

An abstract painting featuring a central figure with outstretched arms, rendered in a style reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's 'Olympia'. The figure is surrounded by a complex, swirling pattern of colors including deep blues, purples, pinks, and yellows. The overall composition is dense and textured, with visible brushstrokes and splatters. The figure's arms are raised, and the hands are open, suggesting a gesture of offering or reaching. The background is a mix of dark, swirling colors, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall mood is contemplative and spiritual.

ROUTLEDGE



POLYDOXY

THEOLOGY OF MULTIPLICITY AND RELATION

Edited by
Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider

Polydoxy

Religious pluralism, the collapse of traditional religious institutions, and the growing impact of religious studies on believers have prompted widespread rethinking of what religion is. *Polydoxy* offers a brilliant and original theological response to this intellectual crisis by suggesting that there are multiple forms of right belief. Reacting against reductive or nostalgic theological tendencies, the chapters in this book take an exciting and creative approach to theology in the twenty-first century. Divided into parts, the first part lays out the theological agenda of *Polydoxy*, while an impressive array of scholars explore key theological topics in the light of relationality and multiplicity in the second and third sections.

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Polydoxy

Theology of multiplicity and relation

**Edited by Catherine Keller and
Laurel C. Schneider**

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
1 Introduction	1
CATHERINE KELLER AND LAUREL C. SCHNEIDER	
PART I	
Multiplicity	17
2 Crib notes from Bethlehem	19
LAUREL C. SCHNEIDER	
3 The sense of peace: a para-doxology of divine multiplicity	36
ROLAND FABER	
4 Take my yoga upon you: a spiritual <i>pli</i> for the global city	57
SHARON V. BETCHER	
5 Be a multiplicity: ancestral anticipations	81
CATHERINE KELLER	
PART II	
The unknown	103
6 Undone by each other: interrupted sovereignty in Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>	105
MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN	

7 “Empty and tranquil, and without any sign, and yet all things are already luxuriantly present”: a comparative theological reflection on the manifold Spirit	126
HYO-DONG LEE	
8 Faith and polydoxy in the whirlwind	151
COLLEEN HARTUNG	
PART III	
Relationality	165
9 Glory: the first passion of theology?	167
MAYRA RIVERA	
10 Invoking Oya: practicing a polydox soteriology through a postmodern womanist reading of Tananarive Due’s <i>The Living Blood</i>	186
MONICA A. COLEMAN	
11 “They’ll know we are process thinkers by our ...”: finding the ecological ethic of Whitehead through the lens of Jainism and ecofeminist care	203
BRIANNE DONALDSON	
12 Signs taken for polydoxy in a Zulu Kraal: creative friction manifested in missionary–native discourse	217
MARION GRAU	
13 God as ground, contingency, and relation: trinitarian polydoxy and religious diversity	238
JOHN THATAMANIL	
<i>Index</i>	258

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1 Introduction

Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider

A single being is a contradiction in terms.¹

For where two or three are gathered ...²

In recent years, a discernible movement within theology has emerged around a triune intuition: the daunting differences of multiplicity, the evolutionary uncertainty it unfolds, and the relationality that it implies are not problems to be overcome in religious thought. They are starting points for it. Divinity understood in terms of multiplicity, open-endedness, and relationality now forms a matrix of revelation rather than a distortion, or evidence of its lack. The challenges and passions of theological creativity blossoming at the edges of tradition and at the margins of power have shown themselves, far from being distractions from doctrinal or doxological integrity, to be indispensable to its life. And this vitality belies at once the dreary prophecies of pure secularism and the hard grip of credulous certainties.

Really, given the venerable pronouncements of the death of God, theology at the start of this millennium should be worse off than it is. The undeniable atrophy of those denominations that still support an educated clergy limit the resources for even discerning just *which* God it is that is presumed dead. The hard questions remain hard; the institutional fragilities remain unsparing. And so the buoyancy we see in theology right now is all the more remarkable. Its life and movement, which in this volume we are nicknaming “polydoxy,” has multiple sources. Indeed, *multiplicity itself* has become theology’s resource. What had always seemed a liability for Christian theology – multiplicitous differences contending from within and competing from without – has miraculously turned into theology’s friend. Indeed an emergent commitment to the manifold of creation as it enfolds a multiplicity of wisdoms may be functioning as a baseline requirement for theological soundness. A responsible pluralism of interdependence and uncertainty now seems to facilitate deeper attention to ancient religious traditions as well as more robust engagement with serious critiques of religion. This is an approach that no longer needs to hide the internal fissures and complexities that riddle every Christian text or that wound and bless every theological legacy.

These intuitions and starting points find grounding in the Christian tradition not only because of the rich history of texts and practices therein that support doctrinal and ethical formulations of multiplicity, evolutionary openness, and relationality. But also, like other global religions, “Christianity” was never merely One to begin with. Internally multiple and complex, it has always required an agile and spirited approach to theological reflection. We sense that the current resilience of theology in its *becoming multiplicity of relations* is a sign and a gift of that Spirit.

From the start, the plurality of canonized gospels accompanied by the ancestral Hebrew library and the shadows of the excluded gospels made multiplicity manifest. Any durable unity that Christians achieved in texts, theology, or community was not just debatable but hotly debated. The debates display the manifold genius of Christian orthodoxy and the creative tenacity of dissent. But the habit of producing heretics as outer boundary markers for orthodox identity also exposes a repressive evasion of evident Christian complexity. Every point in the two thousand year trajectory of Christian theology is a nexus of traditions engaging – in whatever irenic or bellicose moods – each other and the divine. This means that, despite its linguistic ease of use, “the Christian tradition” does not refer to a singular lineage, nor do Christians speak with one voice even (or especially) when they attend to the same line of scripture. In this sense, the Christian tradition is always already polydox; it is irreducible to any one voice or lineage that may claim exhaustively to represent Christian faith, thought, and practice. This characteristic complexity is wrought of interweaving cultures and stories, of shifting agonisms and political pressures, of myriad communal practices, artistic media, and philosophical schools. Thus multiplicity becomes a source of richness and revelatory possibility for supple theologies that remain open to the ongoing participation of divinity in the world. It invites theological attention. The specific complexity of the Christian tradition may well be precisely what enables its mature (that is, *not simple*) unity.

In other words, much theology that has been understood as orthodox nourishes and advances its own polydox legacy. If, therefore, we dub the present gathering of texts a polydoxy, we do not intend a new orthodoxy of the Multiple to replace the orthodoxy of the One. Deleuze, a great thinker of multiplicity, puts it precisely: “A multiplicity certainly contains points of unification, centers of totalization, points of subjectivation, but these are factors that can prevent its growth and stop its lines. These factors are in the multiplicity they belong to, not the reverse.”³ Theologically we intend a *confessedly* multiple teaching of divine multiplicity. Its hermeneutics and its ontology implicate and explicate one another. Both in reality and in the theological interpretation of reality we presume therefore a deep interconnection, a constitutive relationality, between every one and its others. And so by multiplicity we do not mean a mere many, a plurality of separate ones; nor by relationality do we mean a swamp of indistinction.⁴ Yet the lines of differentiation that we find in a logic of relational multiplicity resist predictability.

Without leakage into the indeterminate, multiplicity collapses into totality and dies. The mystery of relationality lies, in part, in its inexhaustible depth and

openness to emergence, its stubborn resistance to unification under one point of view. A certain critical apophysis – an “unsaying” of what we most want to say – becomes unavoidable. It is related to the mysticism of negative theology but also to what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls, for postcolonial theory, “a critical nonknowingness.”⁵ This priority of multiplicity signifies in other words a developing attention to the edges of the known. It conveys the wilder energy of revelation in polydoxy, grounded thematically in our inherited biblical stories of the wilderness, whether grand and desert-exilic or intimate and Emmaus-suburban.

Michel Serres reminds us that “[t]he multiple as such, unhewn and little unified, is not an epistemological monster, but on the contrary the ordinary lot of situations ...” Yet it requires us to recognize that its comprehension, like the apophatic God, always eludes even as it beckons and inspires. “Commonly we know a bit,” Serres concedes, “a meager amount, enough, quite a bit; there are various undulations, even in the hardest and most advanced sciences.”⁶ We cannot know it all, in other words. But this unknowing is an energy of epistemological and theological integrity, as the disparate apophatic thinkers of the Christian tradition from Justin Martyr, through Nicholas of Cusa, to Sallie McFague have always insisted. Unlike the otherworldly priority of much mysticism, polydoxy understands unknowing to have a deep relation to creaturely interrelations. It constitutes and animates the actual openness that an evolutionary sensibility requires; it limns the depth of “ordinary situations” with which theology has to do, or it dies.

Polydox inheritances

Theology that starts from manifold intuitions of multiplicity and relationality is often inspired by stories of liberation, of resistance to some monolithic religious-political rule. But it does not therefore dispense with unity and endurance. Rather it refuses to continue Procrustean practices that chop off whole limbs of experience to fit a dominant theological frame of oneness. It refuses, in fact, the false dichotomy of nihilistic dissolution of meaning on the one hand and unification by self-appointed orthodoxy on the other. It seeks instead an evolving coherence in the midst of actual, lived complexity. It remains mindful of the toxic by-products of any doxic certainty. It appreciates the semantics of *doxa* as “mere opinion,” “appearance,” “illusion,” and “glory” inflecting the doxologies of Christian confession. Indeed it glories in irreducible complexities as sites of enfolded revelation, which is to say, of the embodiment of love according to the discernment of spirits.

But how, one might ask, can such a polydoxy make coherent claims of truth and justice? How will a theology that is energized by the tangle of ancient texts and teachings within and well beyond Christianity, that internalizes the emergent and divergent histories of trauma, survival, remembrance, celebration, and liberation, avoid becoming “lost in multiplicity” that Augustine reasonably feared?⁷ Evidently it will seek a polyvocal kind of coherence. Its logic is not that of an abstract order of pyramidal meaning. Rather it hangs together by “network thinking,” as Hardt and Negri say of the emergent “multitude.”⁸ The net, however,

does not remain in the logic of virtual space but embodies itself in the webs of living interaction, in their sticky logic: to “cohere,” after all, means in Latin “*to stick together*.”

The solidarity of such togetherness cannot be conceived theologically apart from a radically widened sense of the incarnation. Indeed the abstractions of philosophical or systematic theologies exist relative not only to each other but to the bodies that produce them. Feminist theory across the disciplines has labored to keep thought responsible to its relational contexts of embodiment, mindful of what Donna Haraway has dubbed its “situated knowledge.”⁹ And according to Alfred North Whitehead, who earlier unfolded a relevant theo-cosmology of radical pluralism (issuing from William James’ “pluriverse”), “no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe.” This is because all key notions, or metaphors, in a system of thought “presuppose each other.” Yet Whitehead is here defining “coherence” to mean not just that the signifiers “are definable in terms of each other; it means that *what is indefinable* in one such notion cannot be abstracted from its relevance to the other notions.”¹⁰ The unknown is not excused from the multiplicity of its relations.

The theology introduced in this volume sticks together without plastering over differences. As invitations to polydoxy, these essays do not let go of creative divergences and stubborn tensions. They variously point to an incarnational depth in the world from which Christian faith and teaching might renew itself. If that depth also requires of us a disciplined unknowing, it is not as an escape from knowledge. Rather it lends contemplative attention to what Judith Butler calls the “opacity” of our own self-constitution in an intimate multiplicity of relations.¹¹ Otherwise we may miss the point at which the planetary multitude lays its specific claim, its truth, and its justice, upon our gifts.¹²

By way of introduction to this volume and its performances of polydoxy, we suggest an economic trinity of themes – multiplicity, unknowing, and relationality – to serve as a loose guide to the text. This interactivity of multiplicity, unknowing and relationality hints at the triune mystery of a divine manifold eluding and inspiring our collaboration. It also lets us begin to explicate the relations among the texts as they create the manifold of polydox theology.

Multiplicities of Christian theology

Polydoxy foregrounds the context of vibrant and enduring religious and spiritual diversity in the world. At the same time, polydoxy reads that context as indigenous to Christian history and its theological legacy. The theologians in this volume, who share the intuitions and commitments that polydoxy here collects, recognize the novel avowal of that diversity as prolegomena to theology’s future vitality and intellectual integrity. For this reason, despite fundamentalist fears to the contrary, internal and intersectional multiplicity is no embarrassment to theology, something to be masked or dismissed as evidence of Christian failures to *be* Christian. There is a doctrinal claim at play in this volume about what it means to be Christian in this world. It 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.

However, multiplicity as such remains a risky and powerful concept, tricky to handle. It constrains any claims of orthodox exclusivity. In the process it can wash out any ethical or cultural authority with which – in the interest of justice or truth – we ourselves presume to speak. Increasingly, however, there are transdisciplinary clues among philosophers and poets who pit the multiple against the logic of the One. Sometimes, as with Deleuze and Guattari, they take aim at God the One as irreversibly totalizing in His mission. But on the whole, even among poststructuralists still attending the funeral of God (as caricature of the death of European metaphysics), the animus of difference directs itself against the monodoxies and mono-politics that manage a history of vengeful and imperial unities. These monoliths of the One bristle with *ressentiment*. They shore up boundaries of exclusion in vain efforts to deny the very multiplicity that constitutes them – that, as Mary-Jane Rubenstein points out in her theological reading of Butler, also undoes them. If as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it “the origin is irreducibly plural,” then it is no surprise that the multiplicity of lived existence repeatedly interrupts the deafening monotones of empire forthright or neoliberal, theocratic, or totalitarian. Yet we do not naively embrace multiplicity. It is often in the name of pluralism, difference, and interconnection that the globalization of the economy works to flatten the planet like a One World credit card. Leveling cultural difference and old growth forests, this economy can annihilate the very diversity it craves and commodifies. The injustices that late capitalism imposes and the rage its rapacious disregard provokes are not new, only – multiplying.

The peculiarity and promise of this moment may lie in the planetary pressure that a growing multitude feels to find and practice a saner, more sustainable common life. If there is a startling vitality in newer theologies growing in the depleted soil of mainline Christianity, it is not incidental to this pressure. These theologies began to arise like waves when major social crises of the mid-twentieth century solicited responsive echoes in biblical prophetic movements.¹³ The one God of the Christendom that took up the Roman pattern and built empires on the labor of slaves had, through centuries, provoked many rounds of exodus. The U.S. civil rights movement and the birth of Black theology along with Latin American liberation theology churned up new Christian discourses of exodus. And soon the international women’s movement, followed by gay, lesbian, and other queer movements, deepened challenges to the God of orthodoxy. God’s faces and names began to proliferate. God’s façade of bourgeois decency began to slip.¹⁴ A sense was growing that the logic of the One may stand more in the way of justice, liberation, and love than not.¹⁵ Entwining faith with social analysis in their different singularities, these emergent theologies have come through decades of fragile, often brittle solidarity with each other. In the process they have formed vibrant and resolute counter- (not anti-) traditions. Which is not to say that any of these explosive movements have always gracefully engaged their own complexes of multiplicity.

The plurality of issues that energize these emergent theologies are informed by a plurality of extra-theological theories, multiplied by cultures, sexes, and spirits of many sorts. So we have some sympathy for various conservative retreats from this tragicomic multiplication of inelegant identities, with its noisy complication of the rules of theology. One might in a gesture of impatience with liberation, a moue of postfeminist or even postcolonial sophistication, relegate these social movement theologies to the past millennium. Which of them after all is innocent of the logic of the One? But we suspect that a more delicate operation is needed and indeed underway in the form of multiple sensitive moves away from single issue simplifications toward a coalitional, or at least more complex, manifold. Multiplicity and pluralism are not the enemy of justice, or of identity politics, though they require supplemental strategies of reflection and action.

Each of the contributions to this volume takes up the concept of multiplicity as an organizing principle in theology, though each does so differently. Unlike triumphalist theologies that find themselves again and again comfortably ensconced in the political programs of empire, the theological voices in this collection articulate a coherence that neither retreats from uncertainty nor falls into nihilistic disarray. Not surprisingly, they do not all speak with one voice or use a single strategy to create their particular pluralisms. For example, Roland Faber uses Whitehead's richly "irreducible interplay of the multiplicities of creator, creatures, and creativity" to take on the idea of God's peace within his intertwined neologisms of "theoplicity," "polyphilia," and "para-doxo." He does so in order to better account for worldly multiplicity and the divine multiplicity revealed in and through it. Laurel Schneider argues for multiple modes of reasoning that can help remedy theology's typically stultifying over-reliance on presuppositions and frames of thought forged in Europe's cultural context. She seeks to "loosen Christian theology's cramped grip on seriousness, a tired habit of solemnity that undermines its lush capacity for wisdom." Divine multiplicity, revealed by incarnation and accessible through postures of openness and humor, is grounded in the rich inheritance of canonical and extra-canonical stories about it, their plurality and limber ambiguities.

Sharon Betcher investigates the global city as a locus of bodily and spiritual multiplicity that, rather than being a problem for Christian pneumatology, becomes a source of insight for it. With her eye on growing cosmopolitan "spiritual but not religious" populations in the midst of centrifugal urban forces, she teases out the "ligatures" of connection that indicate a spiritual vitality. She gestures toward a nascent ecclesiology of the multiple, in which "the prosthesis of Spirit, the locus of opening and the harness of corporeal generosity might imply practicing ... ways of 'being with' one another in the city." Catherine Keller thinks toward the con-valority of polydoxo with the help of the little known Anne Conway, "the first writer of the relational multiplicity." Conway's reasoned challenges to the emergent, desensitizing dualism of early modernity crackle with explosive potential. But her small voice, nurtured in a multiplex of thinkers and activists, bided the centuries as philosophy and theology gradually benumbed themselves with the mechanized view of the universe. Of course the fact that we have any

philosophical writing by any woman of any era before our own is a wonder, a testament to the same canny Spirit of multiplicity that flows through the fissures and gaps interrupting the patriarchal hubris of biblical and early Christian writings. In Conway, we find an ancestress for the explicit avowal of multiplicity as the relational fabric of existence itself, one who argues that “a creature must *be* manifold ... in order to receive ‘the assistance of its Fellow-Creatures.’”

All of the contributions to this collection reflect angles of the logic of multiplicity that undergirds polydoxy as a mode of Christian constructive theology. They variously demonstrate the fold, the *pli*, which distinguishes multiplicity from mere plurality. That enfolded and unfolding relationality suggests not a relation between many separate ones but between singularities, events of becoming folded together, intersecting, entangled as multiples. It is such connectivity that allows, indeed implies (*implicatio*), the becoming coherence of polydoxy.

Stories of the unknown

If multiplicity addresses the diversity unfolding as a cosmos, and relationality addresses the interconnections that enfold creatures one in another, neither concept will necessarily divulge its own mystery. Mystery clouds the *eschata* as well as the origins. Do we not need a conceptual space in which to address, *in media res*, both the bottomless beginnings and the glorious and unnerving openness of all of reality to its future? We believe so, and for this reason, embed unknowing in the middle of this collection, between the thematic energies of plurality and of relationality. Change, novelty, and evolutionary emergence all characterize the interactivity that gives meaning to both relations and to diversity. But they also characterize its uncertainty. Is it not this element of the unknown that lends philosophies of becoming and theologies of process their unsettling edge?

If a polydox planetarity calls for unprecedented attention to uncertainty, it is because creation is not static, nor is it unfolding predictably from an origin to an end.¹⁶ This condition of epistemic limitation is often addressed by saying we lack a “God’s eye view,” which is surely the case. But the phrase implies something we do not, that God not only sees it all but sees it in advance, from an eternity beyond time. Many Christians find comfort in such providential remedies to human uncertainty. We do not however find it reassuring to rob God of the new. If, in our polydox trinity, uncertainty goes all the way down – as quantum theories indicate – we suspect it goes “up” as well. We might leave divine unknowing in the cloud of our own unknowing of the divine. But we would still agree that the indeterminacy of the creation is the creative condition of its genesis – its becoming multiplicity. Some of us would affirm that God is also becoming in the internal relations of this becoming; others of us would negate our capacity to distinguish between the being and the becoming of what we call “God.” And these are not incommensurable positions. Negative theology, as in Gregory of Nyssa’s “brilliant darkness,” both relativizes and revives the affirmative utterance – in prayer, confession, and speculative offering – but then precisely not as dogmatic certainty. Our unknowing, linked in this way to the ancient tradition of apophatic

mysticism, “unsays” its own certainties – identities, essences, bodies, objectifications, exclusions, and other last words – in order paradoxically that we may keep speaking of God.¹⁷

Polydoxy presumes a mindful uncertainty. It makes possible what Nancy calls the “auto-deconstruction of Christianity,” as it loosens theology’s limbs, allowing for a greater responsiveness to the world and to the intimate unfolding of its stories. The irresistible postmodern interplay between deconstruction (with its asymptotic proximity to atheism) and any negative theology (with its asymptotic proximity to theism) further tests our spirits and tones our discourse. With the help of Jacques Derrida’s notion of “*sans*” (religion without religion), Colleen Hartung takes up this unsaying of certainty in her exploration of a polydox faith in the face of real-world limitations. “Polydox theologies foreground the multiple and the uncertain,” she writes. They “take seriously this deep-seated, embodied experience of indeterminacy.” Derrida’s pursuit of the *sans* provides Hartung with language that makes a faith without the certainty of religion’s God theoretically intelligible. The apophatic therefore signifies at once the humility of not-knowing-it-all and the excess of expression in the face of it All.

Uncertainty in our triune approach appears at every level implicated in *multiplicity* – as the very density and cloud of *relationality*. Polydox theologies need not retreat to divine proscriptions or veils of authorized revelation to accept this unknowing, which is itself known to us at every juncture of the creation. In their contributions, John Thatamanil, Hyo-Dong Lee, and Catherine Keller all delve specifically and variously into the relationality signified by the trinitarian symbol as a particularly rich and traditioned aspect of polydoxy’s long Christian inheritance. Lee offers insight into a trinitarian panentheism with the help of Neo-Confucian emphases on the openness of the Spirit to embodied abundance. In part this is due to its being “empty and tranquil, without any sign” – which is paradoxically necessary to the Spirit’s *presence* in embodiment. He suggests that Neo-Confucian struggles with openness and presence can provide a great deal of help to Christian trinitarian thought that seeks to move past the shackles of monological ontology. A dialogue between them, he argues, “will be able to strike a balance between the apophatic and the kataphatic by recognizing a depth in God while refusing to call that divine depth God’s ground.”

Apophasis never means a mere “not.” In its theological forms it cannot be confused with the pseudo-certainty of simple denial. The gesture of unknowing entails an apophatic leap of faith. This space in which unknowing transforms certainty in to open-armed uncertainty (a fertile, receptive, and promiscuous openness) can be perhaps symbolized by the Holy Spirit, which for the fifteenth-century cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (following Augustine) is “connection itself.”¹⁸ This Spirit implicates every relation in the “negative infinity” of Cusa’s One, which is “not a one that is opposed to the many”: the divine *complicatio*. Its infinity “folds together” all creatures in itself, even as they unfold of themselves. It cannot enclose the multiplicity in a monistic totality or a dualist hierarchy. But for all its resistance to the idolatries of definition, it does not fold orthodoxy down; it *complicates* it.

Mary-Jane Rubenstein plumbs the apophatic wealth of vulnerability and inscrutability that comes with relationality in her dialogical reading of Augustine's *Confessions* alongside Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*. She finds in Augustine's account of conversion a kind of testament to personal and divine multiplicity. "Or in a more polydox register" Rubenstein suggests, "perhaps conversion does not bring about the static unity it promises. Perhaps, far from annihilating multiplicity, the confessional journey uncovers and reconfigures it." With the help of Butler's reflection on the *ex-stasis* of grief and desire – the constitutive "being beside oneself" that pushes even at ordinary meanings of relationality – Rubenstein thinks about many of the key turnings in Augustine's stories as so many processes of faithful "undoing," not only of the bishop's own sovereignty, but in a certain sense, of his God's sovereignty. "Exhausted from his struggle in the garden with an omnipotent God, Augustine gives himself over to the *incarnate* God, renouncing his own sovereignty for the God who renounces *his* ..."

Being undone by ecstasy is not, in a polydox sense, something to avoid, just as multiplicity is not the epistemological monster that Augustine seems to have feared. It is a confirmation of being alive and of accepting that gift. The only way around this, he himself finds, is an austere closing down of both modes of ecstasy – desire and grief – which simply does not seem to succeed in his own, stubbornly passionate life, and certainly not in his theological account of that life. And therein lies an exquisite, poignantly unpretentious basis for orthodoxy's own polydox self-understanding. As Schneider argues, the incarnational theology implicit in Christianity's own stories dismantles every legitimate bill of sale, pedigree, or authorized provenance in favor of disreputable, improvised, and impure emergence that polydoxy recognizes as necessary to the integrity of its work. The question for polydoxy therefore does not lie in whether Christian theology is multiple and shady in its sources and foundations. Rather the challenge is how to understand its syncretic folds theologically. What interpretive authority/ies can be made possible through a more generous and humorous acceptance of Christianity's own messy, fertile ancestral lures and complications?

All our relations

While attention to plurality and a certain apophatic openness mark – to different degrees and with divergent feelings – all of these chapters, the theme of relationality appears to be the condition of possibility for this shared theology. Because multiplicity falls into incoherence, and apophasis into mere negation, in abstraction from their implicate connections, polydoxy presumes at several levels the ligatures (to use Betcher's image) of a relationality that imbricates and undoes multiplicities as they emerge. The relation of a subject to an inexchangeable other, itself already related to other inexchangeable others, is what makes possible the plural manifestations of worldly experience. This descriptive truth takes on normative force. Relationality distinguishes pluralism from the relativism that swamps judgment and inhibits resolution. Historically speaking, the authors in this volume also presume a debt to the heritage of feminist and Black liberation

thought, much of it in theology, that explicates the systemic relationality of our personal and political condition. Sociality immanent to our individualities, not external to some prior essence, had other antecedents as well, especially of Hegelian and Whiteheadian provenance; but the analysis of our primary relations across sexual and racial divides first rendered this discourse of constituent relationality ethically unavoidable.¹⁹

Also feminist theological alliances with ecology and process theology embed interhuman sociality in layers of cosmological accountability. Certainly Keller, Schneider, and Faber have been long involved in the methodological webs of feminist, pluralist, poststructuralist, and process theories that highlight the explication of multiplicity and relationality as such, especially in its stimulation of a counter-ontology for Christian constructive theology. Brianne Donaldson builds on this foundation in her exposition of interspecies care. She reminds us, with the help of an ecofeminist reading of Whitehead and the Jain concept of *ahimsa*, that “the realm of embodied particularity has long been associated with women and nature.” This is a position that some feminists have sought to move past, but Donaldson retrieves it for a deeper understanding of polydoxy as a mode of theology that attends to planetary life beyond the human realm. In other words, polydox relationality extends through and beyond participation in the familiar to our more alien affinities. Betcher touches on this relational thinking as well in her reading of the Deleuzian “becoming whale,” and Keller lifts it into prominence in her concept of “the conviviality of creation.” Only in the discernment of the vibrant webs of a prehensive interdependence does pluralism escape from liberal banality, the sterile series of separate ones: plastic bottles tossed by a desert road.

These chapters want theology to come to grips with the problematic and promising immensity of our creaturely interdependence. However we articulate divine relationality, it seems to be inviting a more mindful participation in itself, and therefore in the cosmopolitan, ecological, and posthuman senses of our planetarity. What is more, if we open the fold between self and other in these terms, we expose the margin of entanglement that holds us in relation – akin to what Anne Joh refers to as *Jeong*, or “sticky love” in her postcolonial Christology – and renders our multiplicities coherent.²⁰ Relationality, in this sense, laps over and suffers difference without letting go. It bears the memories of the oppressed and excluded and so cannot deny the force of hybridity and miscegenation, of queer fertilities and revelatory contaminations, in the formulation of sacred wisdom. It will not repress the promiscuity and – in memory of Marcella Althaus Reid – the indecency of divine love itself.²¹

Relationality is also the theme that most grounds us, as human beings embodying thinking and writing, in the materiality of connection. As a number of the authors in this collection demonstrate, there exists a wealth of narrative sources originating outside of the European mainstream. Schneider argues that these sources and modes of reasoning are not merely, as Andrea Smith points out, exotic objects for study; they also *produce theory*.²² There is something commonsensical and obvious about the claim that not all good theory comes from

Europe; but remarkably, most Christian theology limits itself to a parochialism that diminishes its rigor, relevance, and honesty. Polydoxy therefore returns to the theoretical intensity of ancient Christian theology by way of disciplined openness to intersecting traditions, narratives, and philosophies. En route to a sustainably planetary vision, it seeks careful and adventurous engagements with the multiplicity of relations that characterize Christianity's global character.²³ In this spirit, Monica Coleman follows the ancestral lures and voices of Oya through a post-modern womanist attention to the multiplicity of Black women's experiences and narratives. She attends to the presences of past and future that link us all to our own and each others' ancestors in theologically potent ways. In an HIV age that has grown terrified (anew) of blood, especially of African blood, Coleman thinks with Tananarive Due's novel *The Living Blood*, about soteriology as complex healing-in-community. She grounds soteriology in the ever shifting ligatures of community, blood-bound, and chosen. "As boundaries bend and cross in the narrative world of *The Living Blood*," she tells us, "this reading also suggests that practicing polydox soteriology is transnational, transcontinental, postcolonial, feminist, womanish, and dangerous, while also necessary for our health."

In their attention to injustice, polydox theologies that eschew singular answers to complex realities are challenged by their own commitments to naming and claiming the multiple interconnections between communities that have survived by any means possible. Exposing oppression as a critique of the privileged is only one side of the work of relationality, as Homi Bhabha has so persuasively demonstrated. "For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory."²⁴ The work of decolonization is a work of recognition: ambivalence structures the hybrid relations and complicated desires that circulate in the empire's wake. Oppression, in one sense, is the suppression of elemental relationality, shored up by doctrines of separation and the legitimation of violence. Exposing, naming, even claiming the hybrid interdependencies of bodies *across* lines of oppression is also a work of relationality; but doing so can undermine resistance efforts that depend upon clearly delineated identities. This work can expose how identities of resistance, forged in oppression, risk an internally-policed sameness that mirrors the exclusionary energies of oppression itself. These identity-based strategies of survival persist because they are needed, and the work of challenging the logic of the One makes polydoxy itself an ambivalent gift, even as it stretches theological imagination toward more fluid and open-ended notions of identity; a peaceable kin-dom in which relations bind, but also unfold. In other words, ambivalent attractions, uncertain hopes, and attention to the least (who are never identical with us), give guidance to polydox relationality.

This means that colonialism and its spawn of institutionalized racial and sexual violence form a primary legacy with which theology can fruitfully contend – when it has the courage to do so. We do not turn away from Christianity's implication on every level of the denial of relationality that has enabled the genocidal trajectories of imperialism. But neither do we turn away from Christian counter-movements, out of which real alternatives to the force of imperialism have flowed. Stories of

enemy-love and resistance to oppressive domination (whether political, ecclesial, economic, or social) can be found even at the heart of imperial and missionary schemes, confounding the easy caricatures of Christian missionaries that tend to permeate contemporary discourse. Marion Grau traces just such a story of resistance and complex conversion in the Anglican mission to the Zulus led by the Colenso family – and the mission to the Colensos led by the Zulus. The deep relationality that this story exposes makes a simplistic reading of mission (from either side) impossible. Reciprocity attends relationality, when it is read as constituent, not as something that I “do” with or to you. John Milbank’s insistence on the “asymmetrical reciprocities” of a participatory ontology has resonance, at this angle, with postcolonial, polydox theology.²⁵

As we have said, relationality is the connective tissue that makes multiplicity coherent. It is the depth that makes all of our relations strange and unknowable even, or especially, in intimacy. The immensity of the manifold converges, as Cusa would have it, upon an infinity, a “divine maximum,” where “the minimum coincides with the maximum.”²⁶ Or as Mayra Rivera notes in her chapter, divine glory transcends the great, and manifests in the neglected and smallest exchanges of life. “Glory appears not only as the shock of injustice,” she writes, “but also as the irreducible difference of that which is closest to us, which lures us beyond ourselves.” She is challenged by injustice – which sticks to bodies and shapes them – to seek “concrete, material, fleshy images of the divine,” for which she relies on “biblical images of glory as earthy and elemental.”

The very excessiveness of biblical images of glory is what makes those images a fertile resource for polydoxy. In those texts, God cannot be contained in single narratives or in single bodies. An elemental vitality seems to exceed in the divine, to transcend conceptual closure in just the ways that flesh elementally exceeds all grasping, imperial, rapacious, or puritan control. There is relationality at play in glory, just as there is multiplicitous excess and the beckoning strangeness of the unknown. We are immersed in glory, embedded in it, and brought forth out of it. Or in other words, the world itself is implicated, complicated, and explicated through divine glory. In the relations of the trinity, the deep orthodoxy of love (which is relation itself) multiplies polydoxically.

In the concluding chapter (which is by no means a closure), it is to the trinity that John Thatamanil brings us. As an indigenous ground for Christian thinking about multiplicity, ineffability, and relationality, the trinity offers an apt place to launch the beginning that an ending may yield. Like Keller, Thatamanil sees in trinitarian thought a strong basis for polydoxy. Through it he is able to approach Christian theology’s proximity to other religious traditions as a source of enrichment and mutual correction rather than mere competition or dismissal. “Might it be possible,” he asks, “for Christian theologians to envision a trinitarian engagement with religious diversity that is marked by a sense of *anticipation* that other traditions may have something to teach us about how to think even about trinity?” He not only finds this vision possible, but does much to actualize its promise. Through his own construction of a triune scheme of “contingency, ground, and relation” he shows this intersectionality to be necessary to an improved, less

anemic, understanding of Christian ideas in themselves. In other words, the differences between religions are important to the ecological health and internal integrity of the religions. But even more so, the differences between and among religions reveal diversity in divine life itself; they reveal a healthy and mysterious multiplicity of relations.

Engaging the endogenous plurality of traditions, texts, and practices in Christianity is therefore one aspect of our intent to develop greater probity and rigor in the mode of Christian theology that we are calling polydoxy. At the same time, the exogenous plurality of traditions has never *not* exercised a shaping effect on Christian thought. Other traditions have always exerted a pressure and influence on Christianity, the recognition of which serves to improve the clarity with which we think about the distinctiveness of our claims. Like others in this volume, Thatamanil recognizes the ways in which traditionally non-Christian modes of approaching common questions of meaning also sometimes offer new lines of flight through doctrinal impasses. The presupposition here is that polydoxy positions Christian theology where it already stands – in the midst of a boundless array of intersecting conversations and modes of reasoning. Furthermore, as we noted at the beginning, polydoxy does not see the challenges of such a boisterous and sometimes bellicose environment to be only a distraction and a problem for Christian theology. That environment also delivers the very ecological diversity upon which theology's own health depends. Christian thought cannot avoid the multiplicity that constitutes it at its textual and narrative core. Nor can it avoid the multiple relations to others who in ongoing interchange, friction (as Grau points out), and mutual inspiration constitute its existence in an actual world.

In conclusion, the chapters in this volume form an invitational introduction to polydoxy as a vibrantly engaged mode of doing constructive theology. We suspect that the evolutionary leap of the manifold – the processes of creation that enfold and unfold the divine – will embody itself in emerging, uncertain, endlessly promising coherencies. If Christian renditions of this unfinished incarnation are also to emerge and stick together, they will need the energy of ancient intuition multiplied by the flight lines of our freshest thinking. Faith, hope, and *caritas*: if the uncertainty translates into faith, multiplicity yields a hope that indeed our chosen multiplicities, as Coleman suggests, will prove loveable. And furthermore, that the unknown will prove liveable.

We hope that the present performances of polydoxy find resonance among many other emerging efforts. We hope they encourage younger theologians and scholars of religion in their commitment to a richer, more rigorous thinking of multiplicity within and of any religions. Our own multiplicities, enfolded here in the structure and personalities of this volume, unfold within the body of Christ, itself multiply incarnate in a logos-invoked cosmos. This polydoxy will help to right theology – *orthos* – to the extent that it teaches us to trade certainty for faith and *anathema* for *caritas*. Polydoxy – by whatever name – happens whenever a few of us are gathered – in whatever space, medium or web – *seeking* understanding. Without yet again presupposing the answers.

Notes

- 1 J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. R. D. Richardson and A. E. O'Byrne, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 12.
- 2 Matthew 18:20.
- 3 G. Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975–1995*, New York: Semiotext(e), 2006, p. 305.
- 4 “To try to think outside of the manifold of combinations, outside of classification, outside of customs and fixed species, outside of discipline and specialty...,” M. Serres, *Genesis*, trans. G. James and J. Nielson, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005 (1995), p. 96.
- 5 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- 6 Serres, p. 5.
- 7 “*in multa evanui*,” Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. O. Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 2.1.1. See also M. J. Rubenstein in this volume, p. 108.
- 8 M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: Penguin Books, 2005, pp. xiii–xiv.
- 9 D. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 14, No. 3 (Autumn 1988), pp. 575–99.
- 10 A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York: The Free Press, p. 3, emphasis added.
- 11 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, pp. 8ff.
- 12 And indeed that contemplation may lead us, theologically, to the precise place of the painfully relevant contradiction – that which Nicholas of Cusa has called “the cloud of the impossible.” C. Keller, *The Cloud of the Impossible*, forthcoming.
- 13 For a genealogy of theological liberalism in the United States, see Gary Dorrien’s three volume series, especially the first volume which examines the nineteenth-century precedents for the social gospel movement: G. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion (1805–1900)*, Vol. 1, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- 14 For a magnificent discourse on the question of divine decency, see the writings of the late Marcella Althaus Reid, especially M. Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001. And also M. Althaus Reid, *The Queer God*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- 15 For an introduction to the concept of the “logic of the One” as a problem in Christian history and theology, see L. C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, New York: Routledge, 2008.
- 16 C. Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996.
- 17 For more on the apophatic, see C. Boesel and C. Keller (eds), *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.
- 18 See Catherine Keller’s work on Cusa in C. Keller, “The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis,” *Apophatic Bodies*, p. 40.
- 19 For more on constituent relationality and primary relations, see I. Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982. And also C. Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986, 1988; R. N. Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, New York: Crossroad, 1988; A. Lorde, *Sister/Outsider: Speeches and Essays by Audre Lorde*, Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984.

- 20 W. Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- 21 Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology*.
- 22 A. Smith, "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 16, No. 1/2: 1–2, 2010, p. 43.
- 23 We are using the distinction between "global" and "planetary" that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak names in *Death of a Discipline*.
Planet-thought opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of ... names, including but not identical with the whole range of human universals: aboriginal animism as well as the spectral white mythology of postrational science. If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains as much as it flings away.
See G. Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 73. For a fuller discussion of the qualitative distinction between the "global" and the "planetary" particularly as it relates to theological concerns, see M. R. Rivera and S. Moore, *Spivak*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
- 24 H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005 (1994), p. 160.
- 25 For more on Milbank's "assymetrical reciprocity" see, for example, J. Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, New York: Routledge, 2003. For an alternative view, see M. Grau and R. Radford Ruether (eds), *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to Radical Orthodoxy*, London: T&T Clark, 2006.
- 26 Nicholas of Cusa, "Of Learned Ignorance," in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. L. Bond, New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997.

Part I

Multiplicity