vivid in Kearney’s discussion of Irish and British mutual identity construction: The Irish “other” occasions and enables the formation of British identity. The inverse is also the case, leaving both nations marked by their spectral double (“joined at the hip of Ulster,” p. 83). This means the affirmation in the Good Friday agreement that inhabitants of Northern Ireland can be “British or Irish or both” is a particularly significant reimagination of national belonging. In sum, collective identity never finds completely solid ground or complete homogeneity but remains in process. It is crucial that a nation or tradition tell and retell the myths of its collective imagination, but it must do so not for an all-defining origin (arché) these myths would recall, but for the possible future that opens up in front of them.

I further discussed Kearney’s “anatheist” retrieval of faith after critique and loss, which are not to be resisted or brought under control, but embraced for the way they open up the possibility of a Christianity purged of absolutism. In Kearney’s discussions of openness to the stranger, he notes a structural dilemma: The stranger both wants to be translated, welcomed into the familiar, but also resists translation, as it threatens their uniqueness. In the persistent strangeness of the other, the untranslatable kernel, Kearney discerns the Divine.

While I found Kearney’s direct writings on the interreligious on the whole somewhat disappointing, they made vividly clear how the interre-
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Religious brings along its own set of problems, without specific attentiveness to which even progressive approaches can become inadvertently complicit in stereotypization and the production of new dichotomies. Kearney especially noted the indelible effect of an orientalist legacy on his approach to Hinduism, and I in turn expressed my discomfort with Kearney’s discussion of the religious other as “strangers,” which, I argued, can reproduce the idea that non-Christians are not really at home on this continent. Nevertheless, Kearney’s work offers powerful resources for a theopoetics of religious difference.

In Chapter III, I discussed the deconstructive theopoetics of John Caputo. Caputo argues that deconstruction is not purely negative, but is alive with a “religious” passion for the impossible. Inversely, this means that religion needs deconstruction if it is not to lose this passion or messianicity at its heart. Religion is not simply a set of beliefs or practices, but the poetics of this passion, of a call, a promise, an event. Caputo finds such deconstructive subversion at work in the “sacred anarchy” of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus of Nazareth. Similarly to Kearney, Caputo’s theopoetics embrace uncertainty: For Caputo, faith is always a “perhaps” that questions the certainty of beliefs but also forms the unlikely condition for hope. Though Caputo’s “religion without religion” at times appears as the affirmation of a universalist faith, separate from traditions or communities (and thus proximate to pluralism), I argued it instead represents a critical moment or “subversive loyalty” within historical tradition.

Caputo’s direct remarks on the interreligious remain brief. He characterizes interreligious encounters as in some way deconstructive: An “unconditional” interfaith hospitality would mean the “deconstruction of the at-home,” would reveal the groundlessness, instability and translatability of our own religious language. Translatability, here, does not mean the same “thing” gets said in different languages, which would again suggest a pluralism, but rather that what we try to name in our religious language does not coincide with itself but slips away. Ultimately, Caputo subscribes not to a pluralism but to a quasi-pluralism, which affirms Christianity is not privileged in terms of divine revelation, but does not enter into a comprehensive schema.

In Chapter IV, I discussed Catherine Keller’s poststructuralist relational process theology, which crucially hinges on shift in focus away from identities and stasis towards relations and process. In Keller’s reading of Genesis 1, an ambiguous but life-giving Deep or tehom presents neither a first principle nor a nothingness, but the space for a groundless but gentle beginning. In Keller’s readings of negative theology, an apophatic “unsaying” is required in our approach to a Divine that resists fixture, not on account of its hyperessence, but on account of its continuous unfolding in all creaturely becoming. More than Caputo or Kearney, Keller also formulates a political theology, suggesting a “panentheistic” relational distribution of sovereignty.
It embraces its “counter-apocalyptic” force of critique, community, and renewal, without the violent absolutism of a full apocalypticism. Community, including political community, remains a process of *communing*.

Keller also more clearly and thoroughly discusses religious difference. In her understanding of the truth of Christianity, she foregrounds relation and the fluidity of all boundaries, truth as *troth* or relational commitment, not propositional assent. In her readings of the relation of the Christian West to Islam, Keller further shows how the violent history of religious difference feeds into political self-constitution: Europe and the West remain marked by their “Crusade complex.” The “relational pluralism” that Keller formulates hinges not on a transcendental unity but on relationality, offering a vision of right relationship in an interdependent universe. The question is not so much if we can discern the Divine at work in the other religious tradition, but in the relationship or *interaction* “between” us.

In sum, we can see that each of these three authors provides ample resources for an embrace of the anarchy of difference. Theopoetics offers a way to figure the *groundlessness* of religious attachments, the *non-privileged* place of Christianity, its indelible *relatedness* to others, and an embrace of critique, challenge, and negation, without falling into silence or neglecting the communal, traditional, and indeed political nature of what we call religion. Further, theopoetics seeks to resist stabilizing these insights into a comprehensive schema or renewed privileged vantage point. In each case, my critique has only consisted of asking if Kearney, Caputo and Keller remain committed to these values—of asking, in effect, whether their conclusions were not in danger of creating new dichotomies and exclusions or of becoming inadvertently complicit in the pacification or containment of difference.

This was guided by the concern that if a liberal or progressive Christianity considers itself not at all challenged or unsettled by difference, it may become incapable of seeing the log in its own eye, of deconstructing its own position of privilege (Wadud).

**V.2.2 Towards a Theopoetics of Religious Difference**

Between these different reference points, something like a theopoetics of religious difference also began to take shape, taking on a distinct sensitivity from each of our three authors. While such a theopoetics remains to be further explicated, we can already draw some tentative conclusions about it.

With Kearney, we can say that it would be a *poetics*, giving a central place to the stories that form our world-view and that we bring to inter-religious encounter, while also remaining attentive to the way those stories are already plural, open for reinterpretation, and crossed by difference, a “deconstructive seed” in the midst of our identity. It would stress how the stories that make us are not about imagining an origin (*arché*), but about
opening us up to a future yet unseen. Religious tradition, it might suggest, is not built on a given and fixed ground, but instead is an interminable process of critique and re-telling, never isolated from those it considers “others.” Further, as Caputo and Keller also stress, it would see in the unsettling anarchy of difference the potential for a salutary critique of Christianity’s darkest sides, opening up the possibility of a God of hospitality, not hostility. Such hospitality will always be a mediation between welcoming the other and respecting the possibility of lasting strangeness.

Following Caputo, we can further say that such a theopoetics of religious difference would prioritize not an interreligiously shared affirmation or comprehensive schema, but the deconstruction of exclusive and oppressive structures in the name of an affirmation that remains elusive. It would not presume to know what is going on in other religious traditions, indeed it would not even presume to know precisely what is going on in its own. Instead of shared values or interreligious consensus, it would stress that no value is ever definite, that each consensus can once again come to exclude. In Caputo’s key, such a theopoetics would not so much seek to make sense of religious difference as to see the kingdom of God as a “sacred anarchy” precisely where things do not make sense. It would see interreligious encounters as capable of “spooking” religious certitude and subverting interreligious power dynamics, revealing a translatability of religious names which never quite turns into transparency. Such a theopoetics would stress that no schema can become universal, as it will always be indebted to one or several traditions, yielding at most a quasi-pluralism.

With Keller, we can stress the connotations of becoming and relationality in such a theopoetics of religious difference, emphasizing that religious traditions and indeed divine activity in the world are unfinished and always marked by their indelible entanglement with each other. In its apophatic key, such a theopoetics would suggest that the interreligious is brought to life by indeterminacy and negation at least as much as by any determinable commonality, seeking not so much a comprehensive schema as an appreciation of the interreligious: It would seek to be a poiesis of the connections, borrowings, and relations that mark religious difference, calling them into right relationship. It might take on a “tehomic” and “counter-apocalyptic” character, emphasizing that although we are always in the middle of an ambiguous mess, God is constantly also calling forth new beginnings in the midst of the old. Following Keller, such a theopoetics might further embrace an understanding of the truth of Christianity as a relational commitment more than a propositional conviction, thus relativizing a potential for enmity. Finally, from Keller we might learn that such a theopoetics would need to be political: It would need to address the way political community constitutes itself with reference to religious fault lines, as well as the way political power negotiations and territorial distinctions have played into Christianity’s relation to (and production of) its “others.”
While a theopoetics of religious difference thus begins to take shape, these are but first steps in its enunciation. In the following section, I will explore a possible direction that an elaboration could take.

V.3 A Poetics of Difference and Relation

In what remains of this chapter and of this study, I will attempt to elaborate a possible direction a more comprehensive theopoetics of the interreligious or of religious difference may take. The path I will explore seeks to join Keller in affirming the poiesis of an emerging togetherness, while always also whispering the “perhaps” of dislocation when Keller’s relational pluralism becomes too holistic, unearthing the potential for resistance and subversion where pluralism becomes pacification. In this view, an understanding of community and collective imagination rooted in multivalent narratives that get told and retold (Kearney) is crucial. I will thus attempt, in a sense, to let the lines between Kearney’s, Caputo’s, and Keller’s versions of theopoetics blur, allowing Kearney’s work on narrative imagination, Caputo’s deconstructive sensibility, and Keller’s relational ontology to mutually enfold and enrich each other.

That said, my choice of conversation partners, primarily from deconstructive traditions, will perhaps already favor Caputo’s framework, while my emphasis on relationality means that my ultimate conclusions will perhaps lean more towards Keller. With this I do not intend to say that their framework is uniquely or superiorly capable of addressing religious difference—I simply intend to explore a path a theopoetics of religious difference could take. As I draw on texts by, among others, Homi Bhabha, Jacques Derrida, and Lawrence Venuti, my reading will be deeply informed by the theopoetic sensibility developed in the previous chapters. I am thus by no means suggesting that these authors would, taken by themselves, offer a compelling account of religious difference, but rather that their writing can come to supplement or expand a theopoetics of religious difference when read with a theopoetic attentiveness. Indeed, in reading them thus, it may also become possible to see where their work is alive with a desire or hope that we may well venture to call religious, in spite of the secular commitments of the authors.

I will thus start with an elaboration of a key insight from Chapter I: the recognition that religions generally do not meet as fully-formed strangers,  

\footnote{In footnotes, I will also introduce possible directions further research could take. Though I have predominantly chosen deconstructive authors as conversation partners for this section, many of the arguments could presumably also be made with reference to hermeneutic or process philosophy. I have chosen deconstructive authors here, because it appears to me they will converse more naturally with the feminist and postcolonial theologies from Chapter I. Deconstruction is also a tradition of thought Kearney, Caputo, and Keller each engage with at least to some extent.}
but tend to already have a history together. This will then lead into a more
(quasi-)ontological investigation of difference and its unruliness, proposing
to think it in terms of *différence*, khóra, and tehom. Third, I will look
to elaborate on interreligiously *translatability* as opening religion up to an
aporetic relatedness, which theopoetics may already consider divine. Finally,
a theopoetics of religious difference will seek, in these aporetic conditions,
to evoke a sense of *community* as inter-religious solidarity.

V.3.1 An Indelible Entanglement

The first part of what I am proposing is to take more seriously the realiza-
tion that identity, community, and tradition are always already caught up
in, and made possible by, difference, relation, and entanglement.\(^2\) Instead of
an assessment of the “religious other,” and whether they are predominantly
similar or different to “us,” a theopoetics of religious difference would look
towards the ambiguous mess of borrowings, differentiations, conflicts, in-
fluences, associations and transfers that have always accompanied religious
traditions. It would stress that contemporary interreligious encounters, and
indeed Christianity itself, cannot be understood or defined separately from
the negotiation and contestation of those relations, “within” as well as “with-
out,” throughout history, and would thus need to start with an examination
of these processes.

For such an examination, it could turn to a number of related fields
in which this realization is becoming increasingly important. Historians of
religion Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke, for instance, have argued
that their discipline “emerges primarily as a history of this ‘between.’”\(^3\) Their subject matter thus

\(^2\)I first expressed this realization at the end of Chapter I (see above, p. 65): A focus
on “self” and “other” in interreligious relations silences not only the other within the
self, such as marginalized or disempowered Christians and Christianities, but also repro-
duces the fiction that interreligious relations are a relatively new phenomenon and do not
already come deeply marked by their particular, and often particularly violent, history.
Notably we recall Thatamanil’s observation, that “it would be possible to craft a history of
Christian thought and practice written as a series of interactions with and transmutations
of movements and traditions that Christians have come to demarcate as non-Christian”
(Thatamanil, “Comparative Theology after ‘Religion,’” p. 238). Jeannine Hill Fletcher
had also stressed that relation, encounter, and dialogue have always been part of Christian
tradition and Christian life (see above, p. 54).

In Chapter II, Kearney argued this regarding national identity, though he did not apply
these insights directly to the interreligions (see above, pp. 78ff.). In Chapter IV, this
insight became more overt in Keller’s relational pluralism (see above, pp. 205ff.): Christ-
ianity itself is already “irreducible to any one voice or lineage” (Keller and Schneider,
“Introduction,” p. 2), and religious traditions live “only in process and in interaction” and
are “fluent towards the others” (Keller and Faber, “A Taste for Multiplicity,” p. 184).

\(^3\)Marion Steinicke. “Introduction.” In: *Dynamics in the History of Religions between
Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. by Volkhard
lies less in the history — or the histories — of the individual religions, for instance of the so-called world religions, from the point of view of their identity as perceived by themselves or others — their dogmatics, their religious practices, their social linkages — and instead in their politico-geographical, cultural and discursive contacts and conflicts with other religious traditions, these being seen not as marginal but rather central factors in their formation and canonisation [sic] processes.⁴

According to Krech and Steinicke, the formation of many if not most religions occurred “largely in contact and through constant confrontation with other religious networks,”⁵ and during their expansion and consolidation, interreligious contact made “a significant contribution” to their beliefs, practices, forms of organization and self-understanding.⁶

Likewise in Judaic Studies, in their recent edited volume Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century, Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler highlight “a complex interdependence in thought and action among different groups of Jews, as well as between Jews and the Christian and Muslim majority cultures.”⁷ They thus seek to write the histories of the Jews of medieval Europe “as entangled in other cultures, creating connected histories between communities.” The entanglement they bring to light was profoundly ambiguous, they argue, including “[p]arallels, similarities and differences, exchange and appropriation, exclusion and persecution.”⁸ The authors conclude that “the histories of medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cultures can no longer be written in isolation.”⁹

In the social sciences, a similar shift can be observed towards entanglement, transfer, exchange and in general an attention to the way identities and developments are invariably caught up in a network of differences, re-

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⁴Steinicke, “Introduction,” p. 3.
⁵Ibid., p. 6.
⁶Ibid., p. 7. To avoid essentializing the “religions” that interact in thinking of transfers “between” one religion and another, Krech suggests seeing “contact as a constitutive process in which cultural units in general and religious formations in particular form.” Volkhard Krech. “Dynamics in the History of Religions — Preliminary Considerations on Aspects of a Research Programme.” In: Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives. Ed. by Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke. Leiden: Brill, 2012, pp. 15–70, p. 70. As historians of religion, Krech and Steinicke are of course interested in classifying and organizing various kinds of interreligious contact, creating something of a taxonomy, which is not my interest here.
⁸Ibid., p. 4.
⁹Ibid., p. 20.
lations and influences. Shalini Randeria, for example, has written about European and non-European modernities and their relation to each other. Instead of “multiple” or “alternative modernities,” such as “Japanese” or “Islamic” modernities, Randeria proposes foregrounding “processes of interaction and intermixture in the entangled histories of uneven modernities.” Likewise, Göran Therborn suggests breaking a monolithic, eurocentric understanding of modernity by taking “entangled modernities” as a focus for research. Appearances of modernity in a society, European or otherwise, comes entangled both with the tradition it responds to, as well as a “world-wide pattern of inter-linkages” including the “multi-faceted complexity of the colonial encounters” and the legacy of “pre-colonial routes and networks of exchange and communication.”

Related to this “entangled history” is histoire croisée proposed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, who propose to investigate the “crossings” or interactions between social, cultural, and political formations in different contexts. Werner and Zimmermann remark that this not only means considering entities and objects of research “in relation to each other,” but also considering them “through one another, in terms of relationships, interactions, and circulation.” Histoire croisée thus not only means looking at what happens when the studied formations come into contact with each other, but also to perceive them as oriented towards, and marked by, one another. They contrast it with merely comparative research, which “tends to immobilize objects.” Werner and Zimmermann stress that “something occurs within the crossing process;” the interweaving of exchanges, borrowings and influences, often in asymmetrical power relations, has “effects and repercussions” that can change or transform the entities themselves.

In religious studies, Richard King likewise notes the interaction between cultures is a “fact,” not a “problem.” However, “the debate between ‘universalism’ and ‘cultural relativism’ is . . . an intellectual ‘red herring’ so long as it ignores the power relations that produce differences both within and between cultures.” In his Orientalism and Religion, King looks for the way the imagination of such an Orient as “mystic” feeds into the imagination of a “West” as rational, but also how “Western” imagination and priorities

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11 Ibid., p. 287.
14 Ibid., p. 38.
15 King, Orientalism and Religion, p. 2.
16 Ibid., p. 214.
have shaped realities in the “East.” “Religion” and “mysticism,” but also “Hinduism” and “Buddhism,” King argues, are constructs with “a discursive history that is bound up with the power struggles and theological issues of Western Christianity.”

One of the focal points for King’s study is the development of “Hinduism” out of the myriad of South Asian cultic practices, beliefs, myths, and laws from the 19th century onwards. Though not exclusively the product of Western orientalism, King argues this development does seem to be shaped by Christian priorities about what being a religion entails. The reformation and revival movements that have marked Hinduism in the last two centuries, including contemporary Hindu nationalism, are thus profoundly marked by this colonial encounter. “[S]ince the nineteenth century, ‘Hinduism’ has developed, and is notable for, a number of new characteristics, which seem to have arisen in response to Judaeo-Christian presuppositions about the nature of religion.”

That colonial influence was crucial to the formation of Hinduism and Indian national consciousness is perhaps not very surprising. However, King also notes how central this process was to European self-consciousness. The description of a mystic East functions “at home as the site of a power struggle in the battle to define European and Christian cultural identity.” Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty, King notes “the history of Europe, or more specifically of [King’s native] England, cannot be divorced from the unfolding of events beyond the ‘home-land.’ The history of the colonizer is bound up with the populations and regions that have been conquered and colonized.”

The notions of “Europe” and “India” are thus “relational, interdependent, unstable and crucially unrepresentative.” There is a “slippage” between the two, which “consistently draws attention to their failure to contain the heterogeneities they are claimed to represent.”

A final study from outside theology and philosophy proper that effects this shift in focus I am proposing is Daniel Boyarin’s *Border Lines*. There, Boyarin undertakes a study of the “partitioning” of Judaeo-Christianity into what was to become rabbinic Judaism and Christianity over the first three centuries CE. Instead of a relatively clear-cut parting of the ways between those that chose to follow Jesus and those that stuck with the Rabbis, Boyarin argues “the affiliation between what we call Judaism and what we call Christianity is much more complex than most scholars, let alone most

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17 King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 211.
18 Ibid., p. 104.
19 Ibid., p. 97. Note that Keller’s similar argument—the Crusade Complex and the Reconquista of the Iberian peninsula allowed Europe to shape itself in violent distinction from the Muslim world (see above, pp. 200ff.)—locates this process not in British colonialism but in the Crusades and the southern European conquest of the New World.
20 Ibid., p. 189.
21 Ibid., p. 209.
layfolk, imagine and . . . that complexity has work to do in the world, . . . we can learn something from it about identities and affiliations.”

What he finds thus has consequences for notions of identity and difference far beyond the specific Judaic-Christian dyad.

In antiquity, Boyarin argues, the drawing of the border between Judaism and Christianity was not a natural emergence, but “artificial and political,” best understood as an “imagined frontier,” “an imposed partitioning of what was once a territory without border lines.”

For a long time, it remained unrecognized by significant portions of the affected communities and continued as a crossing point for people, practices and ideas.

That is not to say that in late antiquity there were not different identifiable groupings, some more identifiably “Christian” and not Jewish at all, and some clearly Jewish without any relation to Jesus. “In the middle, however, there were many gradations,” Boyarin points out, leading to a “spectrum” of groups with various attitudes to Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures, Logos theology, Halakha, or the idea of a divine incarnation. People or groups could be “Christian or Jewish from different perspectives, or both.”

Echoing Kearney’s use of words on Britain and Ireland, Boyarin contends that “Judaism is not the ‘mother’ of Christianity; they are twins, joined at the hip.”

Instead of religious communities and traditions being “entities” that have “split off” from or were “born of each other,” they are “distinctions produced (and resisted) for particular purposes by particular people.”

Boyarin thus compares the partitioning of Judaico-Christanity to the development of languages:

The various groupings or “dialects” of the Jewish world of late antiquity, loosely clustered in a family resemblance, thus “gradually developed structure as clusters through diffusion and were eventually organized as ‘languages’ (religions) through processes very much analogous to those juridical processes by which national languages, such as French and Italian were also formed.” We may observe there is a tehemic quality to this: out of the unformed chaos, clusters emerge through self-organization, while

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23 Ibid., p. 1.
24 Ibid., p. 17.
25 Ibid., p. 18.
26 Ibid., p. 25.
27 Ibid., p. 5.
28 Ibid., p. 19.
29 Instead of a family tree with one or more identifiable origins splitting into different groups, Boyarin notes that in linguistics, it has been argued that differences and influences move more like waves across a pond, “intersecting with other such waves produced in other places and leading to the currently observed patterns of differentiation and similarity.” Historically unrelated groups, once in proximity, may grow to become “more like each other than previously, not less.” ibid., pp. 18, 19.
30 Ibid., p. 19.
their “tehomophobic” organization into “religions” through a discourse on orthodoxy appears to foreclose this creative process. “[M]uch human violence is generated simply by resisting the fuzziness of our own categories of sociocultural division.”

For this emergent self-organization was not to persist. The sharp separation from what was to become Judaism became central to Christianity’s effort to define itself, an effort that increasingly turned to the demonization of groups more in the middle of the continuum.

 “[T]he borders between Judaism and Christianity have been historically constructed out of acts of discursive (and too often actual) violence, especially acts of violence against the heretics who embody the instability of our constructed essences, of our terrifying bleedings into each other.”

As Christianity began to form and attempted to work out what kind of entity it wanted to be, it “needed religious difference, needed Judaism to be its other.” Christianity is defined as a “religion” by the “mapping of a border with something that Christianity will call Judaism.”

As Christianity thus introduced orthodoxy as a means of establishing membership in this new religion, the Rabbis in turn appropriated this strategy for themselves, starting to police the borders of “Judaism” in a way they had not done before. In their attempts at dissociation, “Christian writers of orthodoxy and the Rabbis were evolving in important and strikingly parallel ways.”

By the end of late antiquity, however, the Rabbis come to refuse the denotation of “religion” for Judaism, leading to a lasting confusion within Judaism and further complicating the relation to Christianity, which did not care what the Rabbis think and continued (and continues) to consider Judaism a religion. From the Judaic perspective, however, “the difference between Christianity and Judaism is not so much a difference between two religions as a difference between a religion and an entity that refuses to be one.”

So we see that each of these authors, in their own way, finds that when they direct their gaze towards these crossings and relations, they are not merely studying the exchanges between fixed entities. For each, it is not so much the study of religions, cultures, et cetera, when they encounter the other, but the study of those entities as constitutively oriented towards the other.

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32Ibid., p. xiv.
33Ibid., p. 11.
34Ibid., p. xii.
36Ibid., p. 5.
37Ibid., pp. 7–8.
V.3. A POETICS OF DIFFERENCE AND RELATION

The question facing us when we want to address the interreligious is thus not so much the question of what becomes of the “religious” when it becomes interreligious, but an understanding of the religious as interreligious. Not so much whether we can find an understanding of “religion” to understand the “interreligious,” but the inverse: how the “interreligious” shapes, makes possible, but also de-centers, “religion,” and comes to define and exclude some collectivities as “other religions.”

Boyarin cites a poignant line by philosopher Denis Guénoun: “Religion happens as the difference of religions.” While the shift in focus from entities towards relations/differences does not presume any (post)structuralist assumptions about how all identity is constituted in the play of differences (or the relational or hermeneutic alternative), it thus appears to lead into that territory on its own accord: A closer look suggests traditions, cultures, and religions are deeply marked by their entanglement with others, and that this entanglement is ineluctable, indeed, that they cannot be understood without it.

An aspect of these interchanges has been the critical examination of the element of force and domination: Discussing the “religious other” is always a discussion of an otherness defined or even produced by these ambiguous, unequal and violent processes. The assumption, current in much of theology of religions, that this otherness is simply “there” both cements difference and masks its historical production. On the one hand, the pluralist insight still stands that Christianity must learn to see itself as simply one religion amongst others. On the other hand, however, the analyses of King and Boyarin also make clear that Christianity must recognize the way it is not simply one religion amongst others, but is, in a sense, the religion par excellence, the religion that has historically most been able to define what “religion” means and who its “religious others” are. In my view, interreligious work, especially within the West, always happens in the space of this legacy, meaning Christianity—including its liberal and progressive forms—must be especially apprehensive about imposing its categories and its definitions on the interreligious.

This critical examination of force and domination, and especially Christianity’s role in it, is an element theopoetics must and can embrace. The political effects of theological absolutism are a key motivation for Caputo’s “weak” theology, and the entanglement of religious difference with the constitution of political community is an important aspect of Keller’s discussion of the interreligious. If an examination of the historicity of religious difference places Christianity under suspicion, theopoetics will be able to see in this not only a threat, but a deeper affirmation of the Divine and the possibil-

ity for the tradition’s continued life. That said, it is an emphasis that could still be amplified: When discussing the interreligious, especially Kearney and Caputo do not go into great detail on this political aspect and appear to continue to operate from a notion of religion that they universalize. As I argued in each of my core chapters, a liberal or progressive Christianity is not exempt from the need to be awake to the way it may continue to benefit from unjust power imbalances, and it must be willing to deconstruct its own position of privilege.

Paradoxically, however, this indelible entanglement also undercuts or limits Christianity’s hegemonic force. Christianity constructs difference, as Kwok stressed, but difference also constructs, transforms, and thereby challenges Christianity: As King puts it, this means that a formative part of “our” history happened elsewhere. While it is thus necessary to see Christianity as a hegemonic force and work towards the deconstruction of this hegemony, it is also necessary to point out that this power is never total; the unruliness of difference also means that efforts to exert dominance seep away and turn back to undermine themselves.

V.3.2 A Quasi-Ontology or (U)Topology of Difference

What starts to come into view with the above analyses from religious and social studies is that there is something peculiar going on with the relations and differences “between” “religions.” They at once constitute and destabilize entities and identities; they are both constructed and ineluctable, both omnipresent and elusive. They appear as life-giving and productive, but also as violent and oppressive. If this unruliness or ambiguity, which I have been pursuing throughout this study under the name of its “anarchy,” has thus far mostly served as a heuristic tool to point out where the work of Kearney, Caputo and Keller think the Kingdom of God, creation, and the Divine itself in terms themselves “anarchic,” it has also been more of a shorthand than a well-developed concept.

A more intentional theopoetics of religious difference, however, would need to address this unruliness at a more conceptual level, speaking not only to its empirical occurrence but also (quasi-)transcendentally to its conditions of possibility. With the humility and tentativeness befitting a theopoetics, which can only ever utter a “quasi-”ontology, it would nevertheless need

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40 Another way of putting this, which I will simply note here, would be to repeat and perhaps amplify Keller’s Whiteheadian qualifier for all metaphysics: That they are at most “metaphors mutely appealing for an intuitive leap” (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 4). I fear, however, that such a qualifier will hardly be enough to dispel worries that I am simply proposing another (theopoetic) pluralism. See also my discussion of “quasi-
to venture a poetics of this anarchy, of the way it destabilizes the *grounds* of religion as well as its *borders*, appears at once *ineluctable* yet *resistant* to being contained, is employed to exert dominance yet also appears to unsettle that dominance. And, in the midst of this, it would need to express a hope that the ambiguity of difference may yet open up into a future of togetherness.

To begin such a poetics, it may be helpful to retrace our steps a bit, revisiting what I considered the most radical expression of the anarchy of religious difference in Chapter I: Kwok Pui-Lan’s call for a “theology of religious difference,” which in turn builds on Homi Bhabha’s understanding of cultural difference as distinguished from cultural *diversity* (see above, p. 59). Diversity, in Bhabha’s vocabulary, refers to the perception of cultures as bounded, stable, separated entities and the “recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs,” giving rise to liberal multiculturalism, humanism, or ideas of cultural exchange. *Difference*, on the other hand, refers to an understanding that cultures and difference are not simply “there” but are produced in ambiguous and often violent processes of enunciation. Differences “must be understood as they constitute identities — contingently, indeterminately.” Cultural difference thus refers to a “process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity.” Cultural identity does not precede difference—indeed we might say that cultural difference appears as a condition for culture more generally.

Cultural difference, in Bhabha’s view, is inherently unstable. Because of semiotic instability or *différence*, any meaning is dependent on the discursive context in which the utterance takes place. No communication is simply transparent: Colonial rulers may justify their domination by an appeal to their cultural superiority, but this “is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation.” In the “enunciation” of culture in the context of cultural difference, “something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated” as this enunciation is “crossed by the *différence* of writing.” Bhabha thus identifies “a displacement of truth in the very identification of culture, or an uncertainty in the structure of ‘culture’ as the identification of a certain discursive human truth.”

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41Kearney, too, says he is “particularly indebted” to Bhabha for his work on narrative and collective identity (Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, 189n1), and Keller takes him as a conversation partner on several occasions (e.g. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, pp. 161ff.; Keller, *God and Power*, pp. 39–40, 119–128).
42Ibid., p. 335.
43Ibid., p. 35.
44Ibid., p. 51.
46Ibid., p. 192.
In sum, in Bhabha’s understanding difference is not the meeting of contiguous, otherwise stable and independent identities, but rather the ambivalent negotiation by which those identities are constituted. Kwok’s proposition to think religious difference along these lines has far-reaching consequences: It highlights how religious difference is contested and entangled in what it separates. As an unstable demarcation, on the one hand it enunciates domination over collectivities defined as “other religions,” but on the other hand, through its resistance to being fixed and controlled, it always also undercuts that domination and indeed the stability and self-sufficiency of religious identity more generally.

With différence, Bhabha and Kwok go a long way in offering a framework to think about not only the instability of identities in the context of religious difference, but also the way that instability is produced through the primacy of difference over identity: to think, that is, not only about what happens when the “religious” comes into contact with the “interreligious,” but to think the religious as interreligious, as ineluctably produced by this “inter.” For différence suggests reading difference not as a consequence of identities, but vice versa: Identities, including religious identities, are produced contingently in an ever-expanding play of references and differences, chains which never find an end. In Derrida’s words, the differences that make meaning “are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system,” but themselves “the effects of transformations,” meaning they do not lend themselves to being fixed, but instead open meaning up to endless reinterpretation. Religions, we might say—if there are such things—are not only different from another, they are formed in that difference, which branches out into endless chains of reference, to other contexts, other entities, other terms and collectivities and practices, each of which is again formed by its difference to others, in an ever-extending field. It is precisely because religions are relationally constituted and constructed in an indelible entanglement, which takes place in a field without ends, that they are undone in their self-sufficiency, and confronted with a profound unknowing towards themselves and the collectivities they are part of.

In drawing on Derridean différence, Bhabha also opens the way for an even deeper connection with theopoetics, on the level of (quasi-)ontology. For, as we recall, différence is at the basis of Caputo’s theopoetics as a structural indeterminacy that makes meaning and indeed faith possible and in the same stroke unstable. An account of religious difference here thus connect with the differential (quasi-)ontology that forms the background of at least Caputo’s version of theopoetics, “a constitutive disorder,”48 “the general condition that besets us all . . . in virtue of which we must all make

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47Derrida, Positions, p. 27.
48Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 52.
our way by way of the differential spacing of signifiers." A theopoetics of religious difference might thus recognize in its unruliness a more general quasi-transcendental differential or relational logic, opening up not so much a universal condition (for that would be too easy, and it would be too uppercase, too grand, altogether too archic) as a more general contingency or groundlessness, one that reaches at least beyond these determinate conditions. We can, at most, offer a "light sketch" of this condition, but it never quite gets off the ground enough to say anything about universals with any confidence.

Recognizing something of diff´erance in religious difference, then, is not so much about finding a noumenal general principle at work "below" or "behind" difference, of which concrete differences would be but the phenomenal manifestations, as it is about the realization that there may not be an original principle, no one or original unity "behind" the plurality, multiplicity and difference of the world, and that this absence-of-principle, this an-archy, invades and de-centers any effort to ground an order. Of this realization, it seeks not to unlock a logos but merely to provide a poetics—with Caputo, we might say that it is "headless," that it does not allow for conceptual elucidation. It is not the discovery of an order behind the disorder, nor the discovery of a principle of disorder, but rather the attempt to give words to the realization that all order is ultimately contingent, that the common ground is groundless.

In Caputo’s corpus, this indeterminacy of diff´erance also goes under the name of kh¯ora. Kh¯ora stems from Plato; in the Timaeus, he had introduced kh¯ora as the space in which creation takes place. Plato suggests it is not in itself created, nor does it create, nor does it serve as a form or paradigm for creation: It is simply the “receptacle of all becoming.” Derrida finds in this an “exemplary aporia,” a spacing which does not “exist” or have place itself, yet gives space to all, everywhere and nowhere, without however actively giving anything. Referring to kh¯ora without an article, as to a proper name, Derrida describes how it/she “cannot easily be situated, assigned to a residence: it is more situating than situated.” He sees in kh¯ora the “spacing of de-construction” itself, a spacing that “oscillates between two types of oscillation: the double exclusion (neither/nor) and the participation (both this and that).”

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50 See also my discussion of the ultimate failure of a neat distinction between the messianic and concrete messianisms, and thus of the messianic as a universal, above, pp. 137ff.
52 Derrida, On the Name, p. xv.
53 Ibid., p. 92.
54 Ibid., p. 80.
55 Ibid., p. 92.
Caputo describes it as a “desert-like place without properties or genus,” and a “surname” for \textit{différence}. It names the “site, the interval, the spare spacing, within which both theology and atheology, both faith and faithlessness, theism and antitheism, faith in this or faith in that, would take place, would have a place.” Thought in proximity to \textit{khôra}, religious difference could be said to be the “spare spacing” within which religion takes place, more situating than situated. The difference “between” two “religions” could be said to oscillate, like \textit{khôra}, between being \textit{neither} the one \textit{nor} the other and being both. Facing difference, we might thus say, means facing indeterminacy and groundlessness, or, to put it differently, the contingency of all grounds—giving a place to an insight already reported by the comparative theologians all the way back in I.4 (see above, p. 41).

If this sounds all too desert-like and still, we may switch gears, and briefly retrace our steps to an inflection of unruliness instead teeming with life and relation: \textit{tehom} or the Deep. As we recall, Keller notes a strong affinity between \textit{khôra/différence} and tehom, which is likewise neither created nor Creator but precedes that difference (see above, pp. 174f.). If tehom is is almost exactly \textit{khôra}, it evokes an indeterminacy a bit less desert-like, a bit more alive, a bit warmer. It is almost exactly what I tried to name as anarchy (see above p. 177): an uncontrollable “space” that appears to precede what it differentiates, without grounding it in an origin, calling into question self-sufficiency by its mere being-there. Perhaps this tehomic inflection can complement our \textit{khôraic} reading of difference, yielding a view of religious difference as ambiguous between desert-like stillness and a wilderness teeming with life. What comes into view is not merely a quasi-principle of indeterminacy, but an encompassing \textit{complicatio} that exceeds us, but which we nevertheless inhabit.

Above, I discussed Keller’s discussion with Daniel Boyarin on the “between” of intertextuality (see p. 175). Keller had argued that this “between” was more than a simple \textit{nihil}, suggesting the gaps of “inter” or “between” evoke a tehomic Deep. It is this indeterminate “potentiality burbling between the cracks” out of which \textit{novelty} arises, as the play of intertextuality

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\textsuperscript{58} Caputo, \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida}, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{59} Kearney reads \textit{khôra} as “an open site where the divine may dwell” (Kearney, \textit{Strangers, Gods, and Monsters}, p. 194), but which is in itself “a formless desert abyss, a no-place we experience in fear and trembling moments of uncertainty and loss,” or “misery, terror, loss and desolation” (ibid., p. 204). He faults Caputo for wanting to spend too much time in this desert, instead of finding the way \textit{out} of it to a retrieval of faith. While I agree with Kearney that the experience of contingency can be deeply unsettling, a theopoetics of religious difference as I have it in mind would find Kearney’s reading of \textit{khôra} altogether too unambiguous.
and difference offers endlessly new contextualizations and interpretations. Perhaps we can expand this understanding of a tehomic “inter,” burbling with possibility, to the “inter” of the interreligious. Difference itself could thus be said to have an indeterminate depth to it. Depth “not as a backwards or downwards pushing interiority of the text,” akin perhaps to the deep truths pluralists believe hidden in religions, “but as a dialogical potentiality.”60 This suggests the fault lines of difference, the “in-between,” must thus be seen not as a mere line or empty nihil, as an empty space or clearing to be crossed, but, in its own way, as already divine, as a Deep of potentiality out of which novelty is perpetually emerging.

If, per Bhabha and Kwok, it makes sense to think religious difference in terms of diff´ erance, a theopoetics may thus also think it in terms of kh¯ ora and tehom. Though certainly no less ambiguous—we must not forget “there is real peril in the deep”61—a tehomic reading of difference may be a bit more lively than its kh¯ oraic counterpart, giving expression to the faith that out of this difference something can emerge, that this indeterminacy also opens structures up to a new future. So conceived, a kh¯ oraic or tehomic contingency would deprive the religions of the proud assurance of an origin, opening up a non-space of preoriginal indeterminacy—but also teeming with possibility.

If metaphysics can be understood as the effort to identify an underlying unity to reality,62 this differential quasi-ontology—and it can at most be a quasi-ontology—would instead suspect an underlying difference to reality, an underlying multiplicity, perhaps, that does not add up to a unity but instead becomes apparent as the insistent, anarchic, frustration of such attempts at unity and first principles.63 For this reason, it is crucial that this differential indeterminacy is not itself again taken as a first principle.64 As a nonexistent, groundless space of indeterminate possibility, diff´ erance/kh¯ ora/tehom are not so much first principles themselves as quasi-principles, “quasi-transcendental” conditions of possibility for principles to

60 Keller, Face of the Deep, p. 118.
61 Ibid., p. 86.
63 A more elaborate treatment of these themes would also need to discuss fellow deconstructivist Jean Luc Nancy’s ontology of being-with in this light. According to Nancy, “[b]eing cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the with and as the with of this singularly plural coexistence” (Jean-Luc Nancy. Being Singular Plural. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 3). This is the “groundless ground” that opens up underneath any principled order, less “the gaping chasm of an abyss” than the “network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities: Ungrund rather than Abgrund, but no less vertiginous” (Jean-Luc Nancy. The Inoperative Community. Trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, p. 27).
64 See also Caputo’s discussion of Derrida’s initial rejection of the comparison with negative theology, above, p. 124.
emerge, while simultaneously calling them into question. As Caputo puts it, “transcendental conditions nail things down . . . quasi-transcendental condi-
tions allow them to slip loose, to twist free from their surrounding horizons, 
to leak and run off, to exceed or overflow their margins.”65 Though differ-
ence always leaks into identity, “difference itself,” if there is such a thing, is 
never quite given, always also contingent and in flux. Or, as I put it above 
(p. 174): Tehom is not a first principle, but what perpetually calls into 
question any attempt to establish a first principle or governing structure. 
Not a principle, but a quasi-principle, a non-principle perhaps—\textit{anarch` e}.

This anarchy can also be read as a utopy, a placelessness. For if difference 
is not given secondarily from the space between contiguous and preexisting 
entities, but happens as the negotiation that delimits the necessarily fuzzy 
borders of those entities in the first place, its own “location” is far from 
straightforward. Thinking religious difference as khôraic/tehomic also opens 
up a way to think about this apparent placenessness, the way difference 
cannot be contained to a stable location “between” entities,66 but seeps in 
and out, at once nowhere and everywhere. If khôra is the “interval or spacing 
of \textit{différence},”67 it is also itself placeless; it does not take up space itself, is 
at once everywhere and nowhere. In Bhabha’s words, the “inter” of the 
terculcular is “agonistic, shifting, splitting, . . . lying on the border-line 
between outside and inside.”68 It “sows confusion between opposites and 
stands between the oppositions at once.”69 Difference, in this view, is less 
an unclaimed desert or wilderness between homogenous religious ecosystems, 
and more the insistence of desertification, of overgrowth, of cross-pollination 
and climate factors into any ecosystem, making clear the artificiality of its 
supposed self-sufficiency and opening up to a more general, unlocalizable, 
planetary interdependence.

The idea of religious difference as a “non-site” also appears in decon-
structivist religious scholar Gil Anidjar’s comments on Derrida’s work on 
religion. He discusses (an inflection of) religious difference under the name 
of the “Abrahamic,” and describes it as an “unreadable non-site of impli-
cation (and of dislocation).”70 As the “original gathering root of the three 
major monotheistic faiths” it forms simultaneously an occasion for com-
ing together or hospitality and a space for comparison, competition, and 
thus conflict. The Abrahamic, in its instability, is thus both promising and

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66 As is still relatively common in interreligious studies; see Oddbjørn Leirvik. \textit{Interre-
68 Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, p. 156.
also profoundly dangerous: It “oscillates between the haunting threat of a volcanic explosion, . . . and the promise of peaceful reconciliation.”  

The promise of reconciliation it holds is threatened or ruptured from the inside by the impossibility of this gathering: Religious difference does not permit its simple reconciliation. “The Abrahamic . . . articulates a multiplicity of names . . . that silence and voice, erase and memorize, expose and explode religion—the encounter, if it is one, of Judaism, Christianity, Islam.” If it is one: a Derridean qualifier used to speak of things that do not exist or indeed are impossible.

The interreligious, as our ineluctable and destabilizing co-implication, thus becomes a spacing or difference without presence, without a location, and, in an important sense, without rest: Interreligious reconciliation always already comes disturbed from within, retains its tehomic ambiguity, remains promised/threatened—as impossible. With a deconstructivist sensibility, however, we may not be disheartened by this, pointing out how this impossibility does not limit the promise, but instead only intensifies it. In Caputo’s words, “anything else, anything less, would be too parochial and presentable, too pedestrian and too possible, to be worthy of ‘thinking’ and ‘desire’ and ‘passion’; and elsewhere, “[t]hings only get interesting when we come up against the insistence of the impossible. Things really happen by the impossible.”

In sum, a theopoetics of religious difference might find in the three related quasi-principles of diffr´erance, kh¯ora, an tehom a way of thinking the unruli-ness or anarchy of religious difference at a more (quasi-)ontological level, and

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71Ibid., p. 5.  
72Ibid., p. 7.  
73Cf. Caputo, What Would Jesus Deconstruct? p. 64. The figure of Abraham may be a rather suitable example of the shortcomings of imagining religious difference as a “between space.” For Abraham, though an “interreligious” figure, is no less present or important to Christianity or Judaism simply for his appearance in Islam. And yet, he also belongs to neither of these, at least not in the strong sense of belonging exclusively. Abraham’s (dis)location in the traditions that claim his memory thus follows a deconstructive logic of both/and/neither/nor.

Anidjar argues that a figure such as Derrida, as an “Arab Jew,” stands for the frustration of a European Christian imaginary that would seek to keep this dislocation under control through assignations of ethnic and religious, political and theological, categories to its others. It thus opposes Jews “ethnically” or “politically” to Arabs, but also “religiously” to Muslims. The Arab Jew frustrates this: An ineluctable Abrahamic connectedness destabilizes “hierarchizations of and within alterity” by which Christianity, or Europe, seeks but fails to keep the threatening instability of the Abrahamic under control. “The Abrahamic . . . dissociates and breaks the dividing movement around which ‘Europe’—and religion—constitutes itself.” Anidjar, “Introduction “Once More, once More”: Derrida, the Arab, the Jew,” p. 7; cf. Gil Anidjar. Semites: Race, Religion, Literature. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

75Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 41.
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seeing in it not a marginal situation in which Christianity finds itself now and again, secondary to the proud confidence of identity and dogma, but an ineluctable condition of the very “thing” we call religion. That said, this relational quasi-pluralism, if we may call it such, does not hinge so much on a shared condition, coming together in that we all expect the same thing, or that we all are unsettled by the same contingency, or that we all make a movement of faith in undecidability—which is what Kearney’s pluralism, and Caputo’s pluralist equivocations about an underlying affirmation, seem to continue to do. Instead, it would hinge on an insight closer to what Keller is getting with comparative messianism (see above, pp. 208ff.): The indeterminacy of the interreligious, which remains unfinished and in which nothing is simply given, and the indeterminacy of the messianic expectation, in which everything is possible, are folded together. A theopoetics of religious difference might even consider the search for a shared essence or transcendent referent misplaced, as it would rather discern the Divine to be happening in the encounter, in the relationship, in the difference.

It may be that these short pages do not nearly do justice to the complexity of these issues. In my view, however, this khôraic/tehomic vision of difference may, for a theopoetics of religious difference, give a place to some of its most central insights: That difference opens us up to a groundlessness (namely, the contingency of khôra/tehom), that it questions the borders of religions and appears resistant to being contained (as it does not sit peacefully “between,” but seeps in), that it appears ineluctable (connecting it to a differential/relational quasi-ontology), is employed to exert dominance (as it a particular difference is never given, but a negotiation) yet also appears to unsettle that dominance (as its exertion is crossed by semiotic instability). And, particularly in its tehomic inflection, it can also embrace the way togetherness, relationship, and community are never a given, but nevertheless constantly arising from the depth of difference.

V.3.3 Translatability: The Difference of the Same

A theopoetics of religious difference will also need to speak to the complexities of its crossing, its translatability. We recall that Moyaert, Kearney and Caputo addressed the interreligious in terms of translation, offering a way to think about interreligious understanding that is sensitive to tensions, misunderstandings, and a necessary intransparency. Moyaert had argued that interreligious translatability opens us up to the groundlessness of our attachments (see above, p. 41), and Kearney had intuited that something of the Divine becomes recognizable in the untranslatable (see p. 111). With Caputo, I found a notion of translatability that laid bare the inevitable slipping-away of religious language, casting doubt on their purported metaphysical reference, and suggesting that religious language does not coincide with itself (see pp. 153ff.). In the following, I will introduce a number of
conversation partners to flesh out this notion of translatability as non-self-identity.

One aspect of this experience of interreligious translatability is, simply, that our religious vocabularies and experiences are translatable at all, that they can be said otherwise and may even have their origin elsewhere. The issue of translatability, however, is greater than simply the discovery that what we held to be unique may not be unique after all—an intuition already voiced as the opening salvo of the pluralist hypothesis in Chapter I. Inter-religious translatability, it appears to me, is a more complex matter than a mere transparency or commonness. As I wrote in Chapter III (see p. 154), translatability names not only the relative transparency or understandability of religious languages to each other, or lack thereof, but something more insidious: not only that the “same” can or cannot be said in different words, but that this reveals it to be “not the same,” to not refer transparently to a stable set of meanings but to slip away.

This is confirmed by translation scholar and literary translator Lawrence Venuti. Translation, Venuti argues, is not about an “invariant” meaning, form, or effect that gets transported into another vocabulary, but about offering an “interpretation of the source text, whose form, meaning, and effect are seen as variable.” Venuti conceives of a text to be translated “not as the self-consistent container or cause of an invariant but as a signifying process, at once heterogeneous and variable, constituted by multiple contexts that support diverse meanings, values, and functions in the culture where the text originated.” Translation is thus “radically transformative,” a complex process of de- and recontextualization made up of a multitude of choices, each of which “creates a different set of contexts that constitute a different signifying process.”

In a text on biblical translation, Venuti notes this understanding “puts into question the metaphysical invariant contained in both the biblical text and its translation.” Translatability thus does not so much mean that the same determinate “meaning” or “reference” gets expressed in different vocabularies, but rather calls into question that our vocabularies would have stable meanings and determinate metaphysical references at all. In this light, translatability allies itself with a central theopoetic point: that religious faith is less about reference to a metaphysical constant, and that religious truth is less about propositions and facts, than about narrative figurations, imaginative metaphors and events.

This means, Venuti argues, that “[t]ranslation never communicates in an untroubled fashion.” In order to evoke the idiosyncrasies of the source

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77 Ibid., p. 22.
78 Ibid., p. 22.
79 Ibid., p. 21.
text, the translator can only draw on idiosyncracies of the target language, eg. by using a certain register or dialect of English, perhaps drawing on language that is old-fashioned or evocative of a certain genre of English text, to evoke a certain feel, reference, or certain values in translating, for example, Italian poetry. “The foreign text, then, is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests.”

This need for a domestic inscription means translation “never quite” becomes “cross-cultural communication.”

Paradoxically, this is not immediately apparent to the reader. Indeed, a translation that is most appealing to a reader could be almost unrecognizable to the audience of its original. “[W]idening the domestic range of that appeal [of a translated work] means that the inscription cannot include much of the foreign text. A translated bestseller risks reducing the foreign text to what domestic constituencies have in common, a dialect, a discourse, an ideology.”

In his own way, Venuti here gives words to the structural dilemma also voiced by Kearney in his reflections on historical imagination (see above, pp. 77ff.), which is doubly bound: on the one hand, to the singularity and verity of the historical events, and on the other hand, to the sensibilities of the contemporary audience. We inevitably come to understand what the other is saying in terms already familiar. In translation, understanding is misunderstanding. It is impossible to understand the translated text without also, at the same time, misunderstanding it. Indeed when understanding most seems to succeed is precisely when it could be most tragically failing. However, as we will see, this failure also forms the paradoxical condition for a utopian hope—to which I will return below.

Translatability is also crucial to Bhabha’s understanding of cultural difference. If Venuti describes translation as “violent in its impact on the source text and ultimately ethnocentric in its privileging of the receiving situation,” Bhabha turns this around: In the colonial situation, precisely this process also undercuts the dominant party’s superiority, as it becomes the “source text.” In order to make its domination felt and understood, the colonial power relies on translating itself into the dominated culture, but in so doing in some sense submits itself to the “receiving situation.” The language of the master is submitted to “the difference of the same”: Crossed by translatability, its statements lose their stability, emerging as, in effect, different from themselves.

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81 Ibid., p. 469.
82 Ibid., p. 482.
83 See also my discussion of Marianne Moyaert, above (pp. 40ff.), who, in a more hermeneutic key, likewise argues we need to let go of the dream of perfect understanding.
85 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 33.
In Chapter II, I briefly discussed Kearney’s take on what he called the untranslated kernel that persists in interreligious communication (see above, p. 111). Kearney had identified this untranslated with the Divine, and folded it into the interreligious commonality enabling his pluralism. For Bhabha, the untranslated signifies “the element of resistance in the process of transformation.” As the “unstable element — the interstice,” it forms a moment in which the hegemony of the master is incomplete and begins to falter, thus offering a space for its subversion.

Bhabha sees this phenomenon especially illustrated in what we might call situations of interreligious miscommunication, citing the frustration of missionaries with translating Christianity unproblematically into Indian contexts. A certain Rev. A. Duff finds himself at a loss for words: It turns out the terms he wants to use to describe the tenets of Christianity already have meanings in the Indian context. So “every term which the Christian missionary can employ to communicate divine truth is already appropriated as the chosen symbol of some counterpart deadly error,” the Reverend laments. In this exasperation, Bhabha finds the “grounds of evangelical certitude are opposed,” not by a simple contrary assertion, but by the process of the very translation it needs to assert that certitude. The ambiguity of translatability challenges the “written authority of the Bible,” and with it “a postenlightenment notion of the ‘evidence of Christianity’ and its historical priority.”

Bhabha also relates a story he finds in a missionary paper from the early 19th century, in which an indigenous missionary finds himself caught off-guard by the unusual questions from a group of apparent converts, who refuse to take Communion with the English as long as the latter will not be vegetarians. Though the questioning community apparently accepts the Bible as the Word of God, it “no longer simply commands authority,” but is itself made to answer to contextual “rules of recognition.” Under the conditions of cultural difference, the missionary and indeed the Bible itself are made to answer questions that shift the balance and subtly change the terms of the conversation, given by the simple fact that these Hindus were vegetarians and brought this value along into their assessment of Christianity. “The institution of the Word in the wilds is also an Entstellung,” Bhabha

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86 Ibid., p. 321.
87 Ibid., p. 324.
88 Being “born again” obviously is taken to refer to reincarnation and thus hardly makes an impression on his Hindu interlocutors. In response, he tries a different phrasing: Potential proselytes must be “twice-born,” a phrase, however, also already in use, referring to a step in the process to attain Brahmanhood. Ibid., pp. 48–49.
89 Ibid., p. 192.
90 Ibid., p. 49.
91 Ibid., p. 161.
92 Ibid., p. 162.
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argues, “a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition.”

From this inevitable misunderstanding, something new can thus emerge: As colonial domination is subverted, agency can be reinvented, and unpredictable new forms of being-together can emerge. For a theopoetics of religious difference, this insight of Bhabha’s may be read alongside a central insight of each of my three core chapters: It is precisely critique, deconstruction, negation, suspicion, impurity, and so forth, that can open up structures to their own future, to new life, and—if we can read Bhabha theopoetically—to the Divine.

The possible divine complicity with (un)translatability is a key point of Derrida’s reading of the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 10:31–11:9). Derrida notes that the desire to build a tower and make a name for oneself in a monolingual empire, as the descendants of Sem are said to do in the story, is ambiguous. The city and the tower are historically attributes of empire, and the desire to avoid being scattered thus oscillates between a “peaceful transparency of the human community” and a “colonial violence.” If religious difference, in its khoraic/tehomic inflection, is necessarily ambiguous, both threatening and promising, as I noted above, it is also crucial to stress how profoundly ambiguous and indeed how lethal the desire for transparency, pacification, and commonality can likewise be. The desire for transparent understanding—a “definitive solution” to religious difference—has a totalitarian, imperialist, violent side to it.

God’s imposition of multiplicity on Babel, and the planetary dispersion of its people, Derrida thus argues, “ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism.” With multiplicity, we might say, God has instituted a “constitutive disorder” into human understanding, which will never achieve the clear transparency the descendants of Sem had hoped for: Translatability is untranslatability. It is “both necessary and impossible,” remaining “inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us.”

The divine institution of (un)translatability thus frustrates our hopes for complete transparency, but this is also a gift, for it is done by the giving of

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93Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 149.
94Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel.” This is one of Derrida’s texts that Caputo does not address to a significant extent.
95Ibid., p. 111.
96We recall Caputo’s warning of “the terror of an organic, ethnic, spiritual unity, ... lethal compounds that spell death for Arabs and Jews, for Africans and Asians, for anything other.” Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida, pp. 231–232.
97Moyaert, Fragile Identities, p. 298.
99Caputo, The Insistence of God, p. 52.
100Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” p. 111.
101Ibid., p. 104.
the divine name, which in a single stroke imposes and forbids translation. Though it must be taken seriously that this frustration remains ambiguous, frustrating reconciliation and totalitarian violence alike, a theopoetics of religious difference may see in it a divine blessing.

This divine blessing becomes a more overtly messianic promise in a more recent text in which Derrida returns to the problem of linguistic non-self-identity as it becomes apparent in his own biographical situation as a Francophone Algerian Jew. French is his mother tongue, but as Derrida was not a French citizen as a child, it is also not his language. He thus intimates, “I have only one language; it is not mine.” Apparent in this situation, Derrida suggests, is a more general “disorder of identity.” On the one hand, we only ever have one language that is truly ours, which “constitutes me, it dictates even the ipseity of all things to me . . . as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some vows.” On the other hand, however, “[w]e never only speak one language,” for “[t]his I would have formed itself, then, at the site of a situation that cannot be found, a site always referring elsewhere.” Even if, as I discussed above, difference itself is not stable, cannot be found, it insinuates itself into any formation of identity, which thus becomes split, being both intimate or self-evident (hence “monolingualism”) and marked by difference (“of the other”).

It appears to me that this reading may contribute to a theopoetics of religious difference by illuminating why it can be so vehemently unsettling. For this “auto-heteronomy” may elaborate on the insight that “we are not even identical with ourselves, that we are all inhabited from within by the other,” or, as Kearney put it, that we are all “answerable to an alterity which unsettles us.” Religion as crossed by its (un)translatability finds

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102Biblically, this appears to rely at least in part on speculation (that Ba/Be refers to Father/God) and in part on a reading Gen 11:9 as “over which he proclaims his name: Babel, Confusion” (ibid., pp. 105, 108). In the French translation by André Chouraqui, on which Derrida is drawing, this is ambiguous (“son nom” could mean either “his” or “its” name), but the Hebrew is less so: “Shemah,” name, in Gen 11:9 has a feminine possessive suffix, which does not correspond with YHWH and must be taken to refer to ha’ir, the city.

103Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, p. 1. While it is not his main concern in this work, religious difference in its ambiguity and instability is not absent from Derrida’s analysis: Ethnic, linguistic, and religious categories blur into each other as Derrida’s childhood Jewish community calls “all non-Jewish French people ‘Catholics,’ even if they were sometimes Protestants, or perhaps even Orthodox: ‘Catholic’ meant anyone who was neither a Jew, a Berber, nor an Arab.” At the same time, “the rabbi would wear a black cassock [like a priest] . . . the ‘bar mitzvah’ was called ‘communion,’ and circumcision was named ‘baptism.’” Ibid., pp. 52, 54.


105Ibid., pp. 1–2.

106Ibid., p. 29.

107Ibid., p. 39.

108Caputo, Hoping against Hope, p. 100.

109Kearney, Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, p. 5.
itself in a similar aporetic predicament as the one Derrida describes: On
the one hand, we only ever have one religion, the tradition that provides
the language in which we may speak about religion at all, given the impossibility
of a non-particular viewpoint: the religion that “constitutes me . . . as if,
even before learning to [pray], I had been bound by some vows.” On the
other hand, however, we never only have one religion, as identity, tradition,
and community are always already marked by religious difference. What is
most uniquely mine may not be mine. “I have only one [religion], yet it is
not mine.”

From the anxiety engendered by this situation, however, Derrida writes,
a “desire springs forth” for a “first language that would be, rather, a prior-
to-the-first language,”110 in which immemorial memories of untroubled be-
longing could be uttered. But such a language is impossible, it does not
exist, it can “only be a target or, rather, a future language, a promised
sentence, a language of the other, once again.”111 This desire thus opens up
into messianic desire.112

The notion that translation is animated by a messianic promise or de-
sire is given a particular relational bent in Walter Benjamin’s The Task of
the Translator. Translation, Benjamin suggests, is tasked not simply with
rendering a meaning, but with “ripening the seed” of a fundamental kind
of relatedness of languages he calls “pure language.”113 Translation cannot
“reveal or establish” this relatedness, but it can “represent it by realizing it
in embryonic or intensive form.”114 Like a person fitting together fragments
of a broken jar, the translator tries to fit together the details of their re-
lation, “thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as
fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.”115
In this key, interreligious translation could thus be said to be tasked with,
likewise, ripening the indelible entanglement of an interrelated complicatio.

The wholeness that comes into view in this process must not be un-
derstood as a simple progression towards a universal, underlying, truth. It
remains indelibly tied to the particularity and complementarity of the lines
of difference relating and separating the shards. The possibility of a whole
becomes only dimly recognizable, and by no means fulfilled, by putting
the shards together. Indeed, Benjamin wonders if the task of realizing pure lan-
guage is ever attainable,116 and places it in a messianic end of history.117

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110Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, p. 61.
111Ibid., p. 62.
112Ibid., p. 68.
114Ibid., p. 73.
115Ibid., p. 79.
116Ibid., p. 78.
117Ibid., p. 75. Zohn’s translation oddly elides the “messianic” aspect, preferring to sim-
ply render “bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte” as “until the end of their time.”
What is realized in an act of translation is itself but a seed (keimhaft): The “hallowed growth of languages”\textsuperscript{118} in their translation opens into an “eternal life” and “perpetual renewal.”\textsuperscript{119} In Derrida’s reading of Benjamin, this “perpetual reviviscence, this constant regeneration . . . by translation is less a revelation, revelation itself, than an annunciation, an alliance and a promise.”\textsuperscript{120} In the relatedness that translation and translatability realize in embryonic form, something announces itself, a relatedness that does not yet become fully visible, but remains a messianic promise.

In sum, if Venuti allowed us to say more about the way translatability casts doubt on the constancy of metaphysical signifiers, Bhabha identified in this very process a subversive potential. Though this subversion remains ambiguous, so is the desire for transparency, as Derrida stressed. Benjamin, finally, may help us find a messianic promise of a greater relatedness at work in these aporetics of translatability. Benjamin’s emphasis on the relatedness of language in translatability resonates especially with Keller’s more relational ontology, which thus becomes central to this theopoetics of interreligious translatability. This relatedness does not need to fold over into a simple holism of transparent understanding, but instead remains a promise or indeed an incessant tehomic beginning, one that will always remain ambiguous in its unfinishedness, frustrating mutual understanding even as it undercuts totalitarian domination. As the inevitable intransparency of (un)translatability thus opens language up towards an unpredictable future, a theopoetics of religious difference might see in this opening-up also the dim outline, or perhaps the ripening seed, of a complicated relatedness. Not in the bright lights of pluralist commonality but in the gentle growth encouraging us to piece together what was broken, to restore, to nurture what is as yet but a seed of togetherness: a vision of relation and community incessantly arising from the depths of our difference.

Guided by these readings, a theopoetics may thus recognize in the dislocating intransparency of translatability, in these deconstructive encounters, the paradoxical conditions for a messianic announcement, for a new beginning, for an emerging togetherness. As we put together the shards of our brokenness, in the interaction something divine may happen. As the anarchy of difference calls into question the proud confidence of religion, it also becomes recognizable as precisely what opens us up to our interdependency, an interdependency which, in a relational tehomic theology, is already in some sense divine. This is what a theopoetics of religious difference would ultimately seek to not only name but evoke, make real, weep and pray for:


\textsuperscript{119}Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” p. 75.

\textsuperscript{120}Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” p. 132.
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The newness in the brokenness, the relation arising from the depths of difference, a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert of khôra.

V.3.4 Community: An Interreligious Solidarity

Caputo heralds khôra as the “stuff of a new tolerance,” that “would spell the end of religion’s ever-recurring wars.” This tolerance would consist of a “respectful reserve” for the otherness of the other: A letting-be without seeking to bring the “differend,” the irresolvable difference, under control. One could at this point simply follow Caputo’s vision of khôraic tolerance, and stress the indeterminacy at work in any encounter: Khôraic or tehomic indeterminacy, on this take, would simply mean that nothing is per se given and everything is up for conversation. That would already be a profoundly powerful point to be made: In situations of religious difference, the table we may come together at is, in a sense, not “set,” indeterminate. No-one can set preconditions for joining the others at this table; no-one can make their values count as absolute. It would recognize interreligious dialogue as a constant work in progress, where everything agreed upon can be opened up again the next morning. At this khôraic table of encounter, everything submitted is recognized as submitted by limited individuals at a limited time and place. Finding common ground or pacific relations would always be accompanied by the recognition that even the commons are groundless.

However, such a nonviolent interreligious discourse would only be one side of this khôraic situation, and its one-sided emphasis might well mask significant power differentials and privilege at this supposedly indeterminate table. In my view, a theopoetics of religious difference must therefore take to heart Derrida’s emphasis that the “incredible and improbable experience” of khôra is also political, or indeed a “putting to test of the political,” as it works to question, to deconstruct, to open up the way community is constituted through in- and exclusions. A khôraic interreligious, especially in a

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121 Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 156. See also above, p. 129
122 On the “differend” as a situation that requires judgment, but in which no shared framework is available on the basis of which that judgment could be made, see Jean-François Lyotard. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988. For Lyotard, the question of the differend is always also the question of the victim who has lost their ability to present the way they have been wronged, “when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (ibid., p. 9). Caputo does not cite Lyotard here, but it appears to me “respectful reserve” is quite insufficient for such situations of howling injustice (and I think Caputo would agree).
123 Derrida, *On the Name*, p. xvi.
124 This is political in the related senses Jean-Luc Nancy and Chantal Mouffe give to the word, distinguishing “the political”—as concerning the constitution of political community—from “politics” as the everyday distribution of goods and administration of that community. According to Oliver Marchart, this distinction or “political difference”
tehomic relational inflection, would not be about mere coexistence without absolutes; it would also be more affirmative, a pact with khōraic resistance to any attempt towards dominance, with the subversive potential of its semiotic instability, and with tehomic self-organized emergence of new alliances and new forms of living. The politics of a khōraic/tehomic interreligious must be co-resistance: a shared commitment to subverting the way “religion” and “religions” are employed to exert control and a shared search for a becoming togetherness, constantly emerging from the cracks and fissures of our difference.

Keller stresses that this emergence of newness from the boundless possibility of tehom will always be the realization of a possibility, to the exclusion of others (see above, p. 172). Keller connected this with the experience of loss, disrupting the confidence or self-evidence of the actuality that asserts itself already at its very beginning: it could always have been otherwise. However, it also introduces the question of decision, or, perhaps in a softer tone, of discernment: When are emergent interreligious relations good? For not all fissure engenders a desire that is wholesome, not all dislocation brings newness into the world, not all breaks open systems up to greater justice. Not all newness, further, tends the whole, brings relationships into flourishing, and dismantles structures of oppression. Perhaps the ambiguity of these processes can never be decisively dispelled without destroying the possibility for life itself. On the other hand, it has also been a central point of this study that deconstruction, negation, and critique are not to be considered “good” for their own sake, but that they happen in the name of some elusive affirmation. An anarchist theopoetics of religious difference will need not only to describe or trace religious difference, but will also need to figure

\[\text{is based on Heidegger's "ontological difference" between Being and beings, and is especially concerned with questions of the contingent grounds of any political order. A more elaborate treatment of these questions would need to look more closely into the potential challenge and contribution this discourse can present to a theopoetics of religious difference, but also ask what specific challenges and questions religious difference presents to this altogether very secular debate. See Oliver Marchart. *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007; Chantal Mouffe. *The Return of the Political.* London and New York: Verso, 1993; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community.*}\]

125 In Chantal Mouffe's understanding, this is precisely what “the political” as the “ontological dimension of politics” refers to: “[E]very order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always be otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. . . . Every order is therefore susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices.” The political is “from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification, since in this field we are always dealing with the formation of ‘us’ as opposed to ‘them.’” Chantal Mouffe. *Agnonistics: Thinking the World Politically.* London and New York: Verso, 2013, pp. xii, 2, 4. A tehomic, anarchist theopoetics would stress, however, that the distinction between “us” and the “constitutive outside” is never quite stable, it bleeds in and out—excluded possibility always seeps back in. This anarchic “seeping” is where theopoetics finds its potential, what it makes its pact with. The identities so separated remain interdependent, translatable.
some valuation of it.

Indeed a poetics may be particularly suited to such a figuration. Following Kearney (see above, p. 97), we might venture to say that, even if the nonknowingness never quite disappears, our ability to discern the emergence of community is made possible by our poetic imagination, narrative memories, and traditions. This discernment cannot rely on strict criteria, as that would simply be another attempt to bring the unruliness of difference under control, but it can venture a creative articulation of the hope we hold. Where the interdependence coming into view in interreligious translatability is but a still, small, voice, by no means so overwhelming that it cannot be overlooked, a poetics may form an evocative discourse that makes us capable of discerning it, and encourages us to embrace it.

Venuti and Bhabha also envision a certain kind of community emerging from the dislocating multiplicity of difference: One that does not decisively overcome difference nor achieve stasis, that can embrace its own reinvention, and is profoundly political. Though they would not use such overtly religious language, one might say the community they envision is subject to a certain eschatological, or perhaps even apophatic, qualifier. It gets expressed in terms themselves almost already theopoetic: The community they envision remains in an important sense to come, presents a call, and requires a poetics to author its agency. Before closing, I will thus briefly look at how their vision may illuminate a theopoetics of interreligious solidarity.

Venuti argues translation, for all its faults, “constitutes a unique communicative act” animated by a promise of community. The translation and circulation of a foreign text can become “the site of unexpected groupings, fostering communities of readers who would otherwise be separated ... yet are now joined by a common fascination.”

This community called forth by translation remains in a sense impossible, as the readerships brought together understand the translation “in different linguistic and cultural terms.” The inevitable intransparency of translation, which I discussed above, means that the community fostered by translation is in an important sense “imagined,” that is to say, possible as impossible.

Though it may get weighed down or skewed asymmetrically by the inscription of target-language values, beliefs, and references, Venuti stresses translation is, therefore, also “utopian,” because it is “filled with the anticipation that a community will be created.” Translation under the conditions of untranslatability is thus animated by, in a sense, an impossible hope: “Implicit in any translation is the hope for a consensus, a communica-

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127 Ibid., p. 477.
128 Ibid., p. 481.
129 Ibid., p. 482.
130 Ibid., p. 485.
131 Ibid., p. 485.
tion and recognition of the foreign text through a domestic inscription.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 485.} This domestic inscription is “what Bloch calls an ‘anticipatory illumination’ (\textit{Vor-Schein}), a way of imagining a future reconciliation of linguistic and cultural differences.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 486.} It is almost as if this community emits a \textit{call} to be made real.

Venuti's emphasis that this community is \textit{imagined} may find a theopoetic deepening when read through Kearney’s understanding of imagination. For Kearney, we recall, imagination is crucially about making present what is unavailable, in a way that does not definitively close that “gap.” It is neither simply the autonomous projection of images, nor a pure seeing, but a bridging that remains always multiple and always open to reimagining. In a theopoetics of religious difference, imagination must be central: Interreligious relations cannot be limited to simple face-to-face relations, but must include the relations we have to communities that are not present to us—which must therefore be imagined. In Kearney’s understanding, then, such imagination is neither simply a projection of our own issues, nor a simple demand to leave the other as other, but is, in a sense, already a relationship in a constant process (see above, pp. 73ff.), and a crucial element in our own collective identity. Venuti’s imagined utopian community in turn deepens this reading, pointing out that imagination not only concerns imagining the “other,” such as American audiences imagining the Italian setting of a novel, but also involves imagining a togetherness of both those contexts—imagining a community that is structurally impossible, yet calls to be brought into existence.

When this utopian anticipation is then read through Caputo’s understanding of religion as “a pact with the impossible,”\footnote{Caputo, \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida}, p. xx.} Venuti’s understanding is almost already theological by itself, gathering as it does around a hoped-for to-come that remains unrealized but allows us to reimagine the present, emitting a weak call that insists upon existing. Venuti’s understanding of translation is, ultimately, about a belief in the possibility of the impossible: the faith that, in the context of untranslatability and inevitable misunderstanding, a community can nonetheless take shape, togetherness can nonetheless emerge. In such a hoped-for community, a theopoetics may indeed suspect some divine longing. At the same time, Venuti’s emphasis that, although a community will be created, the \textit{fullness} of community remains impossible and utopian, can be an important corrective to celebrations of diversity already made harmless, pacified, and too easily presumed to be achieved once everyone simply adopts a theopoetic perspective. This utopian community engendered by translation is thus a community that \textit{may be}, a community of \textit{perhaps}, a community that can become possible only at
the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

While Venuti particularly writes about literary translation, he notes the real utopian translation is often more mundane, such as the community translation for refugees and immigrants interacting with institutions. Here, especially, the domestic inscription becomes crucial: A particularly ethical translator or interpreter will precisely *not* simply render the exact words of their client, but express their discourse in the terms, values and structures that the institution will appreciate, adding information about the foreign context, “historical, geographical, political, or sociological details that may be omitted in testimony” and be new to the host country’s lawyers or judges. The interpreter fosters a domestic community that is open to foreign constituencies, but that is not yet realized—until the client is given political asylum, due process, medical care, or welfare benefits, as the case may be. Derrida likewise emphasizes the very real material stakes of all this. The togetherness of France and the Maghreb, suggested by the hyphen of “Franco-Maghrebian” used to describe those with biographies like Derrida’s own,

> will never have been given, only promised or claimed. . . . The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory. It could even worsen the terror, the lesions, and the wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs.

Only promised or claimed: In Derrida’s words, the stakes of the repeated assertion that the *poiesis* of inter-religious solidarity is *unfinished*, perhaps even *impossible*, become vividly clear. For this emphasis is by no means merely guided by theoretical concerns, but finds its urgency in questions of justice. *This* is why it is so crucial to always revise the dichotomies that reassert themselves, to always remain vigilant towards the “log in our own eye,” to the way our own categories exclude some and privilege others—especially where they privilege ourselves: When religious difference allies itself with the political, these dichotomies and exclusions can become lethal, and a failure to reexamine them can cover up situations of howling injustice.

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136 Ibid., p. 488.
137 Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 11. Derrida stresses the mere analysis of difference is hardly sufficient in the face of such material suffering. Taking a colonial situation as indicative of a more general condition must not distract us, he argues, from the particular violence of colonial exploitation and alienation, which is never just the illustration to a general condition of placelessness, exile, or colonization. Instead, this recognition must lead to a *repoliticization* of the stakes at work in such analysis. Cf. ibid., p. 63.
As Caputo says, saying justice is already present would be the “most unjust thing of all.”

Bhabha makes a similar move, differentiating between a “global” and a “vernacular” cosmopolitanism. The former “readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples,” but only “so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies.” Such cosmopolitanism is conspicuously uninterested in inequality. With a vernacular cosmopolitanism, in contrast, Bhabha seeks to name a togetherness that emerges less from business class airport lounges and more from the streets of Bombay and Trinidad. It is more processual, working “towards the shared goals of democratic rule, rather than simply acknowledging already constituted ‘marginal’ political entities or identities.”

In Bhabha’s words, in the process of shifting and dislocation of hybrid translatability, “newness enters the world.” From the persistently ambiguous and shaky negotiation of the “inter” of difference, Bhabha contends, an “interstitial future” opens out, which “may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture,” dependent neither on a universalism—we might say, a simple pluralism—nor on a multiculturalism of different separate identities. The solidarity that emerges remains indebted to the particular relation it emerges in, and thus does not quite achieve the privileged vantage point a comprehensive schema would require. Newness—an interreligious solidarity, perhaps.

The possibility emerges for “a politics of social difference that makes no autotelic claims,” centering on an understanding of community as the “minor” version of society. Understood as a “performative discourse,” community “disturbs grand globalizing narrative of capital, displaces the emphasis on production in ‘class’ collectivity, and disrupts the homogeneity of the imagined community of the nation.” Community, in a transnational world, is not the territory of the majority, but of the minority, the migrant, the diasporic, and the refugee. According to Bhabha, this promised community would require a “poetics” (!) to “author its agency.”

Such a poetics, we might say, would envision community not as mere consensus or commonality, nor as a simple respect in enduring difference, but as relationship in persistent becoming. Following Kearney, Caputo, and Keller, it would see interreligious community as a process of interminable gathering.

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139 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, pp. xivff.
140 Ibid., p. xiv.
141 Ibid., p. xviii.
142 Ibid., p. 324.
143 Ibid., p. 313.
144 Ibid., p. 56.
145 Ibid., p. 319.
146 Ibid., p. 330.
147 Ibid., p. 331.
that does not achieve fusion or stasis, nor finds a definite foundation (arché), but remains crossed by multiple stories, re-tellings, and transitions. Interreligious community would always again be exposed to reinterpretations, critique, and renewed gathering. As it is not constituted by the implementation of some identity that would be definitively shared, it cannot be produced archically, but instead only evoked, invoked, provoked—it emerges, breaks in, happens.\footnote{In this, a theopoetics of religious difference may find a reference point in deconstructivist philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense of community as “being in common,” as opposed to a common being or substance, “fusion into . . . a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed.” Indeed community is made by the lack of such an ultimate identity. Nancy, The Inoperative Community, p. xxxviii.}

Following L. Callid Keefe-Perry’s tentative definition, a theopoetics of religious difference might thus speak about interreligious relations with an “acceptance of cognitive uncertainty . . . an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty, and an emphasis on action and creative articulation regardless.”\footnote{Keefe-Perry, Way to Water, p. 131.} A theopoetics of religious difference is thus not just a discourse about it, but seeks to evoke an interreligious solidarity, to make it, facere veritatem, fostering a community that is not yet realized. It would ally itself not only with theology, philosophy, and literature, but also with the everyday co-operative poiesis of building relations. At the same time, it would seek to discern where there is a truth happening in these relations: not the truth of competing truth claims or of a higher or deeper essence, but the truth of relationship, as Kearney, Caputo, and Keller each stress, the truth of troth, that envisions “new transcultural possibilities” and “makes the space in which our complex relationships can breathe and thrive, beyond competition, suffocation, violence.”\footnote{Keller, On the Mystery, pp. 34, 42.}

In the midst of such an evocative poetics, Venuti’s and Bhabha’s emphasis on the everydayness of this co-resistant poiesis fostering an elusive togetherness is crucial, and it may prove to be a vital corrective to the perhaps somewhat ivory-tower intellectualism of much of theopoetics. For, though ultimately whispered in the utopian register of non-sites and placeless places, the elusive affirmation animating this work does take place within
the horizons of determinate historical conditions, determinate struggle, and determinate hope. For all its emphasis on contingency and groundlessness, it does not happen anywhere else than on the ground.

A planetary *complicatio* that we all inhabit comes dimly into view as we piece together the shards of a broken relatedness. This is what is promised in interreligious translation: Not the transparency of a prior-to-the-first language before Babel, but more relation, more life, a deeper togetherness which remains in process. In this growth and renewal in the midst of the broken shards of enmity and opposition, we may recognize something of a *coincidentia oppositorum*, where an aporia or impasse may open up onto an unprecedented passage into something new. Newness: an interreligious solidarity emerging from the depths of difference, perhaps. Translatability thus names not only the slipping-away of our religious languages into silence but also their lively chatter, their multitudinous discourse merging not into a simple unity but into something like a relational manifold.

An anarchist theopoetics of religious difference would not seek to bring difference under control or banish it, but see togetherness arise precisely from it. The vision of such promised “minor” community is thus neither an apocalyptic vision of all-consuming wholeness, nor a mere tolerance or pacification of difference. Emerging from the tehomic interstices of interreligious relationality is a hope for a togetherness that remains ultimately unnamed, remains subject to a constant process of re-naming, unsaying, retelling. An apophatically unnameable desire must animate this work of tracing, telling, undoing and remaking differences: Any formulation of community must always again be interrogated, deconstructed, unsaid, in the name of this elusive affirmation, but this interrogation may, again, be the groundless ground for a renewed gathering, a renewed communing, drawing closer together, enacting this togetherness not given by origin or principle. In Kearney’s vocabulary, it will be necessary to imagine and reimagine this interreligious togetherness, telling, recalling, questioning and reinventing stories of interreligious togetherness, not as theories of the origin behind them but for what opens up in front of them.¹⁵¹

For this sense of emergent community remains, in itself, a process yet unfinished, a story still being told. So understood, interreligious togetherness remains a community in process, still unfolding, resisting delineation, remaining to come. An anarchic theology of religious difference can imagine, reimagine, invoke, weep and pray for this togetherness, *oui, oui, viens*, and marvel as it emerges at the edge of chaos out of the depths of difference. With God perhaps, we may say that, indeed, it is *very good*.

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