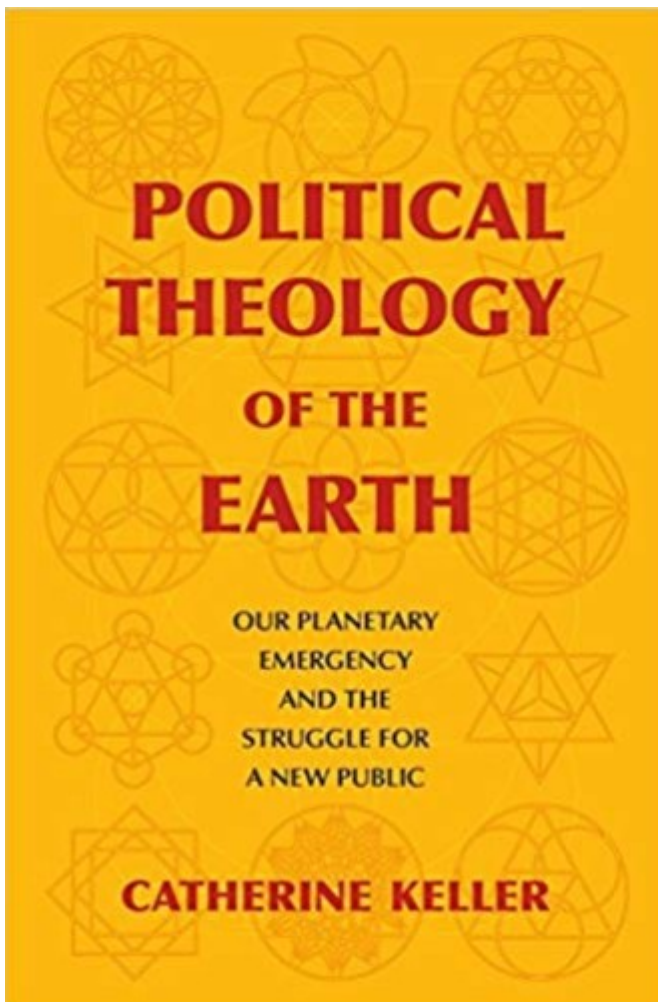


Catherine Keller's political theology for the end of the world

Our era's poet theologian begins by retranslating Paul: "the remaining time is contracted" (1 Cor. 7:29).

by [Clint Schnekloth](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Political Theology of the Earth

Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public

By Catherine Keller

Columbia University Press

Perhaps only Catherine Keller could publish a work of political, theology, process theology, and eco-theology that is also highly readable. Keller is our era's poet theologian, modeling a way to push through academic jargon and out the other side with prose that pops. For this reason alone, it's worth picking up this book—or any of her books.

Like a great novel, *Political Theology of the Earth* begins with a memorable sentence: "Once upon a time we had . . . time." Keller then jumps into a meditation on the end of the world, retranslating a famous passage in 1 Corinthians, "The appointed time is short" (7:29), as "the remaining time is contracted."

Think about the differences highlighted in these two translations. If someone announces the end of the world is nigh, it's tempting to focus on the end itself and what the end will be like. However, what's really happening each time we consider the end of the world is our heightened awareness that the remaining time we have is contracted. In some ways the contraction of time is like Zeno's paradox of the tortoise and Achilles. If you keep covering half the distance you need to travel, and then half again, and half again, you never really reach your final destination even if each half distance is diminishingly small. Or, in the famous reworking of Walter Benjamin by Judith Butler that Keller cites, "the messianic thwarts the teleological unfolding of time (the Messiah will never appear in time)." The Messiah draws closer and closer but is always deferred.

For Keller, this edgy crisis—a specter of any actual end—is the engine for an altogether different sort of political theology. It's not a theology that waits for a final and definitive *telos*, but rather it materializes in historically worn possibilities. Keller sees this emerging theology as "a coalition intersectionally dense and vast enough to interrupt the death spiral of climate change and the politics of a capitalism that, in its globalism of growth, is fomenting endless raging, racist, heteromasculinist disappointment."

Situating her political theology within the academic field, Keller explores the tension between two currents of political theology. One is as the "omnipotent sovereignty in

the exception,” the other is “the messianic commons in the inception.” The former refers to Carl Schmitt’s now famous dictum, “sovereign is he who decides the state of exception.” The latter, which Keller favors, draws on Ernst Bloch’s notion that “*the core of things drives towards itself, which awaits its genesis in the tendency-latency of process.*”

In the exception model, Keller explains, the approaching end is seen as a threat which must be controlled by the forces of empire (the sovereign). In the inception model, contracting time is seen as fragile but fecund, messy, and intrinsically messianic. She recalls the memorable comment by the Jewish scholar Jacob Taubes on sovereignty and the “inception” alternative. In his words, “One prays for the preservation of the state, since if God forbid, it doesn’t remain, then chaos breaks loose, or even worse, the Kingdom of God.”

In the second of her three substantive chapters, Keller moves from the political to the ecological. Shifting from polis to planet, she reflects philosophically on the Anthropocene, a term that formally designates the period after the 12,000-year-long climate stability of the Holocene. Here Keller highlights the opportunities that arise when we consider humans in relationship to (and as a part of) all creatures, and in particular when we see the threat that capitalism poses to life on the planet. She reframes the end of time by encouraging an ethic of “staying with the trouble,” a way of life that involves remaining precisely in the contracting time of this moment.

Keller proposes “complex self-organization in mindful interdependence with the biosphere” as the inception for our current time. This possibility involves a contraction not just in time but in diversity, so that diversity is not seen as a threat (e.g., the end of whiteness or the end of the distinction between human and creation) but rather as an increasingly deep relating that brings greater life to all races, all creatures, and just so precisely to creation itself.

It also exemplifies abiding trust in process, in weak power, for it relies on the possibility that in the “least” of creation—whether those are the residents of impoverished coastal communities soon to lose their homes to global warming or coral reefs dying as temperatures rise—might be “encoded an infinity of possible relations.”

Keller’s final chapter considers theology proper, drawing on what she has accomplished in her previous works. She reminds readers of her reconsideration of

beginning and end, not as two points on the end of a timeline but rather as the “alpha and omega of any moment of becoming (genesis).” This model allows room for process theologians to articulate God as a “cloudier, uncertain space, the space of an ‘if’ at the edge of the ‘is,’ . . . a dark-out of determinacies.”

In this framing, God is not a miraculous exception to the world but is the grace of inception within it. It is precisely God deconstructed as sovereign who lingers on and relocates us—creation, creatures—within a political theology of the earth. The weakness of God is “the plasticity of a precarious relatedness.” This divine weakness as this-worldly relatedness is what we might call secularity. Inasmuch as it is theology, it is apophatic, an unsaying of theology that deepens it precisely in a kind of eco-social inception.

Keller makes one of the most compelling cases yet for a progressive theology that doesn’t recede with the overtaking of secularity but is more precisely revealed in the undertaking of it.