

Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein

July, 2014

Introducing Polydoxy

Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/38/

INTRODUCING POLYDOXY

MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN

This special issue of *Modern Theology* stages a critical conversation around the multivocal texts composing *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, edited by Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider.¹ That volume is in part the product of a Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium at Drew University entitled, “Polydoxy: Theologies of the Manifold.” In order to introduce, expand, and refine this vibrant set of theological possibilities, it is our hope in this issue to bring a diversity of perspectives to bear on some of the positions enacted in and as “polydoxy.”

The participants in the conference and contributors to the volume are not members of anything like a “school” of polydoxy, nor do they all share any particular tradition or methodology. Rather, their very different backgrounds and projects operate out of what Keller and Schneider call a “triune intuition” to *multiplicity, unknowing, and relation*.² “Polydoxy,” then, functions as a provisional name—a strategic and perhaps evanescent heading under which to assemble scholars whose theological sensibilities exhibit a striking inter-resonance. It is, in other words, more of a descriptive than a prescriptive term, and a loose one at that. Nevertheless, this tenuous assembly of thinkers does hope in naming their alliance to advance one another’s constructive theological and ethical visions—in particular, their shared commitments to social, political, economic, racial, sexual, and environmental justice, which arise from and strengthen their multiple relational ontologies.

Perhaps fittingly, the name “polydoxy” is itself overdetermined. *Doxa* can, of course, mean “opinion”—as in the “right opinion” of ortho-doxo—but it can also mean “appearance,” “illusion,” “glory” and “praise.” Gathered under this neologism are therefore a multiplicity of opinions, visions, and articulations of divine and created multiplicities from perspectives within,

Mary-Jane Rubenstein
Department of Religion, Wesleyan University, 171 Church Street, Middletown, CT 06459, USA
Email: mrubenstein@wesleyan.edu

¹ Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider, (eds), *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

² *Ibid.*, 1.

beyond, and at the unsteady boundaries of numerous Christian traditions. Attending to multiplicity by means of multiplicity, these authors hope among other things to unsettle an imperial theology's long-standing obsession with what Laurel Schneider has called "the logic of the One,"³ and to transform a traditional object of onto-epistemological denigration—"multiplicity itself"—into "theology's resource."⁴ But what is "multiplicity itself"?

For the most part, the editors and authors of *Polydoxy* use the term "multiplicity" in conscious distinction to "plurality." They suggest that if plurality names a profusion of discrete individuals, the *pli* of multiplicity encodes an "enfolded and unfolding relationality" among singularities that are constituted (and undone) precisely by means of these shifting relations.⁵ Multiplicity, in other words, names tenuously *connected* differences—neither manyness nor oneness as such but rather "events of becoming folded together, intersecting, entangled as multiples."⁶ To celebrate multiplicity as the very stuff of theology is therefore to attend to the stunning and fragile biodiversity of creation; the racial, gendered, and embodied multiplicities that constitute "humanity"; and perhaps most specifically to theology, the varieties of human wisdom through and in distinction to which Christian theologies and ecclesiologies have emerged. By extension, it is also to reflect upon the source of these multiplicities as itself multiple—on the manyoneness of a creator intimately bound up with the manifold of creation. And as it turns out, this may be the point of greatest doctrinal diversity among polydox thinkers. For some, God stands eternally above, beyond, and/or beneath the universe that God nevertheless suffuses. For others, God Godself *becomes* in inexorable relation to created relationalities. There are, in other words, numerous and even conflicting degrees of panentheism enacted in these pieces, and yet each theological vision acknowledges itself as the contingent product of specific, human, and therefore limited texts and contexts, and stands self-consciously subject to revision.

Hence the polydoxic significance of *unknowing* in the midst of multiplicity and relation. In line with the apophatic strands of Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic theologies alike (and bearing in mind the playful inessentiality of its own "name"), "polydoxy presumes a mindful uncertainty."⁷ It remains open, responsive to new insights and earthly unfoldings, and mindful above all of the violence—colonial, imperial, psychological, corporeal—that accompanies and enacts absolute claims to a single truth. And it maintains this apophatic openness in complex relation to a teacher infamously subjected to such violence, as well as a church that so often reenacts it.

³ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁴ Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Polydoxy therefore operates in complex relation to orthodoxy. It would be tempting to reduce this relationship to one of simple opposition—to say, for example, that in the face of orthodoxy’s oneness, certainty, and autonomy, polydoxy unleashes manyness, uncertainty, and relation. But of course, these polydox values emerge from many of the sources (kataphatic, apophatic, and Trinitarian) that compose the orthodox tradition as such. So just as “multiplicity” names not an opposition to oneness but rather a difference both beyond and within oneness, polydoxy claims not an opposition to orthodoxy but a complex “intra-activity” with it.⁸ This intra-activity expresses itself in numerous ways. In some deployments, “polydoxy” amounts to a kind of immanent critique of the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy—an exposition of the processes by which “rightness” establishes itself by disavowing, punishing, ridiculing, and/or annihilating whatever differs from it. In this way, heterodoxy can be shown to be constitutive of orthodoxy as such, as its repressed other(s).

Even setting to one side the production of heresy, however, polydoxy aims to reveal the extent to which orthodoxy is not the monolith to which many of its proponents and opponents tend to reduce it. Rather, beginning from the plural “beginning” of four canonical gospels (and a host of excluded others), emerging from the religio-cultural complexity of the ancient near eastern world, and unfolding through an often divergent multitude of councils, doctors, and fathers, orthodoxy *itself* is “always already polydox.”⁹ It is therefore the task of polydoxy to expose these constitutive multiplicities and to offer them back as renewed resources for theological action and rumination.

Polydox Reflections aims to explore, refine, and build upon some of polydoxy’s openings, tactics, and concerns. Breaking with a common pattern, the plan for this special issue of *Modern Theology* was not to solicit review articles of the book, but rather to approach theologians and historians who might be “fellow travelers” with polydoxy—that is to say, broadly sympathetic, but also possibly skeptical and even critical of it. We therefore invited these authors to respond creatively to the book in light of their own theological sensibilities and projects. We asked them to explore polydoxy in light of their own sense of the task of modern theology, and perhaps to offer correctives or directives for future polydox trajectories. In short, the authors gathered here were asked to “think with” the book, rather than about it, in order not only to introduce it to a wide theological audience, but also to develop their own work and polydoxy “itself” in relation to one another.

The issue’s first two essays establish the contours and stakes of polydoxy’s relationship to orthodoxy. Engaging the fraught history of reciprocal constitutions of orthodoxy and heresy, Virginia Burrus cautions that if polydoxy

⁸ I have borrowed this term from Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁹ Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 7.

establishes itself in opposition to orthodoxy, it risks reduplicating the very operations of power it critiques. A crucial way to avoid such mimicry would be to resist essentializing “orthodoxy” by subjecting its “shifting constructions” to “critical historical investigation.”¹⁰ Offering this intervention, Burrus can be seen as both cautioning and advancing polydox thinking; in fact, a particularly polydox vision emerges in her constructive image of “theological generativity” as neither static nor linear but rather “rhizomatic,” so that doctrine looks “less like a sapling than a bed of irises—or a field of crabgrass—neither one nor many, but always already a multiplicity.”¹¹

With Burrus, Shannon Craigo-Snell worries that even through polydox texts “resist a strict binary opposition between polydoxy and orthodoxy,” they “functionally” reinscribe them “to a single epistemological viewpoint . . . the logic of the One.”¹² Mobilizing Luce Irigaray’s critical retelling of the allegory of the cave, Craigo-Snell concedes that the western epistemic insistence on oneness enacts gendered, racial, colonial, and ecological violence. Yet she reminds us that this particular vision of enlightenment is not the only way to understand Christian truth. Triangulating the seventeenth century fiery revelations of René Descartes, George Fox, and Blaise Pascal, Craigo-Snell unearths the remarkably flexible and highly contextual constitution of orthodoxy itself. This too, then, can be heard either as a critique of polydoxy or as a call for it to be more fully itself; that is, to attend to the specific ways in which orthodoxy is “always already polydox.”¹³

If Burrus and Craigo-Snell push the limits of our understanding of orthodoxy, Clayton Crockett dives straight into heresy. In line with the etymology of *haireseis*, Crockett admits that “to insist on choice is to flirt with heresy,” and then chooses to fold together three nontheistic theologies that lie at the edges or well beyond the fray of Christian traditions.¹⁴ Tuning into Colleen Hartung’s Derridean suggestion that “theology does not have to assume a God or divinity to be theological,”¹⁵ Crockett hears nontheistic theological resonances in Hyo-dong Lee’s neo-Confucian meditation on the Great Ultimate, a “unified multiplicity” which Crockett complicates further in relation to the Dao that cannot be named.¹⁶ In all three of these trajectories, Crockett traces apophasis along a familiar razor’s edge between faith and faithlessness, purification and blasphemy, panentheism and atheism. Multiplicity, then, is

¹⁰ Burrus, p. 9 internal reference.

¹¹ Burrus, p. 11 internal reference.

¹² Craigo-Snell, p. 18 internal reference.

¹³ Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 2.

¹⁴ Crockett, p. 34 internal reference.

¹⁵ Coleen Hartung, “Faith and polydoxy in the whirlwind,” in Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 153.

¹⁶ Hyo-dong Lee, “‘Empty and tranquil, and yet all things are already luxuriantly present’: a comparative theological reflection on the manifold Spirit,” in Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 128 and Crockett, p. 42 internal reference.

internal not only to orthodoxy, but also to the heresy it calls forth and repudiates. In fact, heresy often looks a lot like orthodoxy—especially at the misty peaks of apophysis.

It is these peaks, which one could also configure as an abyss, that Linn Tonstad inhabits “as a queer and feminist theologian with a dogmatic orientation.”¹⁷ Maintaining what she calls a “polyfidelity” to what are usually marked as wildly “divergent discourses,” Tonstad investigates a common systematic response to feminist, queer, and postcolonial critics of Trinitarian formulations.¹⁸ In response to the charge that the name “Father” is a human projection that reinscribes oppressive systems of sex and gender, many systematic theologians insist that divine fatherhood is utterly different from human fatherhood, and therefore untainted by the patriarchal accretions of ordinary uses of the term. After demonstrating the inevitable collapse of these efforts, Tonstad asks in surprising solidarity with Crockett what it would mean for systematic theology “to speak ‘Father’ without fatherhood.”¹⁹ Ultimately, she suggests, such an effort would require abandoning the singularity of theological method and object alike, deploying “polyfidelity” to mirror the irreducible polydivinity of the Trinity.

Offering a different vision from and of the mist, Graham Ward responds to the polydoxic “gift” through a bifocal scriptural lens. To examine “the roles of revealed truth and authority within polydoxy’s project,”²⁰ Ward trains half of our vision on James’s likening life in Christ to “a mist that appears for a time and then vanishes” (James 4:14) and the other half on Jesus’s parting words: “no longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). Like Burrus’s (Deleuzian) rhizome, the Jamesian mist becomes Ward’s generous offering to the polydox project, hovering as it does in a plurisignality poised “between a fading in and a fading out.”²¹ This mutable, unified manyness enacts for Ward the logic of Ephesians, whose “one,” multiply and differently iterated, “does not mean homogeneity.”²² The essay concludes by posing two interrelated questions: the first concerning the nature of polydox Christology and the second concerning the value of multiplicity itself—in particular, the danger of affirming *everything* in affirming multiplicity, including the “depths of hatred, anguish, fear and impotence all around and within us.”²³ How, he seems to ask, can polydoxy claim multiplicity as a theological resource if multiplicity contains the very violent formations polydoxy seeks to unsettle? And what does any of this have to do with Christology?

¹⁷ Tonstad, p. 51 internal reference.

¹⁸ Tonstad, p. 54 internal reference.

¹⁹ Tonstad, p. 72 internal reference.

²⁰ Ward, p. 76 internal reference.

²¹ Ward, p. 77 internal reference.

²² Ward, p. 78 internal reference.

²³ Ward, p. 88 internal reference.

While other authors might address these questions differently, Mark Jordan's and Wendy Farley's reflections each offer compellingly polydox gestures toward a response. Mark Jordan performs his engagement of polydoxy—in particular, its attunement to *method*—through a series of inter-related fragments. In relation to Mayra Rivera's essay on the doxological polyvalence of "glory," Jordan asks what it means to "write theology" in the face of empire, which is to say in the face of terrorized and tortured human bodies.²⁴ Reminding us of Christianity's complicity with modern torture on the one hand, and of its commemoration of a tortured savior on the other, Jordan revisits some of Michel Foucault's literary essays to ask how we might live and write in relation to that ambivalent history—that is, how to commemorate an act of violence liturgically, personally, and communally without sensationalizing or romanticizing the story—or worse, re-enacting it against others. For Jordan, such living and writing would emerge not in disavowing "the imperial terrors that theology can authorize," but rather in facing them courageously, hoping against hope that a new, transformative God-speech might emerge within the neglected interstices of empire.²⁵

In Wendy Farley's essay, Jordan's meditation on the tortured rabbi and a tortured humanity is extended out to the tortured earth itself—to the raided forests, parched soil, dying oceans, disappearing species, endless wars, and innumerable oppressions of human and nonhuman animals that demand a wholesale reorientation of our theo-political worldview. Joining her voice to those polydox and even neo-orthodox critics of post-Constantinian orthodoxy, Farley recounts the excruciating history of coercion, discipline, torture, war, "re-education," and repression stemming from the "mind-boggling stupidity of authoritarian regimes of knowledge."²⁶ As an antidote, she offers not so much a counter-theology as a corrective spirituality—drawn both from Christian and non-Christian sources.²⁷

In their introduction to *Polydoxy*, Keller and Schneider write that although the volume tends to shy away from doctrinal certainties, it does make one specific "doctrinal claim . . . about what it means to be a Christian in this world. It requires a receptive posture toward a manifold of texts within and beyond the corpus of interpretations, practices, and spiritualities of those who claim the tradition/s of Jesus."²⁸ In attending to a small portion of this manifold, it is our hope that the present collections of essays will serve not only as an introduction to the stakes and methodologies of polydoxy, but as part of its continual unfolding: self-critical, provisional, rhizo-misty, *open*.

²⁴ Jordan, p. 100 internal reference and Mayra Rivera, "Glory: the first passion of theology?" in Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 167–185.

²⁵ Jordan, p. 104 internal reference.

²⁶ Farley, p. 115 internal reference.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 5.