

Book Review – *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*, by Catherine Keller.

Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 232, £21

Subir Rana

Independent scholar

Political theology as a subject of discourse and deliberation is entwined with political philosophy, ecology and theology whose purpose is not just to theorise but to agonise and mobilise according to Keller whose book is currently under review. The book is divided into four chapters namely ‘*Political, Earth and Theology*’ with a Beginning and an ‘*Apophatic Afterword*’ at the end whereby the author aims to read together the “collective earth moment” (p. 7) through an account of the political, of the earth and of theology. This schematisation of three chapters according to Keller is an argument built up to establish the political theology of the earth. In the Indian case, ‘*Bhagavad Gita*’ is a befitting example of an oriental text which is a political and philosophical debate about India’s history and its place in the comity of nations as also a political theology of the earth.

Giving a genesis of the sub-discipline, Keller, a noted eco-theologian and feminist philosopher of religion, says that political theology has developed into a branch of theology quite recently although previous attempts to establish it began with the movement of European solidarity with fresh voices of liberation theology in the global South. This included powerful names like Johannes Metz, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle as well as John B. Cobb Jr’s ‘*Process Theology as Political Theology*’ (1982) whose works remained largely influential yet did not quite establish their hold in theological circles. It seemed that political theology had felt too Eurocentrically generic to catch on among progressive Christian thinkers for the rest of the century. However, it stages a comeback by way of the involvement in philosophy and in social activism as well as in recent political theory. Keller suggests contracting the entanglement of differences so that it takes a constructed theological form or what Moltmann referred to as “the solidarity of hope” and debunks the “radical political theologians” who set forth the “insurrectionist manifesto” of a radicalised democratic possibility. Keller views her project as theo-political which is also collated with eco-theology and which answers “revolutionary messianism”.

The book, centred around the notion of ‘political theology’, is understood by the famous twentieth century legal theorist Carl Schmitt whose “pivotal and problematic” text ‘*Political Theology*’ (1921) has influenced generations of political scientists. According to Keller, this book tries to reconsider Schmitt’s concept of a sovereignty decided “in the exception”. Further, she adds that theology has an ancient practice for liberating insight from certitude, for thinking on the edges of the unthinkable which she calls negative theology or apophasis – “unsaying” born in antiquity as a negation of any name, dogma, or knowledge of the divine, however true and non-negotiable it may seem. Apophatic theology according to her operates as a means of mystical insight and takes the shade of an ethical critique. Keller says that a political theology of the earth always and mindfully casts a shadow of darkness, and therefore it can sometimes appear as a “negative political theology”.

Chapter 1, “The Political: Sovereign Exception or Collective Inception” takes on the political theology’s classical standpoint of Schmitt’s politics of friend vs. foe and which is responded by William Connolly’s and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “democratic agonism” which is a “vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests” (p. 26). Agonism or healthy antagonism is hard to be missed in the current politics of we versus they or us versus them. Here, Keller tries to introduce Kelly Brown Douglas’ geneology of white exceptionalism, correlating it to multiple registers of exceptionalism trending towards planetary emergency.

Chapter 2, “The Earth: Climate of Closure, Matter of Disclosure,” attempts to highlight the havoc and destruction caused by the great crisis of our times namely that is climate change. This section has frightening imageries of natural / manmade disasters including the melting and flooding, droughts and fires, immigrations and the inequities not only materialising but reaching epic proportions in the Anthropocene. In this section, Keller introduces Donna Haraway and Karen Barad for some energising loops through the nonhuman.

Chapter 3, “Theology: ‘Unknown Better Now,” mediates on a theological unknowing, apophatic theology, in relation to the standard certitudes of a theology of Christian exceptionalism. Process theology poses the metaphors of a constructive alternative in which sovereign omnipotence gives way to a depth of creative indeterminacy known as ‘*seculareligious*’ political potentiality begins to materialise.

The conclusion titled “Apophatic Afterward” tries to read the ruptured and hyphenated present of the earth from the perspective of theology. According to Keller, political theology is always *negative theology* and secularisation is a kind of apophasis, as a logos of theology itself but which needs its own ‘*docta ignorantia*’. She further adds that the political apophasis

doesn't silence all traces of religion but listens to its echoes. According to her, the argument of the book has proceeded from the juxtaposition of the power of the sovereign exception to the potentiality of an eco-social inception.

Key to political theology has been its readings of the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty in terms of emergency. The current conversation in political theology has been unfolding with the rush of a theoretical currency fuelled by old, indeed ancient, theo-political language. It also explains how a theology forged in alliances of entangled difference helps that alliance to emerge in the face of what may be mounting planetary emergency. The author supports local movements of planetary resistance to the new merger of capitalism with white male authoritarianism and there have been umpteen examples of public angst and dissent on matters of freedom of speech and that of religion to begin with and India along with many others in the Eastern and the Western world are classic examples.

Keller tries to interpret the feedback loop of political and ecological depredation and one can safely add catastrophes like global climate change and health emergencies like the ongoing pandemic as secularised apocalypse. Keller calls for dissolving the opposition between the religious and the secular in favour of a broad planetary movement for social and ecological justice. She also adds that confrontation by populist, authoritarian right wings that are founded on white male Christian supremacy can be countered with a messianically charged often unspoken theology of the now-moment that calls for a complex new public. A political theology of the earth like Keller proposes has the capability of activating the world's entangled population and who are participating in solidarity with their commitment to revolutionary solutions to the crises of the Anthropocene.

Keller has been labelled as a "poet theologian" by her colleagues, one who has tried to push the case for a progressive theology and one who argues that the resource of Christianity allows hope to prosper and a new public to emerge. The book calls upon eco-activists to explore the spiritual affinities between us in order to respond to the emergencies of the Anthropocene. This is surely an evocative and thought-provoking book particularly in the current times when the globe faces threats and ideological warfare of various kinds be it terrorism, racism, casteism and gender violence or popular resistance against tyrannical governments among such others.

Dr Subir Rana has a PhD in Sociology from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and a Post Doc from the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. He currently works as an independent researcher in Bangalore. His doctoral thesis discusses the past and present of a

Denotified Nomadic Tribe (DNT). As a sociologist by training, his research interests are cultures, societies and developmental issues like citizenship, human rights, (new) protest movements, popular culture, history of disenfranchised communities and other associated themes.