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Book Review

Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public

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figures—providing in unparalleled detail the “deep story” of the American environmental imaginary, which now must forever include the name of Emanuel Swedenborg. Posthumanist and new materialist thinkers will find ample provocation for further research, and ecotheologians will discover a new companion for rethinking American religious experience. Scholars working in the environmental humanities will find in this work deeper sources of our own environmental thinking and, likely too, that they have unwittingly embodied one or more of Swedenborg’s after-worldly voices and incarnations.

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Political Theology of the Earth:

Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public

By: **Catherine Keller**

Publisher: **Columbia University Press (New York, New York, U.S.A.)**

Year: **2018, Pages: x + 229 pp.**

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Reviewed by: **Matthew R. Hartman, Graduate Theological Union**

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As climate chaos grows and democracies appear to teeter on the edge of collapse, feeling helpless—and hopeless—only seems natural. Any kind of

meaningful action or response can feel like performative window dressing at best, ultimately band-aid quick-fixes that only scratch the surface of the dire realities of living in the Anthropocene. Yet a sense of helplessness and mantras of “too little, too late” that can stifle meaningful efforts of engaging the climate crisis are precisely the feelings Catherine Keller wants us to courageously face in her immensely important *Political Theology of the Earth*. There are no quick-fixes offered in this book, no *Deus ex Machina* or sky-god that will sweep in at the last moment to save the day, and the planet. Keller employs Donna Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble” and be fully present in embracing this dire moment (87), which requires embodied thinking and intentional acting. The project of bringing together political philosophy, theology, and ecology, then, is “not just to theorize, but to agonize and to mobilize” (7). For Keller, action comes with mourning and hope demands struggle, both of which require divine courage cultivated over the course of this book.

The structure of the book reads more like a series of meditations than a perhaps more typical academic study full of grand narratives and sweeping conclusions. Form is key here, and it is not a mere catchy turn of phrase that Keller’s opening line reads: “Once upon a time we had . . . time” (1). Keller evokes this literary trope of the fantasy genre at the outset only to pull us right back to face the reality of the moment, as we are not living in some fairy-tale with a predetermined happily-ever-after ending. Keller’s opening meditation on time sets the tone of the book as a careful re-reading (or, un-reading) of Paul and frames time not in the chronological historical sense, but rather as contracted time in the vein of Benjamin’s “now-time” (*jetztzeit*) or Agamben’s “gathering together.” In this sense, when Paul uses *Kairos* instead of *chronos* to signify time in I Corinthians, the translation, according to Keller, is better read as, “The time is contracted,” as opposed to the more commonly translated, “The time is short” (I Cor. 7:29). For Keller, Paul is not talking about the end of time or signifying a moment out of history on some chronological timeline, but rather a kind of *timing*—a moment or event teeming with possibility. Drawing on the likes of Paul Tillich, Alfred North Whitehead, and John B. Cobb, Jr., among others, Keller pursues this thread of contracted time towards a “negative political theology” that practices a “systemic mistrust

of certainties, however well intending” in order to “tender courage for the thinking of the unthinkable, epistemic and ethical” (16). For Keller, the time is now: to act; to hope; to theologize; to be ethical.

The title of the book—*Political Theology of the Earth*—is itself broken up to give us the three chapter titles, straightforwardly listed: 1) Political; 2) Earth; and 3) Theology; each in turn containing a series of shorter meditations. In “Political,” Keller begins with a helpful discourse on what is meant by the collective—the “we” of the political. For the early theorist of political theology Carl Schmitt the “collective” is derived through conflict, an identity constructed over and against an antagonistic Other. Of course, many have criticized the authoritarian tendencies in this schema (Schmitt was, after all, a proud and unrepentant Nazi) as defining collective identity via the creation of an antagonist—how we get war, religious extremism, genocide, and other forms of political and religious violence. And this process of antagonism is constantly replicated, as even supposed democratic responses to more nationalist or fascist turns often find their own movements needing an antagonist—some “they”—to survive (23). But what if identity was not bore out of a divisive “us/them” relationship, but out of collective struggle? Here Keller offers a political identity of agonism rather than antagonism that collectively laments and struggles for the common good. Drawing on Black Feminist discourse and critical theories, Keller employs the language of the “undercommons” to redefine the political “as collective assemblage across critical difference” which attempts to move past binaries in focusing on a new kind of political struggle (33). Ultimately, this framing seeks to reject the language of “exceptionalism” often found in political theological discourse in responding to crisis or emergency. Drawing on the work of Kelly Brown Douglas, J. Kameron Carter, and Carol Wayne White, among others, Keller emphasizes the historical use of the language of “exceptions” as often being white, male, and anthropic. Thus, the “Messiah figure” sought in the emergency state of political theology becomes a consolidation of harmful extractive forces that have already laid the groundwork for the exceptional state in the first place. What Keller points toward instead is not some kind of savior who consolidates power in crisis, but an entangled collective that embraces the material possibility of the present.

If the first chapter examines the planetary crisis through the more academic lens of political theory, the second chapter brings us back down to Earth, so to speak—specifically in the “collective schema” of a world with “human self-organization inextricably entangled in the nonhuman” (69). For Keller, humans cannot be separated from the more-than-human, just as politics cannot be separated from earth. This intertwined political and ecological crisis is often referred to as the Anthropocene, though Keller references other “-cenes” as well—from Jason Moore’s “Capitalocene” to Donna Haraway’s “Cthulucene”—before drawing on the likes of Pope Francis and Thomas Berry and his contemporaries to discuss the collective shared home of the Earth via the *Ecocene* (92). This homecoming resists more nationalist impulses that often arise during political emergencies precisely because it recognizes the intertwined reality of humans with the more-than-human. “To link the political to the ecological,” writes Keller, “is to resist the temptation in every political emergency, however exceptional, to ignore the matter of the earth” (102). The matter of the earth and the matter of politics is the same, Keller tells us again and again—and recognizing this relationship matters.

The final chapter “Theology” explores our collective future in the midst of the “sovereign stranglehold” economics and politics have on the present (105). Keller’s subtitle for the chapter—“unknow better now”—gets at the heart of her overall project: our only hope for a way out of this mess is not through some traditional hope in the moral and ethical structures that have, at the very least, paved the way for the current crisis, if not actively engendered it. Hope cannot be found in the consolidation of traditional knowledge, but rather through intentional unlearning—fundamentally a project of deconstruction in the tradition of Derrida. This deconstructive turn is meant to be both secular and theological: Keller is skeptical of the moral certitudes she sees accompanying a full embracement of secularization, just as she is not interested in the moral absolutism of particular forms of religious dogma. Instead, drawing on process thought and theology, Keller is interested in a kind of “seculareligious third space” that bridges the two (127). Keller’s rejection of traditional forms of theology, then, is not an outright rejection of

theology altogether, but an embracement of an apophatic or negative theology that is committed to the project of unlearning and unknowing.

An apophatic political theology that resists the language of exceptions and embraces possibility through collective struggle is the main contribution of Keller's work, and is ultimately a theology not meant to be tied to any particular tradition. And while Keller's background is in Christian theology, and therefore much of the language and examples throughout the book reflect various forms of Christianity, a question worth asking is what does interreligiosity look like in the context of the kind of new materialist apophatic political theology Keller presents here? What are some of the tenants of Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, that might lend to this more present, mattering form of a political theology of the earth? Save for a few mentions in lists of world religions, we don't get much here. Similarly, Islam is mostly discussed in the context of lamenting the experiences of oppressed groups through racism, speciesism, sexism, Islamophobia, etc. While deconstructing dangerous forms of Christian exceptionalism that have characterized so much of the literature around political theology is indeed a worthy project, one wonders about the generative potential left untapped. There is certainly more to say about non-Christian traditions in this space—a project the spirit of this work certainly beckons others to take up sooner rather than later.

That said, Keller's work is an important—and timely—contribution to the fields of theology, political ecology, and the environmental humanities. For the sake of space and time (contracted, to be sure), I will conclude with an emphatic endorsement of Keller's work by drawing on her own apt phrasing: this book matters.

Matthew R. Hartman is a Doctoral Candidate in Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. His research analyzes the history and future of climate change denialism, with a particular focus on the American religious and political right. He is Co-Managing Editor of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology.