Catherine Keller's Cloud of the Impossible: A Symposium

with Kirk Wegter-McNelly, "Religious Hypotheses and the Apophatic, Relational Theology of Catherine Keller"; Carol Wayne White, "Aporetic Possibilities in Catherine Keller's Cloud of the Impossible"; Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Fault in Us: Ethics, Infinity, and Celestial Bodies"; Colleen Mary Carpenter, "Enfolding Violence, Unfolding Hope: Emerging Clouds of Possibility for Women in Roman Catholicism"; and Catherine Keller, "Theology, Science, and Cloud of the Impossible."

RELIGIOUS HYPOTHESES AND THE APOPHATIC, RELATIONAL THEOLOGY OF CATHERINE KELLER

by Kirk Wegter-McNelly

Abstract.   In one of its most urgent folds, Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible* juxtaposes negative theology with relational theology for the sake of thinking constructively about today's global climate of religious conflict and ecological upheaval. The tension between these two theological approaches reflects her desire to unsay past harmful theological speech but also to speak into the present silences about the (perhaps im)possibility of a future that is not only to be feared. Suffusing Keller's *Cloud* is the related (perhaps im)possibility of living out one's life in conversation with a religious tradition having accepted the nonknowing character of its wisdom. Here, I develop the notion of "hypothetical faith" as an epistemic posture that commits itself to some particular religious tradition even as it acknowledges the unverifiability of that tradition's deepest truths. Understood as operating at the opposite end of the testability spectrum from science, religion-as-hypothesis provides a way of saying and unsaying one's tradition at the same time.

Keywords: epistemology; faith; hypothesis; Catherine Keller; negative theology; relational theology; religious tradition

At this point in history, can our self-threatening species find its way into an unknown future that is anything but terrifying for those who are to come? Catherine Keller poses this un/answerable question in *Cloud of the Impossible* (2015), which over the course of roughly 300 pages becomes an urgent yet uncanny proem to a planetary transition—already under way

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and probably irreversible—as well as an inimitable, many-folded prose poem of theopoetic meditation (after an initial misspelling, my computer suggested "medication") on the nonseparability of transcendence. From among the book's many important themes, I want to focus on those Keller has caught hanging in the tension between negative and relational theologies and has brought to expression in her dual minding of religion and science through the lens of "apophatic entanglement." Here I want to respond to her work by exploring the im/possibility of regarding religion itself through this lens. My present interest, which also floats hazily next to Keller's *Cloud,* concerns the kind of epistemic relationship one might have with a religious tradition to which one is committed when the tradition is understood to be a form of not-knowing.

KELLER'S RELATIONAL, APOPHATIC CLOUD

In her *Cloud* Keller wants to draw any and all willing theologies (among which I count my own) into closer contact with the political and ecological convolutions of our planet. In particular she wants to encourage us not to shy away from but instead throw ourselves like a dart into the deepening problems of religious conflict and global warming. She offers a relational view of the landscape, encouraging us to see our differences not as confirmation of separation or independence but as a manifestation of intra-dependence, as a folding within the infinite manifold. She envisions a cosmopolitical space where theology can extend its gaze beyond the human fold to the common *oikos* of all earthly life. Finally she does all this while bracing us for a large gust of epistemic honesty that will, she hopes, empower responsible action even as it calls our attention to the uncertainty of all human knowledge, especially of our understanding of the ecopolitical precipice upon which we currently stand.

For Keller, any mindfulness of relational theology must be folded into the apophatic swerve, the darkly luminous, the eminently and immanently questionable, even as any mindfulness of negative theology must be folded into the unsaying of separation, of simple location, of the "I" without a "you." There can be no merging of these different paths that does not mortally weaken their distinctive energies, she thinks, but only a careful forging of coincidence between opposites ever to be unwrought and rewrought in hopes of unfolding something new out of the re-folded old. There is much, much more to be savored, pondered, and troubled over in Keller's chaosmic *Cloud*, but the chiasm of negation and relation is what haunted me through its many pages. Keller's expeditionary juxtaposition of these two contradictory theological postures profoundly expresses, if not the heart of the human predicament at the beginning of the twenty-first century, then at least one of our species' most pressing quandaries.

With this juxtaposition clouding my mind, I found myself reflecting on the epistemic dynamics of my own life and thought, coming back again and again to the question of what it means in our time for someone attuned to negation nonetheless to want to be in relation with some particular religion as "one's own." Can such a relationship bear the admission of uncertainty lying at the heart of things? Dare one hope that it might even be strengthened by the admission? Having origamied various versions of these questions into a variety of unpublished shapes over the past couple of years, I was grateful to find in Keller's *Cloud* new language for explicating some unanticipated folds in my own thought and for this opportunity to explore them. In particular, her tale of negation and relation has led me to consider the merits of deploying the notion of "hypothesis" to simultaneously name what religious traditions can offer qua *wisdom*, on the one hand, and un-name what they offer *qua* knowledge on the other. What cultural im/possibility might the notion of "religious hypothesis" open up? Might it expose an important vantage point, highlighting a novel epistemic relationship that can emerge among those who negate and yet embrace their own religious traditions? And what about the in/appropriateness of importing into such a discussion a notion from the realm of science? Could it im/possibly foster a meaningful coincidence of opposites?

RELIGION AS HYPOTHESIS

"Hypothesis" is not a particularly elegant or mellifluous word, especially in light of its standard connotations. It can sound cold and lifeless, like a formaldehyde-soaked frog on a laboratory bench. In relation to religion it might instead conjure a bare lightbulb hanging above a nondescript table upon which one has laid one's most treasured ideas about humanity, the cosmos, and the divine only to be subjected to the disdainful dissections and disrespecting interrogations of Reason and Experiment. Surely I do not mean to suggest that religion has anything to gain from submitting itself to the empirical machinations of science? "Religious hypotheses"? Hasn't the concept of "hypothesis" been so thoroughly assimilated into the sciences as to make the modifier "empirical" redundant and the modifier "religious" self-contradictory?

As a brief thought experiment, I would like to undertake the im/possible task of considering the word "hypothesis" unencumbered by its usual scientific context. What is a (or, if you prefer, an) hypothesis but an idea given for consideration? Its etymology suggests "placing under" (*hupo tithemi)* for the sake of scrutiny, or perhaps "placing oneself under" for the sake of acting in the world. Do hypotheses count as knowledge? Not in any straightforward sense. They can be empirically well confirmed, of course, but they are always subject to revision and thus forever fail to clear the bar of certainty. They represent, in short, a kind of knowing that is also a form

of not-knowing. To embrace a hypothesis *as* a hypothesis is to enter into a committed relationship with an idea, known and yet not known, for the sake of engaging the world and seeing it in a particular way. To entertain a hypothesis is, to use Keller's idiom, to become apophatically entangled with an idea that one hopes is worth considering.

Is it true that any worthy apophatic entanglement is, by that very fact, empirically testable? Here I think the dominant contemporary view fails us. We humans are hypothesis makers. We hypothesize about our lives and the world around us, from the mundane to the ultimately significant, which is just to say that we make guesses about the way the world is and then attempt to live our lives accordingly, adjusting and modifying our hypotheses as we deem necessary. We inhabit our more consequential and fundamental guesses just as animals inhabit their nests: we leverage them as places of felt order and safety from which we can venture out and attempt further understanding. In the existential arena, hypotheses shield us from the ever threatening chaos and randomness of existence. We stick with those that turn out to be useful in a broad sense, and we eventually abandon or minimize those that don't in some way or another deepen the meaning of our lives.

The world is a peculiar place with regard to our attempts to hypothesize its meaning. As far as I have been able to discern, it does not push back decisively against our existential hypotheses or our attempts to live them out. What truly is at the heart of reality? Love? Peace? Conflict? Spontaneity? Emptiness? Flow? Different religious traditions have touted their different answers for millennia without coming to consensus. New answers still appear. The point is that with regard to ultimate meaning reality frequently appears to do next to nothing to correct our possibly mistaken ideas about its significance (I owe this insight to conversations with Wesley Wildman; see Wildman 2010, 77–79). Whether this is something to mourn or celebrate I am not sure. That it is something to be acknowledged and lived with openly is something I have been slowly coming to accept. That it is something that does not relieve us of the responsibility to hypothesize I am convinced. (I first encountered the idea of theologizing in a "hypothetical mode" in Philip Clayton's *Explanation from Physics to Theology*, 1989, 144.)

A characteristic mistake of our time is to think that only empirically testable hypotheses are worth making or exploring. In order to live as human beings we need to make and hold hypotheses that aren't empirically testable. I would thus like to dispense with the reductionistic view of science as the rightful arbiter of the legitimacy of any and all hypotheses in favor of a broader, more basic sense of "hypothesis" that does not simply equate legitimacy with testability. Some hypotheses are testable, some aren't. As for what it means to be human, the latter are important despite their untestability. Science successfully drives the expansion of knowledge because it focuses on those questions where the world pushes

back sufficiently hard against our ideas about how things are to allow us to sort out the more and less adequate. This is not to say that science somehow transcends the interpretive intricacies of human understanding or stands completely independent of cultural conventions, but only that it relentlessly seeks out ways of checking the validity of its interpretations against empirical data. Religion, as I want to characterize it, has to do with the complementary realm of human inquiry and action in which we pursue answers because we want (need?) to live our lives under some particular framework of meaning even though the feedback we get from the world typically seems vastly insufficient for distinguishing better and worse frameworks.

I propose calling these meaning-frameworks "religious hypotheses." This, I think, is what religious traditions are actually in the business of generating. To dismiss the term as meaningless or naïve for its lack of testability ignores the possibility, introduced above, that hypotheses worth considering can include those that are untestable. Questions can be important and meaningful even when we are quite sure we are not in a position to *know* whether our answers to them are good ones. For better and worse, this makes religion a highly complex and ambiguous enterprise at one end of the spectrum of testability, with science, another highly complex and ambiguous enterprise, working at the other end. In actuality the situation is even murkier, thanks to our frequent inability to know whether a question is truly unanswerable or merely a difficult one. "What is the origin of the universe?" strikes me as a question that falls into this gray area. Of course, such ambiguity makes religious hypotheses vulnerable to scientific advance, but this need not register as a threat to human well-being or to religion. (It *is* a threat to both when religious hypotheses masquerade as certain knowledge in the service of social control.) If, some day, we do actually *know* the answers to our questions about the whence and why of reality in the sense of figuring out how to get the world to push back against our hypotheses regarding these questions, then surely humanity will be better off for it. In the meantime (and who knows, perhaps for all time) we can and must choose to construct relevant meaning-hypotheses in whatever way we can and with whatever resources are available.

Religious Hypothesis as Conversation Partner

This brings me back to Keller's chiasm of negation and relation. If science and religion both deal in hypotheses, then all of our knowledge about ourselves, the world, and the divine—all of it, whether religious or scientific—is a form of nonknowing. A fundamental coincidence lurks not too far below the surface here: none of our knowledge carries within itself the certainty of its own claims. Meaning inevitably emerges, as Keller rightly points out, amidst the tension between saying and unsaying. As

I am construing the idea of "hypothetical" knowledge, then, it is not synonymous with a lack of "real" knowledge. It is rather a combined saying and unsaying that, whenever it is voiced explicitly, serves as a reminder of the fallibility of all knowledge. Hypothetical knowledge knows itself to be more than ignorance, on the one hand, and yet is mindful of the ignorance that remains both within and beyond itself, on the other. What makes this view of the hypothetical nature of both scientific and religious knowledge a coincidence of *opposites* is that these two modes of understanding occupy alternate ends of the spectrum of testability. At one end, science limits itself to questions where there is a good chance of getting clear feedback from the world, for the sake of making our knowing less ignorant. At the other end, religion focuses on questions where there appears to be little or no chance of feedback, for the sake of making our ignorance more knowing. Scientific and religious hypotheses form a coincidence of opposites, reflecting our own apophatic entanglement with the world.

What might it look like to embrace a religious tradition "hypothetically" in awareness of the nonknowing character of its knowing? In other words, what might it look like to be apophatically entangled with one's own religious tradition? Given the inevitably narrative way in which we sort out existential questions, committing to a religious tradition as a conversation partner with all of its thick narratives—being in conversation *with* a religious tradition and conversing with others who live *within* it—seems to me to be a viable option. For one thing it would free religious narratives from the deadening job of delimiting what's un/acceptable for the sake of incubating what's im/possible. A helpful analogy might be marriage or life-companionship. I no longer believe, if I ever did, the popular trope that people who desire to be in an intimate adult relationship must find their true "soul-mate," that one elusive needle in the human haystack, to lead a fulfilling life. When it comes to making meaning with other human beings, I think the most one can hope for is to find someone who can sustain a thoughtful conversation over the long haul. Narrating the meaning of one's life is an arduous process. What greater gift than to find a religious tradition willing and able to go the distance?

Key to this kind of long-term conversation is that neither partner is responsible for entering into the relationship with a definitive account of the other's identity already in hand. Identities and meanings are forged over time rather than revealed in a single moment. And so, likewise, what if we were to understand religious traditions not as deposits of absolute truth but as conversation partners to be engaged for the sake of forging meaning along life's journey? What an enormous gift to have the time-tested stories of age-old traditions to reflect upon and converse with as we attempt to narrate the meaning of our own lives! Freed from the burden of supplying absolute truth, religious traditions could live alongside humanity as valued (even venerated) partners with rich histories of asking the right questions.

Might the idea of "religious hypothesis" crack open the wall between us and this cultural im/possibility?

HYPOTHETICAL FAITH?

Believers in various religious traditions will need to consider this im/possibility from the perspective of their own worldview. For myself, I continue to ponder what it might look like to embrace Christianity "hypothetically." What would it mean to have faith, to believe, as my tradition names this type of commitment? What would it mean to worship hypothetically, to strive for a hypothetically pious life, or to do hypothetical theology? Perhaps the man who cries out to Jesus in Mark's Gospel, "I believe; help my unbelief!" was asking not for a resolution that would overcome his uncertainty but one that would integrate it into his larger understanding of who Jesus was. Perhaps he wanted a relationship that, as we might now say, values the tension inherent in simultaneously saying and unsaying one's love for a tradition. Well, okay, probably not. And in any case, most days all of this seems like a flat-out unattainable impossibility. Once in a while, though, I can feel it bubbling up inside as un/attainable im/possibility. I thank Catherine Keller for helping me see beyond absolute impossibility to the un/attainable and im/possible. I remain hopeful for myself and others that our faithful participation in religious traditions can some day become her mindful repetition open to the new, and that our nonseparability from the traditions in which we were raised can some day take the form of her differentiated, mindful relationship that does not leave us passive recipients of the past. Would that more of our species could envision the im/possible in this way or, as Keller paraphrases the anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing,* "I have no idea. Wish you were here" (2015, 84).

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