

MARIUS VAN HOOGSTRATEN

Theopoetics and  
Religious Difference

*Religion in  
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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Marius van Hoogstraten

# Theopoetics and Religious Difference

The Unruliness of the Interreligious:  
A Dialogue with Richard Kearney,  
John D. Caputo and Catherine Keller

Mohr Siebeck

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I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.  
*Isaiah 43:19*



## Preface

This study was submitted as a doctoral dissertation at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and defended successfully on 7 June 2019. It has been revised for this publication, especially in the introduction, Chapter 5, and a number of footnotes.

That defense seems a long time ago, now, almost a year later, and the frantic three weeks of writing, editing, and correcting before submission in the summer of 2018 even more so. A lot has changed since then. Some of those changes took place in my personal and professional life: We have since moved to Hamburg, where I now serve as one of two pastors to the Mennonite congregation, offering a rather different pace and emotional landscape to the writing of a dissertation (and, indeed, a different kind of life than Berlin offered). Some changes, however, are of a more global scale: As I write this, all gatherings, religious, academic, and otherwise, not only in Hamburg but in nearly the whole world, are severely restricted in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Others will surely write studies on the effects of this pandemic on the interreligious and on our planetary togetherness more generally, whether this was the moment everything changed or whether it was just a particularly odd and frightening few months. In either case, the ambiguity and lethality of our indelible interdependence has become unnervingly clear in recent weeks.

If the submission and defense of this dissertation seem long ago, it is even harder to say where it began. Perhaps it began as far back as a visit to Istanbul with my parents, hearing the *adhan* and visiting mosques, or even further, protesting the Iraq war as a high school student, gripped both by fascination for this other world and by the lethal materiality of the structures that make it “other.” This ambiguous sentiment was surely part of what led me to spend time in the Middle East as a student. The many conversations I had in that time, with strangers and people who became friends, are what led me to accept the Christianity of my forebears as the imaginary in which God had always already addressed me, and through which I wished to address God in response.

The months I spent in Deir Mar Musa in the Syrian desert, a gathering place for spiritual seekers, local Christians, and interreligious activists alike, were particularly significant. Meditating on the side of a mountain, celebrating Mass under centuries-old frescoes, experiencing the emotions of Easter together – something gripped me in that time, something, I know not what. I returned home with a strong sense of commitment to the Christian faith tradition – I was baptized in the Mennonite Church not long after – and with the insistent sense that other re-



ligious traditions were alive with something no less powerful (something I know not what).

After moving to Berlin, this dual, perhaps even paradoxical sense of belonging and openness became crucial to our interreligious work. How it also became the root of the philosophical and theological questions that led me back to academia, to this dissertation, is the story I tell in the introduction, below. While writing the words and sentences of this sometimes rather theoretical study, the vivid memories of all these things – sand and stone, water and carpet, prayer beads and candles – were always at the front of my mind.

I am therefore deeply indebted to the all the people I met on the way in this long journey, who are too many to name, though I shall try.

This book would not have come into existence without the support and encouragement of my partner Hannah. Without your presence and our regular walks through the city, I certainly would not have spoken to another person or left the house for days on end, and presumably would have lost my mind.

I must also thank my parents, Thijs and Madeleine, for your kind confidence, for hosting me while in Amsterdam even when we did not have time to spend together, and for your patience as I was figuring life out far away from home.

It seems to go without saying that this study would have remained but a collection of loose ideas without the cordial supervision of Professors Willie van der Merwe and Marianne Moyaert. Your advice was always timely, wise, and encouraging, and I am deeply grateful to you both.

I further owe my thanks to James for his estimation of my English; to Niels for countless conversations and one or two editing tips; to Joel, Maaïke, Pelle, Laura, Gorazd, and Colby for giving me much-needed advice at a crucial moment; to Martina, Nuri, Helga, Claes, Osman, Ayşe and Fethiye, and all the people that made Café Abraham-Ibrahim into a space of such togetherness; to the late Father Paolo and all the people of Deir Mar Musa. God, give peace.

And finally, my gratitude belongs to God, always and unconditionally.

*Marius van Hoogstraten  
Hamburg, 19 April 2020*

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## Introduction

Our neighborhood in Berlin was a microcosm of ambiguous togetherness, marked as much by the hopeful diversity of today as by the tremendous suffering of the recent past. There are expensive cafés and migrant-run shops and eateries, struggling to survive amidst ongoing gentrification. There is an impressive mosque and a bright Hindu temple, but also a former synagogue, standing as an eerie reminder of how much Jewish life there once was in this city. On the sidewalk there are *Stolpersteine*: commemorative metal cobblestones in front of the dwellings of those murdered by the Nazi regime.

The Hindu temple, dedicated to Sri Ganesha and perpetually under construction, borders the *Neue Welt*, now a concert venue but once a popular gathering place for subversive workers' meetings calling for an end to World War I. That war decimated this working-class borough through famine more than fighting. Though the main building is recent, the Şehitlik mosque forms a Muslim presence in this city older than the German state. It still deals with racist attacks on a regular basis. It stands at the edge of the Tempelhof airport, which was built by the national socialist regime, became a lifeline for West Berlin after the war, and has now been reborn as a large green space where people fly kites, practice urban gardening, fire up barbecues, and play football. The terminal building houses refugees.

This is a borough, and a city, at once old and new, heavy yet light, perpetually in mourning yet alive with an impossible hope. Over the past decades, this working-class neighborhood with understaffed schools, high unemployment, and low air quality became a breeding ground for an unlikely togetherness.

For some years I worked for the Mennonite Church here, building interreligious relations. As I met with other activists, faith leaders, social workers, and local politicians, we marveled at this emerging togetherness, at the unanticipated newness of our work and life together, of all this new life that continuously emerged in the midst of the grave history of this city. For it is a history in which the arbitrary constructedness of borders has become as vividly clear as their lethal materiality, in which difference has been celebrated, ignored, and mercilessly crushed. The historicity of this difference and its ambiguity, between letting-be and anonymity, between violent suppression, persistent distrust and emerging relations, forms the root experiential background of this study.

In our Muslim-Christian conversation group, we had quickly grown tired of well-intended assertions that all religions were ways up the same mountain, and less well-intended ones that Muslims – always especially Muslims – were fun-

damentally different. Instead we practiced listening to each other intently and allowed the witness of the other to challenge us in our own faith.<sup>1</sup> But as we did so, assertions of clear-cut difference also vacillated, as we realized the Christians and Muslims in the group never formed homogeneous bodies, often disagreeing with their “fellows” much more vehemently than with the others. As difference opened up and shifted during a single conversation, a kind of relationship grew that was not precisely agreement or commonality, but that we as yet did not have the words to describe. *Something was going on* – something, I know not what.

Ultimately, what I hope to do in this study is to find words and sentences to bring to speech what was stirring in those experiences. To bring to speech the ambiguity, historicity, and dynamic relationality of religious difference – in a word, its *unruliness* – without trying to bring it under control, to pacify it, or keep it at a distance. To come to an understanding of the interreligious with this unruliness at its heart.

As I turned to theology to sharpen my understanding of our interreligious work in Berlin, I found an appreciation for such unruly ambiguity lacking.<sup>2</sup> In the field I will refer to as “theology of religions,” central questions traditionally include whether and how Christians can affirm that adherents of other religions partake in salvation and truth, but also, more significantly in recent years, on what basis such judgments can be made, and what happens when adherents of different religions encounter and strive to understand each other. Yet I found many of the most well-known approaches simply took for granted that categories of self and other, of “religions” as delineated and stable entities, make sense, and that the study of the “interreligious” can be undertaken without a great appreciation for the historical mess of borrowings, togetherness, and violence that have always accompanied religious life. Where my experience was one of dynamic relationality, nourished by a recognition of my own ignorance and a willingness to listen and be challenged, theology of religions appeared to offer only two main options: sweeping assertions of commonality or rigid assertions of particularity. Even in their most affirming versions, neither seemed to quite address my experience.

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<sup>1</sup> I describe one particular conversation in Marius van Hoogstraten, “Haunted Encounters: Openness to the Other, Deconstruction, and Religious Difference,” in: *Shifting Locations and Reshaping Methods: Methodological Challenges Arising from New Fields of Research in Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies*, ed. by Ulrich Winkler and Henry Jansen, Zürich: LIT, 2018, pp. 171–188.

<sup>2</sup> Generally, I will refer to religious “diversity” to denote the least theoretically informed *prima facie* observation that there are various religious ways. With religious “difference” I will refer to a more specific understanding of those fault lines and differentiations “between” religions, understood to be malleable, historically contingent, and ambiguous between life-giving and lethal. “The interreligious” will refer to those occurrences and analyses where the boundaries of religious difference are thematized and crossed, not limited to intentional interreligious dialogue. “Pluralism” will refer to one specific strand of theological answers to the fact of diversity (see below, pp. 11–18).

In theological approaches to the interreligious, I found missing an appreciation for the way the interreligious can unsettle Christianity, for how this difference resists being grasped, and for how hope and relationship arise precisely from, not against, this unruliness. On closer reading, however, it became clear that I was not alone in noticing this deficit. Indeed, a line could be traced through recent theological debates, connecting rising tremors around this very intuition. Perhaps it could even be said that each prominent contribution to the debate in the last thirty-odd years started with this intuition of difficulty, of messiness, of unruliness – yet most approaches in one way or another also again seek to contain it or bring it under control.

So what could an approach to the interreligious look like that embraces this unruliness of difference instead of seeking to contain it? My suggestion in this study will be that we might do this by turning to *theo-poetics*.<sup>3</sup> Under this name goes a way of thinking about God that might well itself be described as “unruly,” alive with a resistance to comprehensive schemata combined with an embrace of unknowing and of the unsettling of theological certitudes, and an affirmation of hope as arising from precisely these uncertain conditions. In the words of John D. Caputo, theo-poetics is “a deployment of multiple discursive resources meant to give words to the event, . . . without asserting that one knows the secret, the code, the rule that governs events.”<sup>4</sup> As Catherine Keller puts it, theo-poetics “marks its God-talk with its proper im/possibility.”<sup>5</sup>

L. Callid Keefe-Perry more systematically describes the main concerns of the-poetics as:

an acceptance of cognitive uncertainty regarding the Divine, an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty, and an emphasis on action and creative articulation regardless. It also suggests that when the dust has settled after things have been said and done in the name of God, the reflection and interpretation to be done ought to be grounded in dialogue and enacted with a hermeneutic of hospitality and humility.<sup>6</sup>

Further concerns of theo-poetics include an emphasis on the role of *imagination* in addressing the Divine (as “poetics”), an emphasis on divine *becoming* in the world

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<sup>3</sup> I was originally introduced to the-poetics through the “Homebrewed Christianity” podcast hosted by Tripp Fuller. See also e.g. Tripp Fuller, *The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to Jesus: Lord, Liar, Lunatic or Awesome?* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 95. Significantly, for Caputo, faith is always about *something I know not what*, cf. *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 309.

<sup>6</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theo-poetics Primer*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014, p. 131. It appears to me that the use of “the Divine” as one of the names for “God” in theo-poetic vocabulary is best understood not so much as an effort to depersonalize or conceptualize God (into some kind of divine “element”) but rather as an effort to avoid connotations of God as a supreme being, as well as to evoke connotations of manifold, mystery, and process, which are crucial to theo-poetic ways of bringing God to speech.



that remains unfinished and invites our participation (as “*poiesis*”), and the sense that a poetics offers a way of displacing the connotation of a *logic* in *theology*. *Theopoetics* seeks to be more an evocative than a denotative discourse, seeking to bring the Divine to speech without suggesting it has thereby definitively described it or brought it under control.

Theopoetics might thus give us precisely the vocabulary we need to address this unruliness of religious difference. For it offers a way of thinking about God as quintessentially not a *ruler*, and of religion and Christianity as fundamentally not about control. It can place *difference* center stage, because its philosophical commitments view the construction of identity as always already caught up with relationship, difference, and otherness. It can resist coming to the interreligious with answers formulated a priori, because it offers a way of looking at the world in which nothing is a priori, in which not even God has a “God’s-eye-view.” The best way to approach religious difference without denying its unruliness might thus well be to formulate a *theoetics of the interreligious*.

In order to formulate such a poetics, it will first be necessary to look at contemporary formulations of theoetics more closely. For the sake of clarity, and in order to find a balance between breadth and depth, I will focus on three inflections specifically: those represented by Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller. Not only are these arguably the most prominent thinkers within this field, but focusing on three authors will also highlight common concerns and valuable distinctions in their approaches, while still allowing me to also discuss the work of each in sufficient depth.<sup>7</sup> For each of these, theological questions about God and God’s relation to the world have in an important sense become philosophical questions, and they each draw on a different strand of twentieth-century European philosophy to develop their ideas. For Kearney, this is primarily hermeneutics, for Caputo, deconstruction, and for Keller, process thought – though deconstruction also plays a significant role for Keller and Kearney. While each thus presents a distinct rendition of theoetics, a shared

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<sup>7</sup> Hopefully, and perhaps ironically, this focus will limit the “unruliness” of this study itself. This is not to say, however, that Kearney, Caputo, and Keller are the only voices in theoetics. See especially Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*.

According to Keefe-Perry, Amos Wilder and Rubem Alves form the strongest early voices for theoetics. In its contemporary revival, he gives Kearney, Caputo, and Keller a prominent place in his introduction, each as a representative of one current or flavor of theoetics: Kearney is thus presented alongside Karmen MacKendrick as offering theoetics as “the roughing up of our ideas of God through an enticing wager on God” (ibid., p. 129), Caputo alongside Peter Rollins offering theoetics as deconstructive resistance to closure and an embrace of the new, and Keller alongside Roland Faber as looking for divine becoming (*theo-poiesis*) with process theology. In addition, Keefe-Perry also includes the embodied theologies of Melanie Duguid-May and Scott Holland, who maintain that “faith must be fleshly and imaginative before it becomes propositional and dogmatic” and see theoetics as “an affirmation of the body, which functions as a means of radical egalitarianism, allowing voices to speak and be encouraged that might otherwise be kept pressed into silence” (ibid., p. 10).

concern is found in the effort to think what we might call a progressive Christianity sensitive to its historical complicity in domination, and the intuition that their respective philosophical conversation partners offer ways of thinking God beyond or after “ontotheology” or the theology of God as a supreme being.

This is not to say they always apply these insights to religious difference. As will become clear in the following chapters, especially Kearney and Caputo have not made it the subject of serious philosophical investigation, offering readings of religious difference that remain underdeveloped or equivocal. If theo-poetics can help theology of religions take the unruliness of difference more seriously, it appears that in turn theo-poetics might learn from the practiced sensibilities and more refined insights that have emerged in theology of religions over the years.

In the following, I will thus attempt to bring these two academic discourses into conversation.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, they have much in common: Both theology of religions and theo-poetics seek to think through the relevance of otherness, difference, and diversity for Christian theology. Each considers otherness to be profoundly significant to understanding and living Christianity in the twenty-first century. And each attempts to trace the consequences of this significance while doing justice to the other. However, to my knowledge they have not been seriously related to each other, and their respective thinkers have, as will become clear, at most dipped their toes in the questions animating the other discourse.

Methodologically, in bringing together theology of religions and theo-poetics, the task cannot simply be the *application* of one to the other, as a framework to a content or as an answer to a question. While my main goal is to turn to theo-poetics to address issues found in theology of religions, questioning the thinkers of theo-poetics on the interreligious will also reveal something about their work. In the following, I will thus seek to trace what happens when these two discourses come into contact with each other, devoting my first chapter to drawing a line through the debate in theology of religions, and then a dedicated chapter for Kearney, Caputo, and Keller, respectively. In the final chapter, I will attempt to tie the various strands of this study together into something like a comprehensive approach: a poetics of religious difference.

In Chapter 1, I will thus sketch the main issues and questions of the debate in theology of religions as it has played out in recent decades. Throughout this chapter, I will trace how the unruliness or “anarchy” of religious difference becomes apparent and takes shape in this debate: It appears to destabilize both Christian assumptions of superiority and the boundaries differentiating it from its “others.” Religious difference also appears itself unstable, resistant to efforts

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<sup>8</sup>This means that this study is primarily concerned with a debate that is not only intra-Christian but also, for lack of a better word, intra-progressive. Few of the authors I will cite represent bona fide conservative, orthodox, evangelical, or fundamentalist positions. Though the awareness of those more conservative brothers and sisters in Christ is never far off, this choice of direction reflects both the reality in the debates on the interreligious and my personal faith position. I hope, however, that I will not have taken this progressive position as given.

to bring it under control or to think it from a first principle (*arché*).<sup>9</sup> This unruliness or instability is recognized in deepening layers throughout the chapter. Taken together, what emerges is a sense of the *groundlessness* of Christianity, especially its assumptions of superiority, the *unavailability* of a comprehensive neutral viewpoint or unifying schema, the *unsettling* and *unfinished* nature of interreligious encounters, and the need for *critique* of the most central categories through which Christianity has viewed religious difference, including “religion” and “difference.” Instead of constraining this anarchy, repressing it, or seeking its pacification, I will propose its embrace: a *pact* with this unruly difference, intuiting that it may present a particular kind of good news. While at the end of the chapter, theology of religions dips its toes into the profound philosophical questions precipitated by these rising tremors, ultimately, I will argue, a turn toward more philosophically inflected theo-poetics allows us to take the full dive.

With the stakes thus established, I will turn to Kearney, Caputo, and Keller in Chapters 2 through 4. In a dedicated chapter for each author, I will start by looking for resources in their work for thinking Christian faith in the context of this anarchy.<sup>10</sup> In each chapter, at least three common angles of approach will appear: an embrace of *negation* or *critique* as constitutive for affirmation, an understanding of faith as conditioned by *groundlessness*, and an understanding of *community* or *tradition* as plural and unfinished. In the second half of each chapter, I will investigate what each author has written about religious diversity and the interreligious more directly.

I start this journey with Richard Kearney in Chapter 2. While Kearney is an influential contemporary thinker on religion, I will argue his earlier work, not expressly addressing religion, is his most insightful. I will thus start there, with a discussion of questions of narrative imagination as constitutive of collective narrative identity. A shared identity, Kearney argues, is not given by a shared origin or present homogeneity, but by what opens up in front of the irreducibly plural and agonistic stories we tell. Imagining our own place in the world is caught up

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<sup>9</sup> For most of this study, “anarchy” will be a shorthand and a heuristic device more than a working concept. I endeavor a greater conceptual explication in Chapter 5.

Though clearly in some sense indebted to both, my use of “anarchy” must be distinguished from its meaning as a political utopia animating anarchist movements and from its function in Emmanuel Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*, where it names the unmediatedness of the call of the Other. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998, pp. 99–102. On Levinas, see also below, note 214 on p. 100 and note 43 on p. 221.

<sup>10</sup> In so doing, it will not be my goal to give an exhaustive study of their work, but to discuss them always in light of the stakes established in Chapter 1. This means that some aspects of their work will receive less attention than they would in a comprehensive review or summary. Notably, this includes each author’s discussions with psychoanalysis – sometimes amenable, sometimes more antagonistic. This is, in part at least, because psychoanalysis evokes an alterity marked by a certain structural necessity, as well as anonymity and interiority, which do not appear to me helpful in addressing religious difference. See also note 80 on p. 76.

indelibly with the way we imagine, and potentially reimagine, the other: Neither autonomy, nor heteronomy, take the decisive upper hand. In two shorter sections, I will then trace Kearney's more explicitly religious arguments: that Christianity can rediscover itself after atheistic critique, especially after the critique embodied by the failure of divine providence in the horrors of the twentieth century, and that this "anatheist" Christianity should take the form of a wager on hospitality for the divine stranger. Compared with the erudite scholarship of his earlier work, Kearney's direct statements on religious diversity and interreligious encounter remain, I will argue in the second part of the chapter, undertheorized and at times problematic. Nevertheless, his reflections on imagination, collective narrative identity, and otherness will play a crucial role in my concluding chapter.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the work of John D. Caputo, who draws primarily on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. I discuss Caputo's argument that deconstruction is alive with a deeper affirmation or hope that can be called religious, and that the deconstruction of religious certainties can thus open up a deeper faith. Faith is most faithful, Caputo argues, when it does not rely on solid grounds but recognizes its own groundlessness. I argue this does not lead to a faith without religion, but to a subversive loyalty within the religious community and tradition. Caputo's statements on the interreligious, while sparse, radicalize its unsettling character and read interreligious encounter as deconstructive, revealing a fluctuation and difference at work at the very heart of our religious vocabularies. I also discuss Caputo's use of apparently universalist language, which at times appears to lapse into a comprehensive unifying schema, seemingly at odds with his general deconstructive distrust of such schemata.

In Chapter 4, finally, I turn to Catherine Keller's blend of relational theologies, feminism, poststructuralism, and process theology. I start with Keller's reading of a groundlessness in the divine process of creation: Not out of a founding principle, but out of an ambiguous Deep, newness is perpetually called forth in a co-production between creator and creation. In her readings of negative theology, Keller further sees a negation or unknowing as central to our relation to God, not because God is so transcendent, but because God is immanent in the becoming of all the relations of the universe. This "panentheist" understanding of God has consequences for political theology, offering a vision of a distributed sovereignty, vigilant toward domination and closure, instead thinking community as a constant process of gathering. Keller's thought on the interreligious is the most developed of the three, offering a biblically rooted non-exclusive understanding of the truth of Christianity, a critical view toward the political theology of Islamophobia, and a relational pluralism which seeks not a unifying schema but a valuation of relations in persistent difference.

In the final chapter, I will relate the insights from Chapters 2 through 4 back to the problems of Chapter 1, asking both how theo-poetics can help theology of religions think about the unruliness of difference as well as what theo-poetics might still learn in order to better speak to religious difference. In the remainder of the

chapter, I will then attempt a more speculative and constructive elaboration of the consequences of the three middle chapters for questions of the interreligious. Difference, I will suggest, appears as both constitutive and destabilizing, seeping into principles and identities as an unruly indeterminacy. However, it can also be read as the groundless depths out of which relationship and togetherness are continuously emerging. A theoetics of the interreligious might not only envision but also *evoke* such a togetherness, calling forth relationship from the depths of difference.

## Chapter 1

# Theologies of Religions

## A. Introduction

In the following, I will sketch the main lines of the debate in Christian theology around the meaning and relevance of non-Christian religious traditions, and, secondarily, of interreligious encounter. Most theologians frame this debate along a typology of “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” and “pluralism.” In brief, exclusivism is taken to mean that non-Christian religions offer *no* truth or, alternatively, no salvation. Inclusivism typically means that although there may be some truth or an option for salvation in non-Christian traditions, the fullness of either is reserved for Christianity. Pluralism finally refers to various attempts to come to a comprehensive schema in which all religions mediate truth or salvation, but in which no one religion has privileged access. Paul Knitter, Paul Hedges, Marianne Moyaert, and some others add a fourth they call “particularism.”<sup>1</sup> Particularism is generally seen to refer to arguments that deny the validity of comprehensive schemata and instead seek an understanding of religious truth as inseparable from religious particularity.

I will not recapitulate this debate comprehensively as it has played out throughout history.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I want to enter the debate at the point of the introduction of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002, pp. 173–237; Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press, 2010, pp. 146–96; Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For good overviews, see the works cited under note 1. Though I have written this dissertation while living and working in Germany, it does not expressly address the German-language discourse in theology of religions. This absence does not imply a valuation, but is simply due to temporal and spatial constraints. For good overviews of German-language debates in theology of religions, which generally discusses similar issues, see e.g. Reinhold Bernhardt and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, eds., *Interreligiöse Theologie: Chancen und Probleme*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013; Reinhold Bernhardt and Klaus von Stosch, eds., *Komparative Theologie: Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009. See also Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, Stuttgart: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011. Though not part of it *stricto sensu*, this dissertation has benefited in a general sense from my research in *Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies* project at the University of Hamburg. See Carola Roloff et al., *Interreligiöser Dialog, Gender und dialogische Theologie*, Münster: Waxmann, 2019; Thorsten Knauth et al., eds., *Jugendtheologie – dialogisch und interreligiös*, Münster: Waxmann, Forthcoming; Katajun Amirpur et al., eds., *Perspektiven dialogischer Theologie: Offenheit in den Religionen und eine Hermeneutik des interreligiösen Dialogs*, Münster: Waxmann, 2016. For an overview of German-language con-

pluralism and subsequently discuss a number of the responses it has engendered: Trinitarian particularism, comparative theology, and feminist and postcolonial approaches. One reason I start with pluralism is that, in the words of Paul Knitter, pluralism “seems to occupy the center of the storm that is disturbing Christians” as they wrestle with the fact of religious diversity.<sup>3</sup> Pluralism is the current that makes much of the debate possible, giving it a focus and setting the major terms.

It must be said that this is very much an ongoing debate and a dynamic field. Authors tend to know each other, and respond to each other at relatively high speed by academic standards. In the following, I will only be able to hint at these interactions. For the sake of argument, my presentation will therefore rely on some schematization. This means some of the critiques I will formulate will already have been picked up by a next generation of theologians. My critique of comparative theology is a case in point, as will become clear below.<sup>4</sup>

I will thus begin my discussion with the way pluralism attempts to come to a comprehensive schema in which all religions mediate truth or salvation, and are thus grounded by an underlying unity, in relation to which no one religion is privileged. Second, I will discuss two particularist critiques I will describe as *Trinitarianism*, as they argue that Christians should not seek an underlying unity but rather should look towards the Trinity to conceptualize and assess religious diversity. Third, I will discuss comparative theology, an interreligious reading practice which is skeptical of either of these schemata, and fourth, I will discuss feminist and postcolonial critiques, which ask whether typical conceptualizations of religious difference do not rely on problematic assumptions rooted in power and violence.

In their own ways, each of the arguments I discuss begins with the recognition of religious difference as something more complex and unsettling than had previously been recognized. Although each ultimately also falls short of thinking this through to its radical consequences, each of them on some level recognizes religious difference as *destabilizing*, in the sense that it effects a wavering in the *ground* on which religious attachments are founded. As we move through the chapter, each next critique will show the limitations and simplifications on which the previous position relied to still the wavering created by this recognition. Towards the end of the chapter, an additional dimension will also become more important: Religious difference is also itself *unstable*, in the sense that it questions the *bounds* or borders of religion.

This is the growing intuition or suspicion I attempt to pursue in this chapter: that there is an unruliness to religious difference, both destabilizing and itself unstable. I will call this the “anarchy” of religious difference, as a shorthand for the

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temporary philosophy of religion, especially as it begins to discuss issues of religious difference and especially interreligious understanding, see Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, eds., *Hermeneutik der Religion*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> See section D and pp. 56ff.

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