

The Seminar on God and the Human Future

A Report on the 2017 Spring Meeting

Hollis Phelps

How do we imagine God's relationship with the world, with us? How do we imagine our relationship with God, and what exactly do we mean and hope to accomplish when we use the word "God"? These and similar questions are, of course, at the heart of the God and the Human Future Seminar. Whereas the Fall 2016 meeting largely focused such questions on the issue of God's putative sovereignty, the Spring 2017 meeting in Santa Rosa focused on philosophical, theological, and political issues surrounding pantheism and pantheism, as alternatives to classical theism.

Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein were our speakers for this meeting. Keller, Professor of Constructive Theology at the Theological School of Drew University, presented on "Cloud of the Impossible: Darkening Horizons, Deepening Entanglements." Rubenstein, Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University, spoke on "Pantheist Monstrosities: On Gender, Race, Divinity, and Dirt."



Catherine Keller

Keller began her talk in the first session on the "Cloud of the Impossible" by offering an unapologetic theology. "I don't want to be sorry to be a theologian," she said, "but I also don't want to explain away the difficulties of theology." Navigating between these two poles is, of course, essential to theology, but for Keller the task is perhaps even more pressing now as we find ourselves in the turmoil of political and ecological disaster. Indeed, this is precisely what her image of the "cloud" evokes: an image of darkness and opacity but also, in a more constructive vein, a gathering-together in the midst of life's precariousness. From within this "cloud," the question of God and our future poses itself with an apocalyptic vigor.

Keller draws the image of the "cloud" from the tradition of negative (apophatic) theology. In contrast to more positive, confessional theological traditions that make strong assertions about God, negative theology emphasizes "the not-knowing, the not-seeing: a negativity that pits itself against theological positivism." Drawing on fifteenth-century theologian Nicholas of Cusa, negative theology

emphasizes our ignorance when it comes to God, to our relationship to God, and to our entangled relationships with each other. Hence Keller's call for an "apophatic panentheism," that is, a hidden or unknown God in the center of our being.

Such apophaticism, such ignorance, is not, however, an excuse for withdrawing from the problems that we face. This is not an attempt to "mystify" theology. Rather, apophatic or negative theology opens up a "contemplative space" in which "uncertainty is not overcome but becomes capability." In short, the name of God understood apophatically names a space of pure possibility, in which God is understood as possibility itself.

It is in relation to possibility that Keller's idea of God becomes important. If traditional theism rests on separating God and the world, and traditional pantheism collapses the two together, "panentheism" is about their entanglement. Without confusing them, the world and God are co-determined. Practically speaking, this means that God names possibilities for us but we actualize the possibilities. God, that is, "does not intervene to act for us" but, rather, acts through our actions: we, in other words, embody God in the world.

Following her presentation, John Caputo (Villanova University) questioned the apparent Neo-Platonism (or commitment to an ultimate principle) undergirding Keller's invocation of apophaticism. On Caputo's reading, Cusa's "coincidence of opposites," where God is simultaneously both great and small, tries to define God in a stable, unchanging way. God is always the meeting of opposites that sustains the world. But what about accidents—variations in things and unpredictable events?



John Caputo

Cusa ultimately sidesteps the possibility that the cosmos may hold no meaning as it tends toward nothing. Keller responded that there is no reason to deny Cusa is a Neo-Platonist, but this philosophy varies from one philosopher to another. The question for Keller, then, is what type of Platonism is involved? She reads Cusa as a "radical" Platonist who affirms complexity and remains important today. Cusa's notion of the coincidence of opposites presents a complicated, rather than a simplified, idea of God. Keller challenged the idea that the universe may unfold meaninglessly toward nothingness; she also rejected the idea that the universe has a definite beginning.

John Kelly (University of Nevada, Reno) asked how we deal with the fact that our conceptualizations of God often do not coincide with our actual practices, as in the case of slavery in the United States, which was often justified on theological grounds. Karen Bray (Wesleyan College) followed up with a question concerning the weight of the

Continued on page 18

The Seminar on God and the Human Future *Continued from page 16*

negative when it comes to politics, noting that negative theology has often functioned to reinforce certain power dynamics and oppression since it can remove God from the scene. Without ignoring the dangers, Keller responded that negative theology inside the “cloud of unknowing” also provides a contemplative space for thinking about our responsibilities toward others in terms of justice in the world.

Jarmo Tarkki asked about the ironically negative effects of negative theology. That is, what if unknowing is used simply as an excuse for non-action. Keller noted that mystification can certainly be used as an excuse, but also emphasized that this is not what is going on in the apophatic tradition. The tradition, rather, is one that fosters deeper reflections on God and theology.

Susan Elliott asked about how Keller’s work might fit with Dorothee Soelle’s work that emphasizes how everyone has a “hunger” for an unknowable form of justice, however one understands it. Keller responded that such an idea of hunger reminds her of the way process theology talks about God as a lure. In the process idea of God, she said, there is always a hunger for union, and the world unfolds as if it were being lured toward a greater togetherness.

Michael Zbaraschuk (Pacific Lutheran University) expressed a concern about the coincidence of opposites, indicating that it may imply the equality of good and evil. What effect does that have on ethics? Keller noted that she often hesitates to use the term “coincidence of opposites” because of the danger involved. Nevertheless, she

stressed that coincidence is not the same thing as merging. Coincidence means that there remains a difference between good and evil. “Coincidence” is more about shifting our perspective on what we think is good and evil.

Namsoon Kang (Brite Divinity School) asked Keller about the potential dark side of negative theology, that it can foster a romanticization of not knowing. Keller agreed that such a danger is present, but noted that negative theology at its best does not allow us to freeze God in one place. It keeps us vigilant against mystifying God or restricting God to our private needs.



Namsoon Kang

The second session of the day continued with Keller’s work, with a response by Mary-Jane Rubenstein. Keller again took up the theme of panentheism, noting its historical and conceptual provenance in nineteenth-century philosophy but, more immediately, in relation to contemporary process theology. Nevertheless, Keller also suggested that Panentheism, which understands all as in God and God as in all, relates back to orthodox theology because it upholds the notion of God’s infinity.

Keller emphasized the distinction between panentheism and pantheism, but in anticipation of Rubenstein’s talk, insisted that her use of the term panentheism should not be understood in opposition to pantheism. Her use of the term panentheism, rather, underlines how, at the end of the day, there remains a distinction between God and

Apophatic Theology

Apophatic theology names an approach to thinking about God by means of negation rather than affirmation. God is approached through what cannot be said about God. Apophatic theology affirms the transcendence of God, but it sets limits to human reason and language.

Immanence

The word means “to dwell in.” In theology, immanence refers to (1) the experience of the divine in the everyday experiences of the world and (2) the reality of God dwelling in or with an object or experience.

Monism

This word refers to the commitment to one principle that unites all reality. In theology, it is close to pantheism except that monism identifies a divine principle that unites all reality whereas pantheism says reality itself is divine.

Panentheism

Panentheism means that God is in all things. An alternative to classical theism, panentheism understands God and the world to be interrelated yet distinct. The world is in God and God is in the world but God remains distinct from the world.

Pantheism

The word is derived from the Greek *pan* (all) and *theos* (god). Pantheism states that God and the universe are identical. Pantheism rejects belief in a supernatural God.

Transcendence

The word means “to climb over or across.” Transcendence refers to (1) the holy reality of God beyond the limits of human experience and comprehension and (2) the critical relationship to reality from a position beyond reality.

the world. The two are not identical. Such a distinction remains important, rhetorically speaking, because panentheism can function as a way to introduce more orthodox Christians to progressive theological notions.

Rubenstein began her engagement with Keller's remarks by acknowledging her worry that panentheism presents itself as a more palatable alternative to pantheism. Rubenstein said that she wanted to disambiguate the term "panentheism," teasing out its various and different forms. Certain types of panentheism, she noted, are compatible with orthodox theology in the way the distinction between God and world remains. Such a distinction assures God is exceptional in relation to the order of nature. Rubenstein went on to note, however, that Keller's thought does not seem to work along these lines. Keller's apophatic panentheism unsettles the distinction between God and the world and avoids the dualism often assumed between God and nature. The question for Rubenstein is to what extent panentheism helps us think beyond such dualisms and integrate theology with the cosmos.

Before opening up to questions, Keller expressed her interest in forming coalitions with those who may not follow her all the way to panentheism. What remains important to her is to find a way to live together on this planet, rather than asserting one type of theology in competition with all others.

Stephen Patterson (Willamette University) opened with a question about whether Keller's apophaticism really disguises a positive theological claim. Ironically, we can say positively that "negative theology" is a true statement about God. Keller maintained that the negative theological tradition does not replace the affirmative theological tradition but, rather, functions as sort of a "prophetic watchdog" against making God into an idol.

John Kelly asked Rubenstein if terms like "God" and "panentheism" can be employed rhetorically to either compliment or disparage certain foundational claims about God and the world. Rubenstein responded that when it comes to the term "pantheism," that may be the case. The term, she noted, often functions as a way to dismiss another's position in advance, without dealing with the arguments involved.

John Caputo stated that, despite the rhetorical use of such terms, it remains important to distinguish the conceptual and logical differences between pantheism and panentheism. The first does not necessarily need God as an agent, but the second, panentheism, does continue to



Mary-Jane Rubenstein



Karen Bray

claim God has agency, even if it's only "persuasive" or "luring." Rubenstein admitted the distinction is important, but she still wants to highlight how pantheism is often rejected at a cultural level without reference to philosophical arguments.

Karen Bray commented that while many liberal panentheists are comfortable with uncertainty about God, few are comfortable asserting the uncertainty of God's goodness, which we often see represented in biblical texts. Bray asked Keller whether her own version of panentheism can account for this observation in a productive way. Keller responded that panentheism affirms

In the parables of Jesus, God is absent from the story. We often ignore this absence and seek in the parables clear, positive, and non-negotiable directions, which can become dangerous.

the goodness of the universe, and this is what drives, at least in part, the desire to keep the distinction between God and the world. This does not mean, however, that goodness is unambiguous. It does not mean that we can discern the difference between good and evil in advance. Rubenstein continued this line of thought, pointing out that one of the charges against pantheism is that it does not give an adequate account of the problem of evil. However, she claimed that the problem of evil

rests on certain commitments to an anthropocentric and benevolent deity. When God is understood to be like human parents who love their children, the question about why God could let evil things happen becomes a problem. Nevertheless, once such images dissolve, so too does the problem of how a powerful and loving God can co-exist with evil in the world.

God Seminar Spring 2017 Ballot Items

Ballot 1—Panentheism

The question "Is God Dead?" has lost its freshness and radicality.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

Theological Apophaticism is ethically challenged and politically impotent.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Gray**

Ballot 2—Pantheism

Pantheism is a threat to contemporary theology.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Gray**

We affirm pluralist pantheism for its ability to locate divinity in the endless multiplicity of the material world.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

In reference to Keller's presentation, David Galston (Westar Executive Director) noted that, in the parables of Jesus, God is absent from the story. We often ignore this absence, he said, and seek in the parables clear, positive, and non-negotiable directions, which can become dangerous. He mentioned that this seems to be the case with certain positive expressions of panentheism. Keller responded by affirming the importance of maintaining this absence in the parables but also generally. It is never clear in the "cloud of unknowing" if God is present.

Jeffrey Robbins (Lebanon Valley College) asked whether the difference between panentheism and pantheism rests on the difference between transcendence and immanence. Rubenstein asserted that a spatial transcendence often remains operative in pantheisms, but even among some expressions of pantheism. Transcendence can occur in pantheism as the desire of all things for unity.

Spring 2017 Audio

Luther for the Future

Kirsi I. Stjerna

Stjerna looks at the inequities in welfare and education that galvanized Martin Luther into action. She begins by introducing his theology, at the epicenter of which lies a deep concern for freedom, especially of spirituality. She then turns to women's roles in the Reformation.

Two audio set (56 & 60 mins.)
CDs \$20; MP3s \$5.99

Helping Jesus Fulfill Prophecy

Robert J. Miller

Miller investigates the ways in which Greek oracles, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and others paved the way for early Christian authors to manipulate prophecy. He shows how the argument that Jesus fulfilled prophecy was used to justify both the view that Christians had replaced Jews as God's chosen people and the aggressive anti-Judaism that followed.

Two audio set (57 & 62 mins.)
CDs \$20; MP3s \$5.99

The Rape of Eve

Celene Lillie

Lillie explores three Nag Hammadi texts that tell the story of the rape of Eve. She argues that these are complex tales in which Eve becomes the mother of those who will save humanity. They open a window onto Christian resistance to imperial ideology, the Roman Empire, and the culture of rape pervasive within it.

Two audio set (51 & 63 mins.)
CDs \$20; MP3s \$5.99



See order form on page 31

POLEBRIDGE PRESS

The force of such a desire is like the transcendence of the whole above the parts. However, pantheism emphasizes immanence such that spatial transcendence, as we see in panentheism, dissolves. Pantheism, though, can re-think transcendence as the factor of novelty or creativity in the productive power of the the unfolding world. Keller added that panentheism will likely always involve some interplay between transcendence and immanence but, again, these should not be understood as sharp distinctions, but rather as unstable ones.

Namsoon Kang noted that, in practice, monism, which expresses God in unity with the world, is an idea that often supports adverse socio-political arrangements. Sometimes a certain social order is assumed to be the way God intends things to be. She asked Rubenstein to what extent pantheism can foster a commitment to justice, equality, and peace. Agreeing with this concern, Rubenstein responded that she wants to untangle the political strategies that often surround these words and shift their meaning depending on the context. Monism often stands against dualism, but sometimes in the name of unity still provides support for categorically, even violently, erasing real differences among people. Rubenstein argued that it is important to seek theological expressions and cosmological understandings that support and affirm pluralism.

In the third session, Rubenstein presented her work on pantheism, delving into conceptual and rhetorical issues surrounding the use of the term. Rubenstein noted that, regarding the term itself, "pantheism" identifies "all" with "God." Nevertheless, in its actual use, it can mean "wildly different things." Moreover, in the literature surrounding pantheism, the term is most often used polemically to dismiss another's position. As Rubenstein put it, "there are more voices saying 'you are a pantheist and that is absurd,' than, 'my doctrine is pantheist and this is what the term means.'" Pantheism, it seems, is something that everyone seems to want to avoid, rather than embrace.

Rubenstein is interested in answering why that is the case. Certainly, as she stated, there remains something alluring about pantheism, otherwise it would not be opposed so vehemently. Yet such opposition often had less to do with understanding and more to do with colonial, racial, and gendered assumptions. Drawing on various nineteenth-century descriptions of pantheism, Rubenstein showed that the fear of pantheism coincided with a "revulsion at blurred distinctions and crossed boundaries: of East and West, passivity and activity, femininity and masculinity, darkness and light." In short, pantheism was understood as a threat to deeply-rooted assumptions about how society should be organized.

Such assumptions also lay in the background of several philosophical treatments of pantheism. Rubenstein argued

Continued on page 28

to the statistics by contextualizing them in stories about her own experiences and framing them with the impassioned hope that a more equal society is possible.¹⁷

These authors do not focus on divine intervention. They do not predict an apocalyptic-like reversal in which the rich and poor trade places. Nor do they predict the emergence of a priestly caste that will rule with justice. They do not appeal to a new agreement with God in an effort to change an unequal society for the better. Rather, they look to a social contract that can be the basis for a just society. Like sentinels they ring the alarm that warns us all of the dangers we face and alert us to the remedies we can introduce to save ourselves and our planet. That hope for a more just world might seem as likely as miraculous water changing a desert to a paradise. However, it is the internal world of transcendent values to which prophets speak and for which they demonstrate, often at great cost to themselves. We who have been duly warned are encouraged to respond to the alarm, if only out of mere self-protection.

4R

Notes

1. See Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel*.
2. Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, 303.
3. Odell, *Ezekiel*, 1.
4. Block, *Beyond The River Chebar: Studies of Kingship and Eschatology in the Book of Ezekiel*, 74.
5. Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context*, 107.
6. See Van Hagen, "Second Thoughts."
7. Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context*, 104.
8. Odell, *Ezekiel*, 15.
9. Block, *Beyond The River Chebar*, 13.
10. Kamionkowski, 132.
11. Odell, *Ezekiel*, 488.
12. Heaney, *Gender Reversal*, 50.
13. O'Murchu, *Meaning and Practice of Faith*, 18.
14. See Baran, "Commitment of the Intellectual."
15. See Krugman, "Twin Peaks Planet."
16. See Klein, *This Changes Everything*.
17. See Warren, *A Fighting Chance*.

Bibliography

- Baran, Paul. "The Commitment of the Intellectual." *Monthly Review* (May 1961): 8–18
- Block, Daniel I. *Beyond The River Chebar: Studies of Kingship and Eschatology in the Book of Ezekiel*. Cascade, 2013.
- Boccaccini, Gabriele. *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*. Eerdmanns, 2002.
- Halperin, David J. *Seeking Ezekiel*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002.
- Kamionkowski, S. Tamar. *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study on the Book of Ezekiel*. Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.
- Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*. Simon and Schuster, 2014.
- Krugman, Paul. "Twin Peaks Planet." *New York Times* (January 2, 2015): A19.
- Odell, Margaret S. *Ezekiel*. Smyth and Helwys, 2005.
- O'Murchu, Diarmuid. *The Meaning and Practice of Faith*. Orbis, 2014.
- Peterson, Brian Neil. *Ezekiel in Context*. Pickwick Publications, 2012.
- Van Hagen, John. "Second Thoughts on Second Isaiah." *The Fourth R* 28–6 (Nov–Dec 2015): 13–15, 24–26.
- Warren, Elizabeth. *A Fighting Chance*. Metropolitan Books, 2014.



A former Catholic priest, **John Van Hagen** (Ph.D., Adelphi University) is a licensed psychologist, now retired, with more than thirty years experience in clinical, training, and teaching positions. He is the author of *Rescuing Religion: How Faith Can Survive Its Encounter with Science* (Polebridge 2012).

The Seminar on God and the Human Future *Continued from page 20*

that "the matter with pantheism is that it threatens the western symbolic not just with a maternal abyss, but with a racialized and speciated range of queer monstrosities: with parts combined that ought to be kept separate and boundaries crossed that ought to be maintained."

Drawing on the work of William James, the famed American philosopher and psychologist, Rubenstein concluded that we can take pantheism in two different directions. On the one hand, it can be taken as an expression of monism, which identifies the "all" of pantheism with the unity of the cosmic and divine reality; on the other hand, it can be taken as an expression of pluralism, which

affirms a "messy plurality rather than a perfect totality." Rubenstein emphasized the fruitfulness of the second option. Pantheism as an expression of a messy plurality can help us think about "a queerer, more metaphysically disruptive, and therefore more ethically promising pantheism than the monistic totality would—putting not only materiality but multiplicity at the heart of the concept of divinity."

After the discussion following Rubenstein's talk, which focused on the relationship between panentheism and pantheism and what could be gained conceptually, practically, and politically from both options, Jeff Robbins presented two ballot items to the seminar (see Ballot 2 results). 4R