

# RELIGION & GENDER

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## **Review of Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (eds.) *Entangled Worlds. Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia). New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, 333 p., ISBN 978-0-82-3276-22-6**

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Edited by theologian Catherine Keller and philosopher of religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein, the brand-new volume *Entangled Worlds. Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* touches upon various philosophical-theological experiments with what the editors in question understand to be a new materialist rethinking of the religious and spiritual human subject, the 'stuff of religion' (p. 6), the universe, and the subject's acts within this universe and encounters with the other – human and non-human – actors that populate it. This critical decentering of the human subject as a supposedly disembodied agent (or receiver) of faith makes *Entangled Worlds* into an interdisciplinary volume that is not only of interest to readers with a background in theology and religious studies. Its innovative explorations of various relational ontologies that point at the already-existing connections between God, mankind, environment, and the universe as a whole – without however merely repeating the doctrine of Christian materialism – will surely speak to a larger audience of feminist theory scholars, philosophers, and anthropologists and sociologists of religion.

Stemming from the 13th Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium that took place at Drew University in 2014, all of this volume's pieces are held together by their authors' explorative reflections on the matters of religion, theology, and science – and the entanglements between these three. Hinting at earlier materialist and current new materialist debates in theology and religious studies on the experiential 'matter', materiality, and potential embodiedness of religion and framed by a particular American subset of the field of new materialisms as presented in Diana Coole's and Samantha Frosts' *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics* from 2010, *Entangled Worlds* brings a variety of interesting topics to the foreground. Packed with thought-provoking contributions on diverse topics such as an agential realist Benjaminian-inspired rethinking

of the matter of time and justice (by feminist science studies scholar Karen Barad), 'onto-sympathy' or an ontologically-ingrained *feeling-with* plants and other non-humans (an essay by political theorist Jane Bennett), the agency of the Mexican-diasporic Light of the World Church (written by religious studies scholar Manuel A. Vásquez), theology, humanism, and the dehumanization of African-American subjects (by philosopher of religion Carol Wayne White), and the positions of Christian materialism and pantheism (contributions written by the editors themselves), this book is making its mark in the so-called (new) material turn in the disciplines of theology and religious studies. *Entangled Worlds* consists of three thematic parts or 'interfering waves' (p. 7): The first part, titled 'Matter, Anew' includes four essays that each in their own way address a specific perspective on the agency of matter and the material. Barad's, Bennett's, and Keller's essays stand out here, because of their insightful engagements with the complex project of rethinking agency – a notion that mostly has been reserved for very specific human actors because of our modern Western belief in human exceptionalism. Bennett's 'Vegetal Life and Onto-Sympathy' and Keller's 'Tingles of Matter, Tangles of Theology' immediately inform the reader about the overall statement that this edited volume is trying to make, that agential materializations are all around us, and that human, vegetal, and divine bodies are all relationally interconnected. Troubling the aforementioned human exceptionalism by means of an analysis of the works of Thoreau and Darwin, Bennett in her piece pleads for a vitalist philosophy that emphasizes the material affinities between plant and human, and, consequently, everything else that has been labeled and (often alas quite literally) been disposed of as 'non-human'.

Bennett's focus on – and appeal to – an environmental, relational consciousness is further elaborated by Keller, who compares and contrasts Whiteheadian process theology and Baradian agential realism to think through the materiality of religious relics and past versions of Christian materialism to come up with what she calls 'an *apophatic materialism*' (p. 123). Referencing negative theology, Keller uses the foregoing neologism to inform the reader that there is always something of matter – and of God and godly matter – that escapes us and our understanding. Barad's diffractive-experimental piece 'What Flashes Up. Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments' gracefully brings the concerns of Bennett and Keller and their call for a different, more relational philosophy/theology together by carefully demonstrating how the fields – and the matters of – theology, politics, and science should not and may not be thought of (and practiced) as separate domains. By unraveling her own agential realist philosophy step by step, while diffractively commenting on fragments by Benjamin, Butler, Marx, the Kabbalah, and quantum physics, Barad almost poetically reveals that questions of time, political hope, and justice are completely intertwined with one another, and must also be treated as such. Matter itself, according to Barad's philosophical-theological reflections, is filled with messianic potential; with a political explosiveness that already bears the changes-and-transformations-to-come. Interestingly, Bennett, Keller, and Barad in this part of *Entangled Worlds* thus not only sketch out how we can conceptually think with – and think things anew with – new materialist philosophies, but they at the same time also attach concrete theo-ethico-political meaning to such a ground-breaking but immensely complex project.

'The Matter of Religion', the volume's second part mainly touches upon questions of the concrete materiality or even *material body* of God in all of its religious

figurations. Theodore Walker Jr.'s piece on cosmo-liberation theology provides us with an interesting new materialist-sounding relational take on traditional liberation theology, and Vásquez's chapter employs a Latourian actor-network theory-inspired (yet not that new materialist, or at least not that *feminist* new materialist) approach to examine the entanglements surrounding a Mexican-diasporic Pentecostal church in Atlanta. Yet it is Rubenstein's more essayistic piece, however, that immediately draws the feminist reader's attention. In 'The Matter with Pantheism. On Shepherds and Goat-Gods and Mountains and Monsters', Rubenstein entertainingly thinks through the much reflected upon topic of pantheism as a religious-philosophical position that links the discipline of theology to concrete materiality, and she does so by what she calls 'reanimating the "pan"' (p. 159) in pantheism. Rubenstein follows in renowned feminist theologian Grace Jantzen's footsteps when critiquing the dichotomized binary structure of Western metaphysics and thought, and convincingly claims that the fears surrounding pantheism relate to its binary-disrupting characteristics. She takes us on a pantheistic journey by means of reflections on sheep, the Greek god Pan, and the latter's link to Christ.

The essays that make up the third and concluding part of this edited volume, aptly titled 'Ethicopolitical Entanglements', analyze the ethical and political ramifications of new materialist theologies, although this does not mean that the other chapters from *Entangled Worlds* do not focus on issues such as justice, (de)humanization, and liberation. The pieces from White and Terra S. Rowe respectively look at a materialist liberation theology of 'scared humanity' (p. 253) that could counter white supremacist, liberalist processes of dehumanization. They look at the necessity of criticizing theological humanisms that have supported the incessant exploitation of our natural surroundings in much greater detail. The final part of this edited volume in fact provides a lot of philosophical inspiration by not only reflecting upon new materialist philosophies in a theological manner, but it also demonstrates the practical, socio-political relevance of thinking the two together.

The foregoing statement already reveals that I find *Entangled Worlds* to be an inspiring and relevant edited volume for those working on the crossroads of theology and/or religious studies, philosophy, and feminist theory. Extremely rich in content, truly interdisciplinary and dialogical of nature, and written and edited with an eye for detail, *Entangled Worlds* continues the materialist-theological explorations that have already been undertaken in the past while attempting to think the matters of religion, science, and the world as a whole anew via a new materialist lens. The only point of critique that I could come up with, has to do with the overall theoretical situatedness and citational politics of the volume in question. Even though the editors extensively discuss their view and own positionality with regards to the field of new materialisms, and acknowledge that there are many versions or 'multiplicities' of new materialist philosophies in their introduction to *Entangled Worlds*, readers with a background in Continental philosophy and theory will most likely wonder what has happened to the more Continental-oriented (and often Deleuzian-inspired) branches of new materialist thought. This minor point of critique nonetheless does not detract from *Entangled World's* overall value: this volume surely enriches the reader's understanding of lively materiality, theology, science, politics, and the many potential linkages, entanglements, and productive cross-pollinations between them.