

***Theopoetics and Religious Difference: The Unruliness of the Interreligious: A Dialogue with Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller.* By Marius van Hoogstraten. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck. xi+259 pp. ISBN: 978-3-16-159800-5. \$118.00 (paperback)**

In this book Marius van Hoogstraten effectively seeks to develop a non-hegemonic, non-reductive, and non-pacifying conceptualization of the interreligious. The author's goal is to propose a non-totalizing theory of religious difference that does not seek a "bird's eye view" of de facto religious pluralism. Rather, van Hoogstraten attends to the interstitial spaces in which religious communities and discourses have historically met and mutually shaped each other; this attention to the "in-between" spaces demands a theo-poetics of religious difference. If this project seems both daunting and messy, it is because, as von Hoogstraten demonstrates, the tendency is for theologies of religions to propose a universal and universalizing theory that at best ignores, and at worst tames, "the unruliness of the interreligious." Theologians of religion have come to expect a "grand theory of everything"—or a "grand theology of every religion"—that organizes all traditions under a universal system; but these theories or theologies often end up *controlling* or even *subjugating* differing traditions under themselves, despite their best efforts. Van Hoogstraten endeavors to offer instead a theo-poetics that embraces not only disruption, subversion, critique, deconstruction, suspicion, and negation, but also creativity (*poiesis*) and imagination toward something radically new. Instead of peaceful coexistence, a theo-poetics of the interreligious conjures "co-resistance: a shared commitment to subverting the way 'religion' and 'religions' are employed to exert control and a shared search for becoming togetherness, constantly emerging from the cracks and fissures of our difference" (234).

This is an excellent contribution to the field and the book itself is a treasure-trove of insights. Nonetheless, there are some criticisms, in my view. While van Hoogstraten does an expert and admirable job of constructing a theo-poetics of interreligious difference, he repeats the error leveled at theologies of religions for the last several decades: the inked spilled *talking about* religious difference would be better used *engaging religious difference* through careful attention to other traditions alongside other practitioners. In this case, his praise for comparative theology is noteworthy, even though the book lacks any sustained engagement with discourses that are non-Christian, non-White, and/or non-Western. It seems that van Hoogstraten's book is a reflection on his own experiences in interreligious encounters. Consequently, the book appears to be expositing critical reflections, *theoria*, from his interreligious experiences, *praxis*. Scholars taking the time to practice first and theorize later are few and far between; this move is thus welcomed, but more could have been said in this regard.

Notwithstanding, it is odd that in a book seeking to develop a theo-poetics of interreligious encounter, one that endeavors to be non-hegemonic, non-universalizing, and open to that which is radically new, disruptive, and subversive of "tradition," the *primary* and *predominating* interlocutors are those hailing from Western, Christian, and White traditions (one exception is Kwok Pui-lan, whose eminent scholarship makes a brief appearance in chapter one). Furthermore, there is little to no careful engagement with other religious traditions; and while it was not his project to do so, it bears mentioning given the purview and goal of the book. Kearney, Caputo, and Keller are exceptionally qualified and intelligent in these matters and their discursive genealogies, scholarly and religious traditions, and academic schools of thought should

not preclude them from contributing to such an important topic, of course. However, the reader would have been served well had van Hoogstraten addressed the lack of interreligious and intercultural engagement with non-Christian, non-White, and/or non-Western genealogies, traditions, and schools of thought.

Additionally, van Hoogstraten offers critiques of various pluralist systems in his book: (1) they often operate through a “bird’s eye view” or even “God’s eye view”, a sort of enlightened position of “being in the know”; and (2) they perpetuate dualist categories, viz., those wise and enlightened about the true nature of religious traditions and how they relate, and those foolish and unenlightened. But it is unclear how any theology of religious difference cannot succumb to those criticisms, even one as robust and as near to non-hegemonic as van Hoogstraten’s theopoetics. Indeed, those two critiques could be leveled against any totalizing and universalizing “grand theory” proposed by the Western academy, especially insofar as they don’t attend carefully and critically to those discourses marginalized by dominant scholarship. The subaltern *can* speak.

The book is organized into five well-researched and eminently clear, cogent, and coherent chapters, at least for those with foundational knowledge concerning the topic at hand. In other words, the book is more suited for graduate students or upper-level undergraduates who are at least familiar with some of the following fields: theology of religions, philosophical hermeneutics, deconstruction, and process thought. After a short introduction in which van Hoogstraten opens with a personal narrative that situates the project and then summarizes the book, Chapter One (“Theologies of Religions”) sketches “the main lines of the debate in Christian theology around the meaning and relevance of non-Christian religious traditions, and, secondarily, of interreligious encounter” (9). Van Hoogstraten does an excellent job of presenting four aspects of theologies of religion roughly in the order of how successful they have been in dealing with “the unruliness of the interreligious.” These are (1) pluralism and the pluralist hypothesis, (2) the Trinitarianisms of Gavin D’Costa and S. Mark Heim, (3) comparative theology as explicated by Francis X. Clooney and Marianne Moyaert, and (4) postcolonial feminist contributions, which challenge the implicit imperialism and hegemony that many theologies of religions perpetuate. Van Hoogstraten finds the open-ended and non-generalizing conclusions of comparative theology and the destabilizing imagination of Kwok Pui-lan’s postcolonial feminist theology to be strong critiques of the more universalizing tendencies of religious pluralism and trinitarian inclusivism. The self-described “marginal” nature of comparative theology, however, undermines its ability to disrupt and shape confessional theologies, a problem van Hoogstraten thinks voids some of its potential. In the end, all approaches except Kwok’s theology of religious difference explicitly or implicitly strive to tame the unruliness of the interreligious. In her postcolonial feminist theology, Kwok does not seek to contain anarchy, but embrace it, to form “a *pact* with [the] anarchy [of the interreligious], guided by the intuition that its instability might prove to be particularly *good news*” (62).

From here three chapters follow, one for each scholar van Hoogstraten considers particularly insightful for the uniquely inflected poetics they propose: Richard Kearny, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller. Deconstruction plays a role for all three thinkers, though it is central to Caputo’s writings; while Richard Kearny’s work primarily engages philosophical hermeneutics and Catherine Keller’s scholarship is heavily shaped by process thought. These chapters are sustained analyses of the thinkers’ scholarship with an interpretive and constructive

eye toward drawing out a theo-poetics of interreligious encounter. In this way, each chapter focuses on the aspects that support van Hoogstraten's project. Nonetheless, they are impressive introductions on their own. For instance, Chapter 2 could be assigned as an independent chapter that introduces students to Richard Kearney's project, and the same for Chapter 3 and 4 regarding John D. Caputo and Catherine Keller, respectively.

Richard Kearney provides van Hoogstraten with theories of narrative, narrative identity, and narrative imagination to show how the self is constantly being remade and reinterpreted in the context of a community and a "tradition not built on a given and fixed ground but instead on an interminable process of critique and re-telling" (77). Kearney's *anatheism* suggests that negation, deconstruction, and suspicions permit us to rediscover God not as absolute act and a fixed given, but as a potential and a gift. These two aspects complement his rumination on hospitality by suggesting that not only the other but also the self is marked by a strangeness; indeed, the encounter with strangeness is what drives his anatheist Christianity marked by narrative imagination. Van Hoogstraten finds these ideas conducive toward interreligious encounter but finds Kearney's application of them lacking. Ultimately, Kearney slips into an exoticization of the strange or the other and, more importantly, seems to offer a "conditional pluralism," i.e., religious traditions are lacking insofar as they do not offer a version of his anatheism. In a way, Kearney is a more theoretically rich but only slightly improved version of Hick's pluralism: "Kearney's account thus remains unsatisfying. At best, it is underdeveloped; at worst, it is problematic" (107). Van Hoogstraten will apply the theoretically rich aspects of Kearney's thought to the constructive portions of his book (Chapter 5) but ends suggesting that Kearney may just perpetuate a dualism: those whose faith is anatheist, and those whose faith is not, and implicitly the former is superior.

He then engages John D. Caputo in Chapter 3 and Keller in Chapter 4. Caputo is famous for this "radical" or "weak" theology, something which may be termed "deconstructive theo-poetics" (111). Van Hoogstraten spends time introducing the reader to deconstruction and its relation to (and difference from) negative theology. The eschatological, prophetic vision of Caputo's weak theology is important for Van Hoogstraten's theo-poetics, to be sure; it provides him with the *anarchic*: "faith means a pact with the impossible, the subversion of what is, the *anarchic*" (128). Anarchy is a central principle of a theo-poetics of interreligious encounter—unruly, messy, subversive, and disruptive, but also creative and life-giving. From Caputo van Hoogstraten draws the importance of subverting tradition "not out of hatred, but out of love" (136) precisely because the tradition is always more than what is there. When analyzing Caputo on the interreligious, his "theo-poetics" becomes central to van Hoogstraten's project. This *poiesis* is a "creative discursive construction" and an "evocative discourse" both of which evoke "an unnamable faith in the to-come" (139). According to van Hoogstraten, for Kearney "conditional pluralism" was an issue while for Caputo "Quasi-Pluralism" is an issue. This quasi-pluralism once again implicitly perpetuates a dualism: those who know about the non-exclusive nature of truth, and those who don't: "[this non-exclusive understanding of truth] 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?" (146). Additionally, this quasi-pluralism may accidentally suggest a "deep truth" at the heart of all traditions (147-150).

Chapter 4 on Catherine Keller is another impressive summary and analysis of erudite scholarship. Van Hoogstraten finds in Keller's rich and complex oeuvre the most potential for a theo-poetics of religious difference. Keller's panentheism, theories on relationality, process thought, "the deep," apophasis, aporia, and explicitly political apocalypticism and theology provide the necessary aspects to support the lacunae in Kearney's and Caputo's thought. Here we see how van Hoogstraten recognizes the explicitly *political* nature of his theo-poetics of religious difference. Relationality is central here: each tradition is constructed in the interaction with another tradition, and it may be said that each tradition is formed only in the context of "the other" and does not exist *except in relation*. Numerous historical examples are given. In the final part of this chapter, van Hoogstraten engages Keller's work on the interreligious, with special attention to Christianity and Islam. These traditions co-constitute each other in the context of imperial contestation—pre-modern empire historically and neo-imperialism presently. Religion is never just religion; it is also politics. And politics is never just politics; it is also religion. Van Hoogstraten labels Keller's implicit theology of religion "relational pluralism" (195), just as he labeled Kearney's "conditional pluralism" and Caputo's "quasi-pluralism." Relational pluralism suggests a "togetherness, or relationality, [that] is less about establishing or postulating a unity, and more about the suggestion that the religions are already mutually enfolded. It is not just recognition that something, perhaps something divine, happens within the other tradition: It is the recognition that something divine happens *in the interaction*" (196). 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" (199). Once again, however, van Hoogstraten finds the problem of "in group" and "out group," as it were, even within Keller's attempt at a non-hegemonic, non-essentializing theology of religions. It is worth quoting his critique in full, as it exemplifies the problems he found in both Kearney and Caputo and the insurmountable difficulty of constructing a non-elitist theology from a place of privilege—i.e., the Western academy:

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... 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," however, it appears to me that this challenge remains limited to that part of Christianity Keller 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 difference in a cosmopolitan setting erodes or superficializes the "difference" of that difference (200).

In other words, progressive Christians are open to difference...to a point; conservatives, traditionalists, exclusivists, and dare I say, "Trump supporters," do not fall within the purview of acceptable differences to which progressives are called to be open. (Though this is arguable, and

Keller clarifies her point in an e-mail exchange with van Hoogstraten.) I applaud van Hoogstraten for making this critical point; it is something we all need to understand in the present context of increasing polarization.

Prescinding from the accuracy or not of how van Hoogstraten is characterizing Keller's theology, some may argue that he is not being fair here—or perhaps not going far enough with his critique. How is any sort of “theory” or “theology” that seeks to understand human, cultural, and religious difference not going to appear at least with a shade of exclusivism or a tint of universalism? As the famous German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, argued, “the project [of universalism] is hegemonic: the other's voice is permitted entry only as the voice of sameness, as a confirmation of oneself, contemplation of oneself, dialogue with oneself,”¹ and consequently those “not the same” are excluded. Are we not back to the critique leveled against theology of religions by comparative theologians decades ago? Stop theologizing about religious traditions and practitioners and start doing theology with religious traditions and practitioners. Should not have van Hoogstraten just gone further in his critique? The Western, academic obsession with grand theories and theologies will ever only be hegemonic, elitist, and subjugating—so long as it excludes the voices that have been marginalized by dominant discourses in the first place. Additionally, perhaps Keller and others are exemplifying the “paradox of tolerance:” unlimited tolerance of even the intolerant would result in the destruction of tolerance as such: whether progressive or conservative, we should really be on guard against the intolerant (especially the intolerant who possess the political power to enact their intolerance in society or communities).

Nonetheless, van Hoogstraten constructs his “Theopoetics of Unruly Difference” in Chapter 5, and it is a substantial and inspiring attempt at doing the impossible, viz., constructing a non-hegemonic approach to religious difference and interreligious encounter that celebrates unruliness and unpredictability: “It would embrace the challenge that the confrontation with difference may present to settled certainties and to structures that exclude and oppress” (203). This is necessary and laudable, especially since this theopoetics prizes moments “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” (203). Here van Hoogstraten gives a nod to comparative theology, which succeeds as an example of a theopoetics of the interreligious but fails in letting the insights disrupt and subvert confessional theology. Given that comparative theology has been primarily spearheaded by Catholic theologians, it seems this is more due to the stubbornly conservative nature of institutional theology than to the failure of comparative theology tout court. Academic, non-comparative Catholic theologians impact institutional theology arguably just as infrequently as comparative theologians.

Another significant insight van Hoogstraten makes is that “the religious” has always been “the interreligious” (220).

Ultimately, though, I am left most inspired by his turn to interreligious community, solidarity, and co-resistance as constitutive of his theopoetics of religious difference. Taking his thoughts beyond what he has written, religious communities are left subjugated by a global, neoliberal, neocolonial, and racial capitalist system. Interreligious encounter is certainly

¹ Beck, Ulrich. “The Truth of Others.” *Common Knowledge* (New York, N.Y.), vol. 10, no. 3, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 433, doi:10.1215/0961754X-10-3-430.

disruptive and subversive of one's own tradition; but, more pertinently, it should help us to see how it is only in relationship, solidarity, community, and co-resistance that structures and systems of oppression can be overturned in search of a "utopian community...that *may be*" (237). In this way, van Hoogstraten is describing a *theory* for relational solidarity; the problem is that the *practice* of relational solidarity is very difficult, especially given how structures and systems reinforce individualism and self-segregation away from different-minded people and with likeminded peers (in terms of politics, race, class, religion, and so on).

This is where van Hoogstraten attempts to evade the criticisms of any sort of theology of religion. Coming to an interreligious gathering with a theo-poetics in mind leaves us open to the radically new—even to those positions that we prejudiciously deem exclusionary and xenophobic and then consequently label the *persons* and *communities* expressing those positions as backwards, hateful, and merciless. How so? Perhaps because there is a story (Kearny) behind those attitudes (one's own and the others') that needs to be deconstructed (Caputo) with an eye toward developing a relational bond in God with them (Keller) and discovering *some truth* in the *process*. Indeed, it is true that even labeling oneself as "compassionate" places one in the group of "those with compassion" over and against "those without compassion," thereby creating an exclusionary framework. But as I tell my students, a key faculty for learning about traditions and cultures other than one's own is the imagination, and ultimately imagination leads to empathy, even when it is difficult.

In our politically polarizing context of 2022, this is much needed: what sort of experiences have happened to a large swath of Americans such that they are so distrustful of medical sciences, so skeptical of the government, so prone to disinformation, to refuse a vaccine that billions of other residents of planet earth are literally dying for? What is their story? Is there *some truth* to their positions? What is it? There is a protracted list of polarizing topics to be added: the anthropogenic climate crisis, election results, the persistence (or not) of systemic racism, medically safe access (or not) to abortion, how United States history is taught in public schools, the political situation in Palestine and Israel, and, in general, the mistreatment (or not) of the poor, marginalized, and/or minoritized in our neoliberal, racial capitalist system. Given relationality, how am I responsible for polarization? Compassionately listening to the stories in relational solidarity is extremely difficult to do, and perhaps theo-poetics can help—notwithstanding some of the aforementioned critiques.

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