Apophatic theology and deconstruction - Response to Keller on 2-10-2017, expert seminar Nijmegen

Thank you, Maaike, for having me in this seminar and for allowing me to contribute to our conversation on apophatic theology, or more precisely, as Catherine Keller phrased the key-word, on apophatic panentheism.

First of all, let me shortly explain where I speak from. In the early nineties I wrote my dissertation on Origen of Alexandria and I took a particular interest in the middle- and neo-platonic philosophies that were informative for patristic theologies. As I became a Church-minister I found that patristic theology was at a great distance of my daily work and I shifted my attention toward the liberal theology of figures like Herrmann, Troeltsch and Bultmann and in the Netherlands Roessingh and Van der Leeuw. This type of theology also belonged to the past and was completely overshadowed in the Dutch protestant theological landscape by Barthian theology, but I still hold that the liberal tradition, building on Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel, can still be meaningful today. Some ten years ago, when I was appointed to work in the academia on systematic theology, I focused on the subject of ‘God after God’ reading Hent de Vries, Kearney, Caputo, Rollins, Jean-Luc Nancy, Keller and the like, beyond theism, beyond modernism, beyond the secular, well, you know the scene.

I still believe in God, or something that the word hints at, but in daily conversations I am usually a bit hesitant to use it, mainly because of the supposed implications, presuppositions and misunderstandings that go along with it. In this respect, I am very grateful for the radical and deconstructive theologies that cleared the field, but I cannot help the feeling that something is missing there, and I do not want to help the feeling that a liberal theology, after all the necessary critique it had to face on the autonomous subject, on its masculinity, on its ‘bürgerlichkeit’, on its repressive aspects, on its split from nature, also might have some critical questions to ask on post-theistic, deconstructive or radical theologies.

Let me mention Ernst Troeltsch as an example. His basic insight was, that we belong to history, or to process if you prefer, and that we can only understand history while we are embedded in it. Therefore, we have to resist any absolute truth or revelation dropped in from the outside. But he also believed in God as the transcendent ground of the human spirit, working immanent in human beings, distinct from nature, enabling them to develop themselves. He believed that this transcendent ground manifested itself for example in the prophets and in Jesus. Troeltsch heavily underlined the value of the person and the individual human being. Eventually, he recognized that the idea of individuality and personality were Western ideas, but he still held them absolutely valuable *for us*. Without the idea of personality we would decline to violence, meaningless playing around and crudeness. The idea of personality, Troeltsch claims, can ultimately only be grounded in God as the power ‘from where freedom and personality are transmitted to us’.

I fully accept and heartily agree that this type of thought desperately needs criticism and deconstruction. I understand, of course, that this whole liberal idea and the European culture that Troeltsch tried to safeguard went bankrupt, simply because there were no persons, or not enough, who said ‘no’, ‘not me’ when totalitarianisms came across. But still, Troeltsch makes a theistic point that I cannot simply disclaim: God as the transcendent ground of the human person that calls us and enables us to be persons.

In the philosophical work of Jean-Luc Nancy I find a completely different approach. In my opinion, Nancy ultimately wants to save the human individual as a singular from all sorts of oppressive regimes, installed either by the use of ‘God’, ‘reason’, ‘progress’ or whatever. Therefore he demands a dis-enclosure of reason. In this context, he defends a creation ex nihilo. This is not a creation from the deep. It does not introduce God as a reason for creation or as the ground of creation. To say that God created the world principally means a refusal to give an explanation for this world. Creation is from nothing, for no reason, grounded in an un-ground. Nancy prioritizes Difference. Difference makes things different, and in a certain way, Difference acts as a creator, because it makes things different. But difference is nothing, only exposing itself as a gap or a negativity. It *is* not, but only introduces difference between the things that are. Difference, which is not, makes things that are what they are – namely different – but Reason cannot find reasons for these differences that can only be respected or even adored. Because reason can give no reason, there is no reason to subjugate any singularity to some imposed and estranged regime sanctioned by ‘God’, ‘Reason’, ‘progress’ or whatever. The singular’s singularity is both inexplicable and inviolable.

To a large extent, Troeltsch and Nancy seem to share the same interest, namely a concern about the value of the person or the singular. But ultimately, I think there are distinct, or even opposed theologies at work. According to Troeltsch, God is the ground of human beings enabling them to be persons. The ground works, or has effects, gives itself or even empties itself in process. According to Nancy, God is not a positive force, but rather a gap or an absence, that should remain absent or empty. The distinction or opposition between Troeltsch and Nancy, I think, is between kataphatic and apophatic theology, manifested in the difference or the opposition between the subject and the singular. I can see critical questions running both ways. From Nancy to Troeltsch: does the subject, grounded in God, not turn into a dominant ego? But from Troeltsch to Nancy: does the singular, adored in its singularity, not risk to drown itself in narcissism and refuse to obey its call to be a person?

In this deadlock the theology of Catherine Keller is of great help to me. In the first place, she accentuates that human beings develop a relational self. This is neither a subject like Troeltsch’s person, which tends to be too independent and autonomous, emanating from God, nor a singular according to Nancy, which also seems to be too independent and unrelated. In the second place, in her criticism of apocalyptic patterns of thought Keller radically denies the categories of an absolute beginning and a final end. This prevents us from constructing a scheme or a regime in which human beings are pressed and suppressed; in a certain way familiar to Nancy. Keller underlines an open process, which is more or less similar to Troeltsch’s accentuation of history. The most important thing, however, which is probably not a third point, is Keller’s reception or incorporation of apophatic theology in process-thought.

In Groningen, where I studied theology, we were very lucky to get introduced to process-philosophy by the late professor Hubbeling. The theology of John Cobb played a role in professor Dingemans’ constructive theology as well. I never specialized in the field, but I was able to recognize process-theology as one of the most important innovations in liberal theology, even though it was largely ignored in European contexts. As I see it, and I am open for corrections if I am wrong, God’s call to creation in which God self is involved, the so-called ‘initial aim’ plays an important role in process-theology. It is the initial aim which opens the world up for the possibility of novelty. It enables the actual occasions to receive and structure the information they get from the past in such a way as to reach forward at their aim. It prevents them from being determined and as such produces freedom. The initial aim has metaphysical implications: it implies an aim given to the actual occasions from their outside. In a certain sense, these process-thoughts resemble the idea of Troeltsch that the transcendental ground of the person provides persons with freedom to act in history, create value or add value to nature and develop themselves. Of course, the metaphysical scheme completely changed, but in both cases there is a possibility to freely realize something in history that was not there yet, and this ‘something new’ cannot just drop down from heaven but has to be related to events of the past. The possibility for novelty is loaded, in Troeltsch and in process-thought, with religious connotations; we are called or obliged.

To incorporate apophatic theology into process-thought amounts to un-saying what is said or implied about God or the status of God as a separate entity. I can understand that. But it seems very hard to skip the initial aim, which seems to be related to God, for the un-doing of the initial aim would reduce the possibility of novelty and make the process of process-thought collapse. So, where does the initial aim reside?

It seems to me that the answer Catherine Keller develops in her books points in the following direction. God is not some-One, but the unity of the many. God creates by letting creatures create themselves. Yet, it still makes sense to use the word ‘God’ because it refers to the creative power of the creatures, and also to something beyond the individual entities. What is ‘beyond’ these entities is the inscrutable and in-finite sum of their relationships. Entities are made up from relations, because of which they are implied, enfolded or involved in each other. They are enfolded in God, who is unfolded in their relationships. Now the possibility for novelty comes from God, which means that it emerges from the manifold and incalculable relationships of the interrelated creatures. So, if I am correct, the initial aim has shifted from the entity God to the creative complex of creaturely relations, which is God, enfolded-unfolded.

I am very sympathetic with this line of thought, but if I try to figure things out, I come to some tentative conclusions as input for our conversation. I guess that Keller’s apophatic theology still shows the traces of a metaphysical scheme that was not originally apophatic. I also guess that, as a consequence, there is a difference between the apophatic theology of Keller and the deconstructive approach of Jean Luc Nancy. In Keller’s theology there still is something that the word ‘God’ refers to, which is not a some-One, does not exist, cannot be named, yet cannot be left out, nor identified with nothing, like Jean-Luc Nancy tends to do. Even if God is just an inappropriate reference to some sort of hypostatization of the many, or a symbol for that, it is not nothing and more than just an empty place that should remain empty. To put it very succinct: God remains a reference to something positive and not a strict absence, a mere negativity: a gap or a difference.

I think Keller’s thesis that the One is the unity of the many and that a negative theology therefore can contributes positively to a pluralistic society is correct and could even be supported by an interpretation of Plotinus. But in Plotinus, the One, which can only be described apophatically still is something positive, and not sheer nothingness or difference.

One in Plotinus, Substance in Spinoza, absolute Geist in Hegel, God in Christian theology, perhaps even Difference in deconstruction, seem to be tentative figurations of what remains ineffable. Yet it matters what terms we use, since they determine the form in which we point to the ineffable. Apophatic speech, I think, rigorously underlines the inadequacy of form. But then again, I wonder whether it can do more than un-saying what was always already said before its own un-saying.

Apophatic theology negatively refers to something positive. It always inscribes itself in the traditions that it wants to unsay.