Amsterdam, studiedag PThU, 17 april 2017

Dear Peter and dear all,

I am very honored to reflect on your theology at this occasion of the publication of the Dutch translation of your book ‘The Idolatry of God’. I am honored, because I am sympathetic to your approach and many of your themes are of interest to me. I highly agree with the slogans that somehow mark the style and content of the way you are doing theology. Christianity is not about identity. It is not about some worldview we claim to be true and tend to defend. It is not about making us whole and holy or sound and happy. It is about engaging with the world in an honest way.

Let me simply put forward what matters a lot to me. About two or three weeks ago I held a lecture in my Church about a book ‘Liberal Christianity’, which I published with some other theologians and Church-ministers. The book has become popular in the progressive wing of our churches and it mainly tries to formulate a liberal Christianity in our postmodern context, which of course implies some sort of critique on both established orthodox and liberal points of view. I lectured in the community of which I was a Church-minister before I got employed at this university. After the lecture, a woman I know quite well came to talk to me and said: ‘your theology is very helpful to me, it gives me a lot, but it is also very painful to me, and it hurts that you take the resurrection away from me’. These words made me feel a bit uncomfortable, especially because they picture the situation of ecclesial professionals in an insightful way. Speaking in Church is always heavily loaded with sensitivities, taboos and emotional claims, which might easily prevent us, or me in this case, just to put forward our own convictions and beliefs in an open space of discussion and exchange. The hidden message this woman sent to me was, of course, that she was not so sure about her own massive ideas about a physical return to life after death, and the question she actually asked me, was not to disturb but reassure her on this point. I felt invited to take a dishonest, churchly pastoral approach to her question, but did not do that.

I sincerely appreciate that a conversation with Peter Rollins will not get me into that trouble. Your radical theology is an invitation to talk about Christianity in both an engaged and intellectually honest way and I gladly accept the invitation to speak a few words here.

Let me shortly introduce myself to explain where I speak from. I wrote my dissertation on Origen of Alexandria and I was especially charmed by his great learning and the blend of apophatic Platonism and Christianity he helped to produce. Afterwards, I was a Church-minister for about fifteen years and as such I wrote about concepts of God in Plotinus, Rilke and Jonas and I wrote a study on the development of modern theology in the 19th and 20th century to clarify my own background as a modern theologian and to find out the limits of modern theology in a postmodern era. About ten years ago I got appointed to teach systematic theology and I focused on the ‘God after God’ debate with John Caputo, Richard Kearney and Catherine Keller as important figures.

I guess that we have some things in common, but that there are some differences as well. I belong to the learned tradition of liberal theology. It is white, it is male, it is enlightened and probably was colonial, it belongs to the past, but yet, it is still an important resource for doing theology. If you skip the modernism and turn to postmodernism without modernity, the result will be some very fashionable and questionable evangelicalism based on an unsound orthodoxy. I served churches that were neither liquid nor emerging. In fact, the church communities gathered in solid, ancient medieval buildings and they were going down in numbers rapidly. But yet, again, they tried to be meaningful in their context, they were open-minded and self-critical to a certain degree and they had a sense of tradition and institution that kept them going on for more than a century already with very small numbers of Church-goers. They were beyond the fear of secularization and the illusions of re-Christianizing the world by missionary activities. They were missionary precisely because of this attitude. It is from a Christian humanism or a humanistic Christianity as it was practiced in these communities that I am speaking, and I know the objections against such a moderate form of Christianity, but I think its heritage still contributes to our present situation.

Well then, let me engage with your radical theology, which, as a pyro-theology, tries to set the buildings, the institution, the tradition and the humanism of my churches on fire. I will definitely not be the fireman to rescue it all from the flames. But, after some reflections and considerations, I do want to ask you: is there not a bit, and a bit too much, of puritanism in your wish to baptize by fire, and to burn down everything that is impure, human-made, traditional and institutional to our Churches?

Let me explain by first summarizing the first part of your book (The Idolatry of God), which is on creation.

You claim that the Christian religion is mostly presented to us in such a way that it promises the satisfaction of our desires and the fulfillment of our hopes. In your opinion this is a false representation of Christianity’s true message, for a true Christianity offers us the transformation of our desires. Christ does not make our wishes come true, but confronts us with our desires, so that we will accept our ignorance and deficiencies.

I agree. This seems very plausible to me, but I have some doubts about the way you expand on this statement.

In your account, separation lies at the basis of our personality development. Becoming a person means to get separated from our environment, usually ‘mother’, and the rise of self-consciousness implies that we are cut loose from our symbiotic relationships with the world. This results in a basic sense of loss and emptiness. We try to fill this emptiness and bridge the gap between what we sense to be a lack and what we think might make us whole again. We try to fill this gap with objects that provide us with the illusionary promise to bring fulfillment, if only we can get these objects in our possession and our grip. Anything can be become such an idolatrous object: cars, diploma’s or skills and even what is held to be most holy, Christ and God, can turn into idols if we take them to be objects to fill the gap. In this way, emptiness or nothingness gets productive and creates. We stick to our lack because we are tricked by the genesis of our self-consciousness, which imagines a paradise of wholeness before the fall of our differentiation from the world. And the nothingness of this lack makes us produce all kind of things and organize ourselves in culture.

Creation ex nihilo in your interpretation means that we do and produce things to eliminate our feeling of incompleteness. But our productions are illusionary and false, because they are fabricated as idols to fill a gap that was never there in the first place, but only exists in our consciousness once we realize that we are separated from the rest of the world. Original sin is the feeling of this gap and the drive to fill it up with idolatrous objects, saviors and gods. These idols are experienced as existing objects, which are perfect and meaningful. The law even enforces the idea that there are such special, forbidden and powerful objects, which put a spell on us, and this is the reason why they are forbidden by law. In our hunt after these objects we create ourselves on the basis of what is merely lack and deprivation, which makes us imaginary persons or fictional characters addicted to God or to other people’s blood like zombies, who permanently try to pump themselves up and appease their unfulfillable longing. We create our own identities, which are expressed in political, religious and cultural mythologies. These mythologies fortify our identity and our worldview and make us blind to the idolatry at the basis of our own identity and culture. They also provoke hostility towards the other and the stranger, because they seem to be peculiar in our eyes, whereas we should be able to see our own peculiarities through the eyes of precisely those strangers.

In my opinion, this description of creation is very much dependent on Lacan and Zizek and it amounts to a very negative picture of culture and human’s cultural productions. What we do and create is only meant to fill a gap and is based on some sort of self-deceit. We only create ourselves and our world to uphold an illusion.

But is that really all there is to us and to our cultural efforts? I would say that our desires are not only idolatrous desires, but that we also – at least also – desire what is good, true and beautiful. It seems to me, that your description of creation, humans and original sin does not leave enough, or even any, room for this desire.

In the work of Richard Kearney and John Caputo, for example, there is the notion of a desire beyond desire. This is a desire which does not desire any object to fill some gap, nor is it a desire which is born from some sense of lack. I think that Kearney and Caputo both recognize that there *is* a desire that wants to satisfy itself by means of some objects, but they also accept some desire beyond this desire, which is directed towards God or what is good, true and beautiful.

In *The God Who May Be* Richard Kearney elaborates on God as *posse*, not *esse*. God is not a God who is, nor a God who is not, but a God who may be. God offers us possibilities, which we may realize, if we open ourselves up to the transforming powers of transcendence. The possibilities of God transform us, because they break our egocentric tendencies and loosen our selfish drives. If we realize these possibilities, we are transformed, but we also transform God, because we transform Gods *posse* into *esse*. Kearney says that it is Gods desire to get realized in and by our desire for what is good, true and beautiful. This means that *our* desire for what is good, true and beautiful is the location of Gods desire, who makes us desire and gets realized by our realizations.

This line of thought is complex and intricate, but the point of it can be put quite clearly. Our desires are not only idolatrous, nor are they just illusionary ways to fill some gap and make us whole again, but they can also be God-given desires to produce what is good, true and beautiful and thereby contribute to the existence of God.

I am inclined to say that in your chapter on creation you put so much emphasis, with Lacan and Zizek, on our imagined incompleteness that you esteem all culture to be the idolatrous work of making us whole again. This leaves no room for what I loosely call the God-given desires for what is good, true and beautiful.

I suppose that it is most urgent for you to unmask, and in a certain sense to deconstruct, the false hopes of our capitalistic culture, which is obsessed by production and consumption and by commodities that are proclaimed to improve and complete us and even make us what and who we are. Quite right to criticize that! But is it really possible to deconstruct our false and illusionary desires without some God-given desire?

With Caputo, I would say that in the name of God we desire for the event, for example the event of justice, hospitality, forgiveness, the gift and so forth. I take these to be the postmodern examples of a so-called ‘impossible’ something, which is the good, true and beautiful of our times. These desires are a response to the insistence of God. The insistence of God is more or less equivalent to the promise of life itself, upon which we react. Life promises us friendship, love and life. If we respond to the insistent call of God or the promise of life, we try to make friendship, love, life and things like justice, hospitality, forgiveness etc. happen. If we contribute to their realization, we provide the insistence of God with existence. This looks very much like Kearney, who claimed that we give *esse* to the *posse* of God. Caputo, however, is eager to make two statements that make a difference. First, there is a dangerous risk in our response to the promise. If we respond to the promise, we never know for sure, whether we will realize something good, or rather produce something bad and awful, which only makes things worse. It is possible that our desires prompt us to realize bad things. And second, reality will never fully meet the promise. We desire for more friendship, love and life – in fact, life itself promises us more and better love and friendship – than we are able to realize. In this way, the call of our desire and our response to this desire can be (1)very dangerous and (2) will not be fulfilled, but even so, this desire is the engine or the force that makes us contribute to what is valuable and novel. So, our desires are not only idolatrous, even though they are highly ambiguous, because they also offer us possibilities and as such they are to be assessed positively. I guess that we could not even deconstruct or criticize our present situation without these desires.

To be more specific on this point, I will give an example. When I met the woman who was going to be my wife, our relationship promised friendship, solidarity and love. It was a risk to get married, for we might have spoiled each other’s lives. The response to the promise of life is risky. Our marriage turned out rather well so far, however, but looking back at some twenty years of marriage, I have to admit that we did not realize the promise. We got stuck in the humdrum of daily routines and obligations and ignored each other too much. We did not realize the promise of our beginning, even though there is friendship, love and the great value of a shared history. If we want to improve, if we want to open up to some new and better possibilities for our life together, we have to deconstruct our present situation. But we can only do so if we are guided by the desire for some better life, some better love, some better friendship than we have achieved now. We can only deconstruct the present if we desire for something new, something better, something different, something we don’t even exactly know what. So some sort of desire, which does not identify itself with any given object, as a desire beyond desire, is necessary to criticize, deconstruct and transcend our present situation. Desire will never be fulfilled, and the attempt to fulfill our desires is inherently dangerous because we may achieve something evil, but desire is the necessary drive to deconstruct our present situation and to open us up to the better.

So let me summarize. I think your picture of creation and culture is very black, because you suppose with Lacan and Zizek that all our cultural achievements and all we produce are only idolatrous attempts to undo the separation which lies at the basis of our personality development. What we desire is wrong, because we desire the wrong thing, namely to be whole again. I think, with Kearney and Caputo, that there is also a God-given desire, which makes us want to create what is good, true and beautiful and thereby realize God or give existence to his insistence. This desire is risky and can never completely be fulfilled, but yet, there is this desire and it enables us to realize what is valuable. In my opinion, you discard or at least do not recognize this desire nor the possibilities related to this desire in your rendition of the old creation and its culture.

Let me clarify my point with a story of Tsjechow. I am very fond of his short stories and plays and I consider him to be one of the most attentive observers of human’s behavior, who points to their inner feelings in a very concrete and precise way, but never without a humanistic sense of compassion and pity.

The story I refer to is named ‘In exile’ and it describes a penal colony in Siberia, where a Tatar recently arrived. This Tatar tells the Russian outlaws that his wife plans to live with him in Siberia once her old father, who is quite ill, has died. The Tatar looks forward to her arrival, but the Russian exiles are laughing at him. ‘I used to be well-dressed when I was free in my place of birth, but over here, I have progressed so far, that I can sleep naked on the bare ground and eat grass’ one of them tells him. ‘If you want to be happy here, don’t have any desire and don’t give a damn about nothing, for it will kill you’.

One of the exiles, Semjon, tells the Tatar a story about a man who was exiled years ago. He intended to make a good living and to let his wife with their little daughter come over. For, he said, ‘even in Siberia there are humans’. He worked hard, he worked properly, he did not allow himself any rest, and he made his wife come over. He kept working hard because she was always dressed very fine and lived luxuriously, but that had to be, the man said, because she deserved it, since she came over to him in this muddy, watery, cold and miserable place.

One early morning, Semjon tells the Tatar, he saw this wife standing at the riverbank, arm in arm with a civil servant, waiting for Semjon’s ferry to bring them over to the other side. Some hours later the hardworking man arrived and asked whether his wife came across. ‘O yes’, Semjon responded to him, ‘and you will never see her again’. He mocked at the hardworking man and he mimicked: ‘even in Siberia there are humans’. Semjon obviously wanted to underscore the impossibility of it. You have to give up every desire and every ambition and never give a damn if you want to survive here.

The Tatar is stunned. The hardworking man had his wife near him for three years. That is good. He would give everything in return just to have his wife here with him for one day only.

Semjon tells the Tatar that the hardworking man was broken. But he survived and blossomed up when his little daughter grew older and came to live with him. ‘Stupid thing to do’, Semjon says, ‘for what on earth could a young girl find here, in the mud and the water and the cold and the emptiness of this godforsaken land?’ But she gave the hardworking man a reason to live, to work hard and to care. And he kept on working hard, because his daughter got tuberculosis and he had to spend lots of money on doctors and medicine to keep his daughter alive. If only this hardworking man had buried his wishes and desires, it would have been better both for himself and his daughter. The Tatar is shocked and scared by this harsh and merciless attitude. ‘You’ll get used to it’, Semjon says.

At this point, the Tatar, Semjon and some other exiles have to take their ferry to the other side, because a man is waiting for them, in the cold of the dense snow. They cross the river and it turns out that the hardworking man wants to take the ferry, for he has heard that nearby a new doctor has arrived and perhaps he can help his daughter.

Semjon looks at the hardworking man and mimics: ‘Yeah sir, right, even in Siberia there are humans’. And after the hardworking man left the ferry, Semjon tells the Tatar: ‘what a stupid fool. Look at him, running to the doctor, shivering of the cold. Try to find a doctor! Try to catch the wind! Try to snatch the devil at his tail! Stupid fool!’

The Tatar is overwhelmed with emotion and speaks with a mix of broken Russian and his native tongue: ‘He is good … good, but you are bad. That man is a good soul, a beautiful person, but you are an animal, you are bad. That man lives, but you are stone-dead. God created humans to be alive, that there be joy and sorrow and grief, but you want nothing, you’re not alive, you don’t live, but you are stone and a lump of clay. God does not love you, but he loves that man’.

Semjon and the other exiles laugh at the Tatar and walk to their cabin. ‘What a dirty cold’, one them says. They go to bed and Semjon remarks that he is very fine, ‘may God give this kind of life to everybody’. Then they hear some strange noise from the outside, like a dog or an animal. It is the Tatar, crying and howling. ‘What an oddity’ the men remark. ‘He’ll get used to it’ Semjon says, and in a while they were sleeping.

That is the story and it questions, I suppose, the thesis that we have to abandon our desires, because they are all the products of original sin and the law. If we abandon our desires, we may also lose our humanity. Our desires also harbor what is called *eros* in Platonism, which is a drive that may draw us to the good, the true and the beautiful. It seems to me, that the first part of ‘The Idolatry of God’, which is on creation, is too radically exterminating all our desires because of the fallen nature of human beings. I disagree. There is a beautiful line in a song of Tom Waits: ‘if I exorcise my demons, all my angels may go too’. I am afraid that ‘The Idolatry of God’ is chasing away the demons without recognizing that there were some angels among them. The first part of the book ends up with the very clear-cut, unambiguous and completely orthodox sentence of the Heidelberg catechism that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil. I don’t share this position, even if it is covered up by the names of Lacan and Zizek.

I fully agree with the *The Idolatry*’s deconstruction and critique of our capitalist society and the manipulation of our desires to get a fulfilled life. But its description of desires is a little bit too one-sided to my taste and its theology is far too orthodox to me.

The Christology in the second part of the book underlines it. In my opinion three points are of great importance here. First, there is a sharp opposition between Christ and the fallen creation. Second, *The Idolatry* introduces, in spite of some fresh interpretations, a divine Christ, who sacrifices himself on the cross to pay for our debts and destroys the sin and the law. Third, the cross is meant to deliver us from the evils of our desires, to put an end to our search for meaning in life, to destroy our identity building, and to make us free. It saves us, because it shows us to live out of love and to accept the incompleteness of our lives and the imperfections of our world.

I am a bit confused about these statements. Before Christ we were in the state of original sin, we were inclined to all evil and we only produced illusions to escape from our state of unhappiness and longed to be whole and holy again. Now, Christ delivers us from the evil of our desire. But what can this possibly mean? I would say that our desires are unmasked by Christ. For what else can Christ do than to make us aware that we have fallen victim to our own illusions and that we live in a meaningless world and that we have to accept this? Christ probably delivers us from our illusions like Semjon in Tsjechows story: ‘You have to give up every desire and every ambition and never give a damn if you want to survive here. You’ll get used to it’. But actually, this is not what *The Idolatry* says. It tells us that Christ teaches and shows us to live in a loving way, which makes the world meaningful. So, Christ makes the world meaningful by showing us that it has no meaning except to love each other as the imperfect beings that we are. But it seems to me, there is no link between the unmasking of our desires and the love of our neighbor.

Neither is there a link between Christ and creation. Christ comes out of the blue, or out of heaven, to deliver us from the evil of desire. The remarkable thing is that I find this Christ far too orthodox and unbelievable, whereas the redemption that he brings is quite familiar to me. In fact, I think that the statements about redemption in *The Idolatry* come very close to the theology of Bultmann, which I hold in high esteem. According to Bultmann, the word of the cross teaches us to crucify our own ambition**s** and to let go of the control we want to have over our own lives. It teaches us to live ‘as if we were not’ and to have ‘as if we had not’. Bultmann thereby refers to 1 Corinthians 7, one of his favorite texts, which is equally important to the part on redemption in *The Idolatry*. But Bultmann does not need a divine Christ without sin to arrive at this point. He points to the word of the cross in which Christ is resurrected, not to some mythological character coming down from heaven and returning there after life. It is the word of the cross that makes us live ‘as if we were not’, and to have ‘as if we had not’.

Yet, there is a complication. The Christ from *The Idolatry* delivers us from the evil of desire, but Bultmann recognizes that we need desire. I can only identify the word of God as a word of God if I already have existential knowledge of God. Bultmann claims that this existential knowledge is present in humans as the search for happiness, salvation, meaning and authenticity. This existential knowledge, which is a desire, can only be named a desire for God in the light of Gods revelation, but it is an important pre-understanding to identify the word of the cross as the word of God. To Bultmann, therefore, redemption liberates us from the slavery of the world but does not fully erase all our desires as if all our desires were only produced by original sin.

I could render my confusion as follows. The word of the cross liberates us from ourselves and our worldview and teaches us to have as if we had not. But with Bultmann I would not relate this to a mythic divine Christ, nor would I fully oppose this to every desire.

I tried to figure this out and I will put the following thoughts on the table. According to Bultmann, we do not identify with Christ in order to criticize the rest of society and other people’s desires, but we are confronted with Christ ourselves. The word of the cross deconstructs me in the first place. I have to crucify myself and stop to plan, control and calculate my behavior. The word of the cross, therefore, does not make me the prophet to criticize and deconstruct others. I can only be the preacher or the spokesman of the word of the cross at most, which will always deconstruct me first, but will never provide me with a safe position to judge the rest of the world.

The Idolatry, however, introduces Christ as a supernatural entity in order to have some archimedean point to criticize our society, our identity and the fallen creation. In Christ we are delivered from our identity, our desires and illusions and we are set free to accept the world as it is. If we identify with Christ, we obtain a point of view from which we can deconstruct or criticize our society and our desires. This means that deconstruction in *The Idolatry of God* is undertaken from the perspective of Christ. But if Christ is the point of view which provides us with the means of deconstruction and critique, the only one who can actually deconstruct, is the one who identifies with Christ, is Christ, and has risen above and beyond our human situation.

I would say that we cannot deconstruct from the viewpoint of Christ, because we are not Christ and he is not our point of view. We can only deconstruct from the viewpoint of our desires, which are redirected by Christ. Christ is an appeal to our desires and a critique, a readjustment and a transformation of our desires, which allows us to deconstruct our desires ourselves, in search of a better world, a better life, a better hope, a better justice ourselves. But Christ is not our absolute certainty which makes us deconstruct the world and accept it as it is in a community that is delivered form its desires and learns to live lovingly because of that.

As a result, I am hesitant about the liturgical exercises you propose to lose our faith and get human again. I have to admit, that these liturgical events are too theatrical and too massive to me. It makes me feel as if I had to submit myself to some director, manipulating me to see his truth about myself.

I would prefer a play in the theatre to these semi-liturgical events. And I would prefer a sober celebration of the meal, or the Lord’s supper, in Church. I would not need any consecrated priest or any mystification to celebrate it. But I would need a community that is struggling with the world and reflects on the ambiguities of the world, in which the members of the community have a sense of their own ambivalent desires. In such a community we could break and share and we could acknowledge that there are better ways to live than we do now, and we could recognize each other’s attempts to live honestly with our desires and our failures, in order to adjust and redirect them. I would not need a heavy condemnation of the world and myself by Christ who teaches me my rotten state so that I can accept the darkness of the world in a loving way. I would be happy to join in Christ with my neighbor, to figure out what we can make of us and our world once we accept each other.

Let me conclude by affirming, once again, that I enjoyed your book and consider it to be an important contribution to liberate Christianity from its own misunderstandings. For the sake of a concern that I share with you, I asked some questions and raised some objections, which basically amount to the question whether your radical theology is not too radical in the name of some Christ, who is made too orthodox in order to provide us with a perspective to criticize our society and to posit ourselves in opposition to the rest of humanity. I sincerely hope that these remarks will stimulate our discussions and enhance the sake of our concern.