



## Reviews



*Face of the Deep: a Theology of Becoming*, Catherine Keller, London/New York: Routledge, 2003 Hardback ISBN 0415256488, £60; Paperback ISBN 0415256496, £18.99

Keller's exploration is about rethinking 'the darkness of beginnings'. It is a constructive theology, a theology in progress, which offers an account of the creation, but one where creation emerges from the divinely created deep in all its variations, confusion, and circularity. Traditional paradigms of creation have focused on the fixed beginning and ending of linear time. Keller deconstructs origins and final endings. All creation is always in the process of becoming.

In the first part of her book, Keller introduces the metaphors and the methods of her study. She argues that the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, which has been the dominant creation theory since the third century CE in developed Christian, Jewish and Muslim teaching, is not supported by the opening to the Bible, i.e. Genesis 1.1-2.3, and that, for the most part, theologians have chosen to ignore the something, the deep, the void, which was already there. Keller is arguing for a de-familiarisation of the first two verses of Genesis, so that far from glossing over verse two in 'ignorance or orthodoxy' we can examine the creative possibility, the multi-layered responsiveness and risk of chaos and all its changing permutations, which only becomes discernible when we read the deep as something in the spaces between poetics, literature, theology and science.

Keller re-examines the grammar of the Bible's opening and discusses the dependence/independence of verse two. She finds support in Rashi's commentary against a time-bound ordering of creation, and from Derrida's idea of the 'bottomless', the abyss that opens at the origin of life, which carries us, at the very beginning, to the edges of language. These are important references and observations which ultimately ask questions about the originating *Logos* as well as the traceability of life's permutations, its 'matrix of possibilities'. Keller discusses Augustine's

two-stage creation, and the persistence of *creatio ex nihilo* into the theologies of ecology and social justice in the late twentieth century.

This is a feminist theology, where the deep opens a womb of life potential. Keller questions whether the deep is a monster of chaos, either completely divorced from the works of the creator, or needing the father/creator to dictate the shape and substance of incarnation. Instead she posits the theory that the breadth of the creation itself, its waves of complex interaction and variegated life-forms, are always producing a word, always bringing forth an incarnate being, in which all creation plays a part. Keller also knows that theology is not a competition between male and female. Her questions search for more inclusive answers, for openings and possibilities, a God who is in every 'membrane and mucus of the creation'.

As well as being a feminist theology, Keller's work is an implied critique of the linear *Summae*, both formal and informal by-products of hellenised aesthetics, confessions of ordering and harmonising all that is known within and beyond the world. She examines the arid purity of Augustine's divine landscape and its shattered image in creation, and concludes that Augustine's cry for depth leads him to 'sublimate upward'. Augustine creates depth in the space between the heights of heaven, where God is, and the sin-blemished skin of the earth. But Augustine too, reaches the edges of language, and in *The Confessions*, written before he imposed upon himself the rigid discipline of allegory, his passionate reflections acknowledge a range of meanings, a wealth of interpretation. Yet, the dark pools of Augustine's thought are ultimately brought into submission to orthodoxy. They are alternative surfaces, not depths.

Similarly, Keller analyses the embedding of *creatio ex nihilo* in Christian, patristic teaching. In Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Athanasius she traces the development of the doctrine, together with the increasing importance of the *Logos* principle, and sees it as a response to varying forms of heresy. 'In their triumphant *Logos* we have read a logic whereby the creation doctrine guards God's unity against Gnostic complexity.' But Keller also sees this as masculine order imposed upon a lawless femininity, a

begetting, celibate creator who overrides shared procreation, and she relates this to a fixed canon, an end to random textual proliferation. The *Logos* narrative is, for Keller, an imperialist narrative.

Keller examines Barth and argues that he has constrained the dark waters of the beginning and, more significantly, the brooding Spirit to a mythical existence. The creation is by word, and the Spirit of Genesis 1:2 is silent and therefore powerlessly and obediently waiting for the word to be given. For Barth, the waters are nothing. There is no spontaneous creativity in chaos, and chaos must be brought into submission to a divine ordering which alone has the power to withstand the disordered pull of the void. Yet, as Keller points out, this means that the disordering impulse has become a creature that threatens the divine order of which it is a part. And in that 'fissure', that imperfection in creation, it's 'brokenness', Barth opens up a seam into which Keller can place her idea of the broken, chaotic deep, still generating life's hybrid graces.

In the final section of her book, Keller analyses some biblical hermeneutics and their attempts to 'negotiate' a new space, a third possibility between *ex nihilo* and an independent pre-existent chaos. Her deconstruction of *ex nihilo* draws on the work of Von Rad, Levenson, Brown, and Boyarin, but she replaces the fixed doctrine with Brown's 'invitations to enter into the grand creative sweep of God's designs', with Boyarin's recovery of 'the lost personality of the sea'. Keller then re-reads Job as a creation drama, illuminated by Melville's interpretation, expansion and repetition in 'Moby Dick'.

What she finds is a creation where there is an 'infinite intimacy'. In the gaps and spaces between God and the life/death condition of living things, between the spirit and the waters, there is the expectation of a strange, searching, unknowable, risky, and endlessly hopeful, beginning.

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