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CHAOS AND “TEHOMOPHOBIA”

A review of Catherine Keller. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, London: Routledge, 2003.

CATHERINE KELLER'S latest book, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, offers what is perhaps the first full theology of creation *ex profundis*. Keller argues with passion, wit and deep wisdom against the dominant (and dominating) theory of creation *ex nihilo* in the name of a complex, material, and messy creation. In the process she deconstructs the very heart of the domination of the “other” so common in Western religious traditions.

Face of the Deep is a welcome addition to current theological debate that masterfully combines multiple fields of study in a “pluri-single” (172-82) reconstruction of process theism by way of postmodern thought. The book is both a feminist constructive theology and an extended commentary on Genesis 1.2 that draws on some of the best of Jewish and Christian scholarship. Keller constructs (both on the page and in the reader's imagination) a new place to begin thinking about the deepest questions of life and existence. The book is arranged in four parts, each of which adds necessary components to the vision of a theology of becoming.

Part I, “Creation now and then,” asks the question, “What happened to the chaos of Genesis 1.2?” (xix) and discloses “tehomophobic” and “tehomophilic” tendencies in the Bible as well as the thought of formative figures in the history of Christian theology. The persistent connection between tehomophobia and gynophobia is stressed by way of reference to tehom's connection to Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess, which becomes a consistent refrain throughout the rest of the book.

Part II, “Orthodoxies of nothing,” discusses the development of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Starting with the efforts of the early Fathers of the Church to suppress the biblical legacy of tehom Keller finds hope in Augustine's flirtation with tehom in his theory of creation from the “nothingsomething” (*nihil aliquid*) (74-5). Karl Barth's efforts at demonizing the deep as “*das Nichtige*” are ironically

the jumping off point for a search for a “third way,” neither *ex nihilo* nor of a preexistent chaos (84-99).

Part III, “Monsters of hermeneutics,” engages in this search for, and the construction of, such a “third way,” between *ex nihilo* and preexistent chaos. Drawing on the thought of numerous biblical scholars and other postmodern theorists along with the book of Job and *Moby Dick* Keller develops a “tehomic hermeneutic.”

Part IV, “*Creatio ex profundis*,” presents Keller’s constructive theological work outright. Commenting on and simultaneously rewriting the central iconic elements of Genesis 1.2 part four elaborates a theology of becoming out of the depths of chaos along with the theological implications for Christology, incarnation, relations with the ‘other,’ and the concept of God. Gone is the omnipotent, singular, kingly Creator *ex nihilo*. “He” is replaced by a “trinity” of ambiguous plurality, interdependence and commingling: *tehom*, *elohim*, and *ruach*. Far from calling for the simple replacement of Creator Father with Procreative Mother Keller asks us to “bear with” differences and relations (223). The plurality of the universe is shown to be the outcome of complex relationality all the way “back” to the beginning and “down” to the depths of existence.

For all its strengths and breadth *Face of the Deep* does have notable deficiencies. Keller’s project assumes a Whiteheadian process cosmology and seems to take it for granted that it is the only viable scheme. In so doing she ignores the work of Robert Neville, who not only critiques process and postmodern thought but has expounded his own version of *creatio ex nihilo* for decades.¹ Keller concludes that a theology of becoming is necessary on exegetical, ethical, and philosophical grounds but assumes that creation *ex nihilo* always means domination and the problems of theodicy.

Keller confesses that her tehomic theology is one of becoming and not origin and so is not concerned with what might have been “before” the spatiotemporal matrix in which we live (157). *Face of the Deep* makes a convincing case that the watery beginnings of Genesis were intentionally suppressed and demonized, but does this not also miss the point that *ex nihilo* answers a different question than the one a tehomic theology of becoming does? The theory of creation from nothing, for whatever else it does, and notwithstanding its flaws, answers the question of origin and the related ontological question; why is there something

¹ See Robert C. Neville. *The Highroad Around Modernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) for his critique of modernism and its “post.” For his critique of process thought see especially *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Philosophy*. New Edition. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995 [1980]). For a detailed exposition of Neville’s *creatio ex nihilo* see his *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992 [1968]).

rather than nothing? A theology of becoming has no interest in such questions because they point to a “something” that is the transcendent one to the universe’s many. It would have been a great addition if Keller had engaged the thought of Neville whose interest extends beyond (not “above”) cosmological creativity (which is, as Keller contends, always from something) to ontological creativity.²

Though not without ethical and philosophical support Keller’s predisposition against ontotheology would have made an appraisal of counter-criticism from postmodern proponents of creation *ex nihilo* a valuable addition to the persuasiveness of her argument.³ Instead, *Face of the Deep* uses postmodern methods to attack positions developed largely before (post)modernity and as such the book falls into a kind of anachronism.

Despite these criticisms *Face of the Deep* remains an excellent study which offers many possible avenues for future research and constructive work. Keller’s realization that it is the fundamental (though not foundational) nature of differences which is the root of all current theological debate is hugely important. She rightly contends that without a revised understanding of beginnings (and endings) that there can be no hope of embracing and bearing with the plurality present in the universe. Especially notable is the open use of resources from Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish traditions.

Though extraordinarily well crafted *Face of the Deep* is not an easy read. Keller’s book reads like poetry at times, a welcome, and perhaps necessary development for theology since “what is the actual work of theology-but an incantation at the edge of uncertainty?”(xviii). However, due to its breadth of sources relatively few readers will have the expertise to follow the entire argument. That said advanced students and professionals in nearly every field in the humanities should benefit from reading (and rereading) Keller’s theology of becoming.

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² “What I call cosmological creativity, the only sort Whitehead acknowledges, is a descriptive generalization of the character of events; the reality of the events is accounted for with the ontological creativity of God the Creator.” Neville *Creativity and God*, 8.

³ Merold Westphal, for example, argues for elements of postmodernism and for creation *ex nihilo*. See his *Overcoming Ontotheology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 294-295 and *passim*.