Beyond Monotheism — 1. Introduction: incarnation… again

[Here begins our inaugural book event on Laurel Schneider's Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity. This post may be longer than most of the rest, but it seemed necessary to go into more detail since she's laying out the whole project here.]

I’ll begin by quoting Schneider’s paragraph, which is an excellent summary of the argument of the book (or at least the first half of the book):

The logic of the One, which has governed the era of European expansion, has tendrils stretching back as far as thirty-five centuries into the reign of Akhenaten in Egypt, though it did not become dominant and flourish until much later in Persia, Israel, and Greece. The logic of the One—only very lately dubbed monotheism—has functioned powerfully on behalf of exiles and emperors alike, and it has framed a whole scientific methodology. For all of its success, however, the logic of the One simply doesn’t work well enough any more to satisfy far-reaching questions about either divinity or the world. The logic of the One is not wrong, except, ironically, when it is taken to be the whole story. Rather than false, it is incomplete. The logic of the One (and the concept of God that falls within it) is simply not One. There is always less, and more, to the story. (1)

Schneider positions the book as an attempt to think a divinity “which is not One” (Irigaray), which entails thinking about divine “being” and “presence.” Those two concepts have caused major headaches for other theologians, but Schneider is not afraid of impasses, believing that sometimes they “are the best way to move forward.” Her key claim “is that divinity beyond the logic of the One, beyond monotheism, occurs” (1), a claim that contradicts notions of divine eternity and immutability as well as the concept of a clear linear progress toward some goal or telos. Her focus will be on divine
incarnation, which means facing up to the inherent multiplicity and complexity of bodies. This focus is what makes her project a feminist one. Her project also arises out of the contemporary context of increasingly complex global conflicts that draw on notions of monotheism at the same time as they defy well-defined boundaries such as the “nation.” Though theologians have all been shaped by the logic of the One and are therefore complicit with the defenses of empire it entails, she believes it is possible to glimpse another divinity if we move beyond a focus on church authority and become open to a divinity that can actually “dwell among us” (2).

**Bread and stones: tools for the journey**

Schneider acknowledges that she does not “travel this road alone or without help” (3). The very traditions of monotheism often include indications of their own unraveling, and she draws on a wide range of contemporary thinkers as well: for example, Catherine Keller, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Kwok Pui-lan, Wohnee Anne Joh, James W. Perkinson, A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, Kathryn Tanner, Delores Williams, Ellen Armour, Shron Welch, Gilles Deleuze, and Thomas King. She is also aware that even the most liberationist of theologies cannot totally neutralize the tendencies toward oppressiveness that inhere in even the most thoroughly-vetted theological tools. Nevertheless, she finds many promising resources in the Christian tradition, which was never *solely* about the logic of the One. On a practical level, since the defense of empire is so often theological, resistance needs to fight on the same terrain — recognizing that the theological resources that helped people overcome situations of oppression often allow them to forget their own origins when the battle is one. Broadly considered, however, “Christian monotheism is empire theology” — a true first brought forward by
Erik Peterson and subsequently followed up by Moltmann and Boff, who saw the Trinity as a way out of this. Schneider believes that a more promising route is to go directly to the question of *incarnation*, which, when “taken seriously, voids all numerical reckonings” (4). Her focus on bodies challenges empire with a gospel conceived “as a mobile and always contextualized message of good news to the poor and disenfranchized,” so that incarnation “therefore becomes a kind of shorthand for the undoing of imperial pretensions to totality and final solutions” (5).

Theology always seeks to “articulate understandings of the divine… in light of the needs of the day,” avoiding conceptions of the divine that are so foreign to our experience as to be unintelligible (5). This focus on context constrains Schneider to trace out the sources and history of Christian theology in order to begin again, since (following Keller) it is impossible to begin *ex nihilo*. Beginning again requires humility, humor, patience, and a willingness to begin yet again after the inevitable missteps. Since Schneider’s investigation is focused specifically on the incarnation of Christ, it means coming to terms with the cultural heritage of Israel and Greece, as well as the long-neglected contribution of Africa. It means taking seriously the scriptural texts of the great monotheisms as well as the “text” of the world. Christian theology has focused specifically on one particular incarnation, proclaiming that God has become fully human in Jesus Christ — and the meaning of that incarnation has continued to be a point of contention for theologians as well as an object of fascination for laypeople, as evidenced by the success of movies based on Christ. Perhaps the best in Schneider’s opinion is *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, whose humor allows it to get at the all too human elements of faith. Humor is conspicuously absent in Christian theology (though not in the Talmud),
but it is a necessary opening toward multiplicity, insofar as it acknowledges uncertainty. Uncertainty has been growing in modern theology, not unlike the “uncertainty principle” of physics — another example of humor, insofar as the scientist observing the atom finds the atom apparently looking back. “If humor departs when the divine enters, then we have to wonder if it is divinity at all that we are considering” (8).

A theology of multiplicity can have neither “clean starts” nor “tidy finishes”—it can only begin in the middle (8). This is the case even though Schneider will spend part I tracing the genealogy of Christian monotheism, following it all the way up to the development of modern science and then delving into Dante’s Inferno, a piece of protest literature that Schneider found (perhaps improbably) resonant when she took it up in the middle of an impasse of writing. The Inferno “became, for me, a lyrical stepping stone toward clarity about the devastating void at the center of the logic of the One” (editorial note: a reading that she establishes in what is perhaps the best part of the book, a true tour de force of creative interpretation)—the fact that her interpretation goes against Dante’s apologetic purpose goes to show that theology always carries unintended consequences. Part II begins with a meditation on the nature of story, which then exchanges the task of genealogy for an “experimental plunge” searching for a way to speak of multiplicity. Part III then deals with some of the ethical implications of multiplicity, focusing on nationalism, love, and the question of unity.

About words

In this section, Schneider explains her choice of the terms “Divinity” and “the Divine” over against other possibilities like God, because she believes that the choice of
terminology brings up the broader question of why she would write about the divine at all. She answers this question in a way that deserves another blockquote:

There is something about the idea of divinity, and the reality to which the word gestures, that pulls humanity, over and over again, toward itself. By this I mean that what attracts people continually to the fact-idea-suspicion-faith-experience-possibility of deep connection to a reality that far transcends whatever they create for themselves, is indeed a reality that intentionally tends toward them and the world. Beyond psychology, bio-chemistry, and the social constructions of culture, the divine draws human beings out of themselves over and over again. (11)

The question of what the divine is has haunted every human culture; Schneider uses the term “the divine” because it seems to her not to be as pre-loaded with a monotheistic answer. All possible terms are merely metaphors and therefore inadequate, but theology isn’t all about names — it also presupposes the existence of the divine, and so is caught in a tension between affirmation and negation. Though she acknowledges that divinity’s existence cannot be proved, she argues that it is “nonetheless experienced. The real presence of divinity is hoped for, sought after, renounced, feared, flirted with, despaired of, unexpectedly encountered, and embodied every day all over the world” (12). Asking about the divine requires recourse to religious tradition, to philosophy, to sociology and anthropology, to psychology — basically every way that human beings come to construct meaning. Yet it also goes beyond those fields of study, trying to reach the divine itself: “Theology is desire. The beauty and even endearing madness of it is that it begins with the folly of attempting to speak of the divinity itself that comes into human consciousness and recognition” (13). Christian theology, based as it is on a particular incarnation, starts
from a stance of openness toward the divine coming — even if theologians immediately tried to close off that openness, people formed by Christianity kept trying to bring the body back into focus; “the body—bodies—always return to disrupt theological attempts at containment” (14).

Reflection/Questions: What struck me most going through this chapter was Schneider’s insistence that the divine really does happen — that it’s irreducible to the various “explanations” offered by particular disciplines. It’s probably too early to ask detailed questions about what that entails, as that will come out more clearly in the second half of the book, but it seems like something to watch for even in the first geneological half. That is to say, the classical theologians aren’t just constructing an ideology — they’re reacting to and attempting to contain something that is not entirely within their control.

Beyond Monotheism — 2. Then came the word: the invention of monotheism

Schneider begins this chapter by pointing out the Christian assertion of continuity with Israel and the need for some form of differentiation. At the same time, there was considerable internal diversity within emergent Christianity, as people from a variety of cultural and educational backgrounds joined the many small groups that claimed faithfulness to Christ. As Schneider points out, “enough people converted to faith in this god-man of Nazareth to indicate that the Jesus movement’s eschatological promises of imminent good news for the poor and suffering were translatable and accessible across cultural lines, even if the ‘news’ altered somewhat in the translations” (18). This “polyglot” background means that even settling on the definition of “Christian” in Christian monotheism is an incredibly complex and even undecidable task, needing to
take into account the Jewish, Greco-Roman, and African cultural inheritance of Christianity. But before delving into that, Schneider pauses to consider the origin of the word “monotheism.”

“Monotheism” defined
The term “monotheism” first appeared in 1680, about 50 years after the first appearance of “polytheism,” and its coiner (Henry More) was referring to “Unitarian ideas of God-world identity” rather than familiar one-god beliefs (19). Only in the early 19th C. does it take on its current meaning. This late emergence should caution us against using modern terms to capture ancient realities, something that biblical scholars are only beginning to recognize. In modern times, the term “monotheism” “has served and continues to serve two principle, related efforts in modern theology and biblical scholarship. First, it labors in the classifying and cataloguing enterprises of western social science, and, second, it has effectively served as a transport vehicle for ideologies of European cultural and religious superiority” (20). The key divide is polytheism/monotheism, which not only can’t cover all religious systems, but also fails to recognize the varieties of ancient systems — which might be better termed “monolatrous” (worshipping one God while allowing that others really exist too), as in the case of most of the history of ancient Israel. Monotheism also implies a belief in a person-like God, which many religious systems do not have even though they embrace the divine in other forms. Even in contemporary Christianity, many of the presuppositions of classic monotheism — such as substance metaphysics or concepts of eternity — are losing their purchase. So monotheism doesn’t seem very useful as a general category for description of religious phenomena.
Another problem is the way the term has been tied up with imperial ideology. Monotheism’s supposed superiority to polytheism helped justify European expansionism — and was very effective as a propaganda tool (she quotes several thinkers, including Rousseau and Hume). This agenda found its way into biblical scholarship as well, which searched for evidence of the evolution away from polytheism and toward the superior monotheism. Theology embraced the same kind of evolutionism, exemplified by Troeltsh, an ambivalent move that opened up a path for real engagement with modern culture but also underwrote Eurocentrism.

All this brings us to the question of whether we should use the term monotheism at all. It’s not very descriptive of religious experience and it has considerable ideological baggage — indeed, it might be nothing more than an ideology, as Moltmann suggests. If this is the case, then Christian monotheism is perhaps untenable, and theologians need to seriously consider whether the doctrine of the Trinity is enough to overcome it or if “it simply dresses the emperor up, ‘new clothes’ in triplicate” (26). Overall, though, Schneider believes it’s useful to retain the term itself: “The term ‘monotheism’ arose in modernity for some specific scholarly, religious, and political purposes, most of which have to do with securing the dominance of One-God belief systems in a world of difference. It remains a useful term, shot-hand for the ideology of oneness that grew up out of the context of empire in post-exilic Israel, imperial Greece, and imperial Rome” (26). It is a political term rather than a theological one, a misleading way of naming the divine.

**Reflections/questions:** This chapter has a lot of interesting history that I didn’t know about the term “monotheism,” but it’s also potentially confusing — she seems to break
down the case for using “monotheism” as a guiding category and not quite build it back up again. The pieces are all there, but it seems like she could’ve drawn them together more closely. At the same time, I see that the thread I picked out in the last post is clearly present at the end here — it’s not just that the ideology of which monotheism is a part is destructive, etc., it’s that it’s wrong, it misleads us on our quest for the divine.

**Beyond Monotheism — 3. “No god but me”: the roots of monotheism in Israel**

The history of the emergence of monotheism in Israel has been a subject of much debate, complicated by many scholars’ clear desire to secure Israel as “the first locus of revelation for the oneness of divinity” (27)—either for ideological or pietistic reasons. This history has even higher stakes due to the fact that Judaism and the religions that came from it, Christianity and Islam, stake their identity on belief in one God.

Investigation continues even now that the ideological project of grounding modern monotheistic progress has largely fallen by the wayside, with new research focusing on the influence of surrounding cultures like Egypt, Persia, and Assyria on Israel’s religious viewpoint. Now it is clear that Israel was not the first to develop a society centered in monolatry and that it was only during the Babylonian exile that exclusive monotheism emerged (in Second Isaiah). There are seeds of exclusivity even before the exile, however, most notably in King Josiah’s attempt to get rid of all cults but that of YHWH, a project linked to the threat of Assyrian conquest and the need to present a unified front — but it didn’t prove sufficient to prevent later conquest by Babylon and subsequently Persia, which led to the exile.
The achievements of the Jewish elites were quite impressive given the huge temptation to give up on their apparently defeated God and conform to the broader culture. Before laying out the one-God doctrine they arrived at, though, Schneider looks at the precursors. One-God systems did exist in many of the states that succeeded the collapsed Egyptian empire, and of course Egypt famously experimented with exclusive monotheism under Akhenaten. Babylonian emperor Nabonidus declared himself to be the one God, and in Persia there was also a movement toward monotheism associated with Zoroaster. Given the ever-shifting empires of the era, cross-cultural fertilization is likely here. In addition, since evidence against a sudden conquest of Canaan is mounting, we also need to take into account ancient Canaanite forms of worship. The history that emerges is one of gradual change, rather than a jump out of polytheism into monotheism. In the millennium leading up to the exile, even the name of Israel’s God was up for grabs, meaning that perhaps the various Bible stories are actually talking about different deities that only later became condensed into one.

While the roots are complex and sometimes unclear, the emergence of an exclusive one-God doctrine in the exile, as represented by Second Isaiah, is not a subject of debate. This doctrine emerged and evolved over a millennium “of almost unceasing threat to Jewish identity,” coming to a climax with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE. In that context, “the genius of this period is the transformation of the political downfall of Israel into the political ascendancy of Israel’s God” (32). A local god is promoted to ruler of the universe, and the exile is all part of his plan. This shift is the climax of a long history of convergence among different cultures into a single identity, which the invention of monotheism then secured.
Monotheism took three forms. The first was a polemic against other gods, which provided families with a way to help their children resist the temptation of assimilation so as to preserve their identity as Jews, a struggle akin to that against “Americanization” today. The second sought to connect with the colonizing culture, as was necessary when the more tolerant Persians took control and polemics no longer seemed wise. This strain engaged with Hellenistic and perhaps Zoroastrian thought to develop a more philosophically sophisticated monotheism. The first form is an ethnic exclusionism, where the second one is a more class-based exclusionism, mocking the practices of commoners without access to philosophy, etc. The third form was a way of dealing with the splits within the Jewish nation itself, attempting to provide some continuity between the diaspora and the land itself. The process was complex and variegated, but the result was that “the transcendence of the One-God freed the people’s identity from the limitations of geographic space or from narrow and fragile national boundaries, all of which had been shattered by the exile and continued to be threatened by superpower empires on every side” (35). This led to a shift toward acts of fidelity and obedience as the focus of worship, as opposed to bonds of genealogy and temple, “though memory of the god of the land never disappeared” (35). What began as an attempt to preserve the nation from danger became a way to reconceive its identity after the worst had already happened.

All this is captured in Second Isaiah, which works especially hard to reconcile its ideal of a cosmic god with previous understandings of gods as military leaders of particular nations, creating a concept of God who “is the warrior king and cosmic creator in one” (36). Second Isaiah represents the heart of Israel’s influence on later religions such as
Christianity and Islam, and Schneider seems to believe that it was in many ways a positive development: “This theological move, or realization [that God wasn't bound to a particular nation or place], set Israel’s theocracy up to become Judaism, by freeing its God from the sacral necessity of temple or land, to be as ubiquitous as life itself, and as mobile as a Torah scroll” (37). This development in the context of exile “suggests strongly that the theological imagination is always responding to the question of divine presence, interest, and legitimacy in social and political affairs” (37)—in this case, by making an audacious paradigm shift. Yet this paradigm shift wasn’t entirely new or unprecedented — Egypt had long known of the possibility of an exclusive One-God doctrine, as did the same Persian empire that allowed the Jewish elites return to their own land, and meanwhile the Nile provided a conduit for “a wide range of African cosmologies…, many of which supported unified ultimate divine principles” (37). In other words, the emergence of Jewish monotheism took place in a context that would find the basic idea plausible, but that doesn’t take away from the profound religious genius that the conditions of exile drew forth.

**Reflections/questions:** I assume that this chapter was largely review for most of our theologically-trained leaders, but I think the particular emphases in the presentation are valuable — most notably the insistence on cross-cultural influences and above all the focus on the ways that the specific context of exile and the threat of cultural dissolution played into the development of Jewish monotheism. It’s one of history’s great ironies that this concept of God that would prove so helpful to empire arose as a *protest* against empire. Surely this confirms Schneider’s earlier claim that theology always has to deal with unintended consequences.
Beyond Monotheism — 4. End of the many: the roots of monotheism in Greek philosophy

Schneider was concerned in the previous chapter to trace the development of monotheism in the history of Israel. She turns in this chapter to the other major theoretical force running through the Christian development of monotheism. These two traditions come together in the Christian attempt to make sense of the revelation of an incarnate God – Jesus Christ. Their unitary conception of God they create a unitary, immovable, indivisible, and all those other attributes common to theistic theories of God. Yet, in many ways, as Schneider has hinted at in the preceding chapters and will go on to give more attention to after the historical narrative, this conception of God is alien to the experience of divinity incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Clearly, Schneider is engaged in a history of ideas, synthesizing a host of literature into a narrative of how Christianity came to be dominated by what she has consistently termed “the logic of the One”; that is, how Christianity has come to be dominated by the theology, both theoretical and political, of monotheism. Schneider locates a “tempting similarity” between the Jewish development of monotheism and the Greek development of the same:

“Here is the tempting similarity: in both contexts war and the changing sweep of empires made hash of former theological systems that had legitimated former social and political arrangements (and, in the continuous feedback loop of theology and politics, the breakdown of social and political arrangements further eroded the legitimacy of former theological systems). [...] In both contexts the local gods were proving impotent against
invasion and conquest. In both contexts, at roughly the same time, political trauma correlates with theological innovation towards ideas of cosmic divine unity (40).” Here Schneider deploys one of the two ciphers she uses to synthesize such a large amount of historical data. The cipher which allows the reader some sympathy with this logic of the One, and investigated here at the beginning of the chapter, is the relationship between trauma and theory and the cipher which allows the reader the critical distance to see the need for a recasting of theology is the imperial appropriation of that theory separated from the experience of trauma and now used as a weapon causing trauma. Both come together to create the narrative that lies behind the logic of the One, showing that it is not the only way things could have been and that it is not how it must be.

The cipher is compelling, but Schneider wisely avoids giving into the temptation that would lead her to ascribe any substantial historical causality to the curious parallel development of monotheism in Israel and Greece. She is well aware of the differences between the two cultures as well and that there are different forms of trauma. “It wasn’t the grand drama of exile but the ongoing petty plays of local city-states at war with one another under a confusing and apparently often changing array of local gods who themselves seemed to swing between allegiances according to the fortunes of local warlords (40).” It was these soap opera-esque relationships amongst the gods that led the Greek monists to reject, not just a plethora of gods, but the notion of personal gods in general. (Schneider does note that there is some historical evidence that the Greeks could have followed a similar path to Israel and coalesced the multiple Zeus’ into the One True Zeus [41]).
Schneider takes us through the development of monotheism in Greek philosophy as it plays out in the two post-Homeric periods – the early pre-Socratic thinkers and the closely related thought of Plato and Aristotle. The three pre-Socratic thinkers Schneider surveys are Thales, Pythagoras, and Xenophanes, each shown to exist within the relationship of trauma and theory. Each thinker is identified with some important aspect in the development of Greek monotheism. Thales, that 7th-century BCE man from whom no writings survive, is credited as the founder of the Greek tradition of *theoria* or that “notion that reality may best understood through abstract ideas and especially through mathematical grids (42)”. Arising out of this tradition is Pythagoras who ascribed to the number one the number of reason itself. In a world of ceaseless change Pythagoras found in abstract mathematical thought an unchangeable truth. Regardless of if a tyrant rules or democracy prevails, two plus three will always equal five. And finally the third thinker in this line is Xenophanes. His contribution to Greek monotheism was his unceasing assault on the Greek pantheon of gods, arguing “for a philosophical concept of divine reality that is immutable and so indivisible” and for this Schneider credits him possibly being “the first Greek to attempt a systematic approach to constructing a concept of God (43).”

From the works and arguments of these three thinkers narrative accounts of the gods eventually fell way to abstract, theoretical arguments. In their collapsing of reality with numerical simplicity they created a necessity that divinity itself be One. As Schneider says, “They sought, in the immutable nature that they ascribed to the divine, a necessary simplicity that leads logically to the requirement that divinity ultimately be uniquely One (46).”
After tracing the history of these pre-Socratic thinkers, Schneider turns to the philosophical theology of Plato. I won’t reproduce what most already know about Plato’s philosophy (in a nutshell: it ascribes true reality to ideal and static unitary being and denies truth to the world of material becoming). Rather, let us just consider what it is that Schneider says Plato adds to the logic of the One. Simply put, above the occasional and early work of the pre-Socratics, Plato gives the most mature account of monotheism/monism. It is with Plato that “Greek monotheism [...] came to full expression in this philosophical concern with a reality that transcends the sensible and chaotic world (50).” It, like the therapeutic theories of the pre-Socratics, dealt with a whole host of troubling questions by making them essentially false questions, “To declare the material world a chimera neatly avoids any claim it can have on the meaning and purpose of existence (50).”

Yet, something of the mystical still remained in Plato and so it is Aristotle who ultimately develops the logic of the One into a pragmatics of the One. He did so, Schneider tells us, by disrupting the sharp dichotomy between the material and the ideal, largely by focusing on cause and motion. Instead of rejecting Plato’s logic of the One, Aristotle firmly rooted it into the political and social life of humanity – physics became politics. This is because in his theory of causes there is always some unitary, last cause that is the cause of all other things. This is the causal identity of the theistic God. And this cosmological theory was taken up in the practice of empire, by his own student Alexander the Great, and in later Christian attempts to create one imperial rule rooted in one natural and divine law. Schneider ends the chapter by touching on the connection between the Roman imperial culture and the earlier Greek philosophy. It was the logic, though not the content, of this
philosophical theology of the One, immutable, indivisible, disembodied, perfect, and eternal God that was shamelessly stolen from the Greeks by the Romans and put to their own imperial ends. This was the logic that dominated at the time of Christ and the early development of Christianity. I will close the summary with Schneider’s own words: “How these monistic notions combing with that of a God-become-a-Jewish-man and with the One God of his tradition is the challenge that Christians faced and still face. Incarnation changes everything (52).”

Reflections/questions: I found this chapter to be an interesting and powerful summary of Greek monotheism. Much like the preceding chapter, I suspect for many of our philosophically or theologically educated readers it was something of a review. What I found interesting about it, however, was the way it cast these (for some) familiar themes within the ciphers that I located above (1, trauma and therapeutic theory and 2, imperial appropriation erasing its origin in trauma). As someone who considers himself a sympathetic co-traveler with Schneider’s overall project I also feel I should raise two questions that remain, for me at least, stubbornly in place. First, I’m curious as to the relationship between history and constructive projects (in this case theological). I suspect that others who do not share Schenider’s sympathies would read the history of Greek monotheism quite differently and may present their own plausible narratives for why we should too. The question that this raises for me is this, how important for constructive projects is the historical work being done when their exist different historical accounts? Secondly, and this arises out of my work on François Laruelle as well as some Marxist political commitments, I’m a little uncertain about the necessary relationship between a “unified world” and imperialism. Schneider writes that it is not, “any surprise that the
Romans became the champions of imperial imagination, carrying forward the Pythagorean and Platonic mission to unify the world and so rule it (52).” Is the relationship here causal or mere correlation? As a point of comparison, consider Alain Badiou’s political axiom that there is only one world and that the world is one only because different beings inhabit it (and they are different only because they inhabit one world).

*Beyond Monotheism — 5. “I am because we are”: The roots of multiplicity in Africa.*

Chapter 5 continues the historical survey set out in the preceding chapters. What differentiates it from the others is its goal of highlighting an alternative conception of divinity than the one found in the logic of the One, but first Schneider continues with the narrative history concerning monotheism. Schneider spent time showing us that the Christian logic of the One developed through the relationship between Christianity and its rootedness in the history of Israel and the interactions with Greek philosophy. In this chapter she begins by focusing on the Roman Empire’s Hellenic culture and the Christian apologetic attempt to present the revelation of Christ within the framework of that culture, before turning to the alternative conception of divinity found in the distinctly Creole theology of the Latin-speaking African Tertullian.

The historical birth of Christianity occurred in the midst of an increasingly Hellenized Jewish culture. Combining the theo-political monotheism of the patriarchal and convenantal history of Israel with the Greek philosophical ideals of cosmic oneness. Schneider points, by way of example, to the figure of Philo of Alexandria. Philo, from the position of a member of the Jewish upper-class closely aligned to the Roman occupiers,
carried out an act of philosophical translation between Jewish and Greek monarchical ideas. Explaining the oneness of God through the philosophical terms of the Greeks. While himself not a Christian, being 20 years old at the time of Jesus’ birth, his writings had a major impact on Hellenic Christian theologians (Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen are named by Schneider).

What Philo offered Christian thinkers was a theological and philosophical framework familiar to the wider culture that could be used to explain away the ambiguity of the New Testament writings on divinity. In short, Philo offered an apologetic tool to explain away the marked strangeness of the early Christian communities claims about Jesus’ divinity in the context of a Hellenic-Jewish culture. To the Jews the claims to divinity seemed unfounded as Rome still ruled and Jesus was unable to save even himself. To the Greeks the claims of a human being to any kind of divine sonship seemed akin to the early Greek pantheon of gods that, in the collapse of their empire, failed them. While the synoptic authors didn’t appear to see any need to explain the divinity of Jesus, Schneider goes so far as to write, “The meanings of the fatherhood of God and the sonship of Jesus were apparently self-evident enough to the members of those communities that their writers felt no pressure to explain what Jesus meant when he called God Father, or they did not see Jesus as divine in any way that required explanation (56-7).” This, however, is differentiated from the Gospel of John who spends some time making explicit that when dealing with Jesus one is explicitly dealing with God, showing that the coherence of Jewish and Greek monotheism in Christian worship had began to erode. Finally, in the midst of major Hellenic conversions of intellectuals schooled in Hellenic thought, called
the Apologists, the revelation of incarnation was largely collapsed and incorporated into
the logic of monotheism.

However, one can see cracks in the monolithic presentation of monotheism as other
thinkers in the early history of Christianity attempted to articulate claims about divinity
outside of the strict logic of the One. Schneider introduces the reader to an understanding
of the Latin-speaking African theologian Tertullian as a “Creole” theologian. She credits
Tertullian as creating “an opening in Christian theology (an opening, of course, that
already existed) for multiplicity (61)” within the overriding culture of monotheism. While
arguing for a unified concept of God he never ceased to argue, at the same time, that
there is an essential plurality in God as well. He attacks head on the political analogies
from which monotheism gains so much of its strength, going so far as to mock those who
think that plurality in rule means diminished power.

Schneider credits Tertullian’s African heritage for his ability to conceive of the inherent
relatorality present in the divine. Born in Carthage he was, against those racist
ideologies that would remove Northern Africa from the African context granting it some
kind of honorary European identity, at the crossroads of Hellenic culture and the African
culture. Within the African political and intellectual context there was an emphasis on the
“general idea of communality”, as A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya has argued, that lead
directly to the mature doctrine of the Trinity through thinkers like Tertullian and, in a
more individualistic tone (according to Schneider), Augustine (another Hellenized
African thinker).

However, despite the genius of Tertullian and the import of this general idea of
communality, “the idea of trinity proved to be a stumbling block for Christians
throughout Christian history because the underlying monotheism was never actually challenged (67).” This was because, in part, Tertullian argued for a closed plurality that allowed for appropriation by the Roman political elites. “The opening toward multiplicity in the divine that the idea of the trinity represents in Christian theology was almost immediately narrowed by ecclesial and political pressures” to give a religious system that would not challenge the political aspirations of Constantine nor the new found place of privilege the Christian church found itself in (69).

Schneider sums up this chapter nicely writing,

As a doctrine of God, therefore, the Christian Trinity feel into incoherence in the context of imperial demands for a theology of absolute rule and a Hellenistic cultural presupposition of the perfection of stasis. “Trinity” does make best sense in the light of common African cultural presuppositions that understand organic communality to be ontologically prior to individuality. To be alone, the Akan claim, is to be cursed – why would any religion curse its own God with monotheism?

And yet, throughout the numerous schisms and reformations that haunt the history of Christianity, that is exactly what it has continued to do.

**Reflections/questions:** I was impressed with this chapter and learned something about the development of the doctrine of the Trinity that I had not really come across before in her discussion of scholarship locating the elements of ancient African culture in the doctrine. The questions that this brings up for me are focused on the failure of multiplicity to unroot the logic of the One and the way it was subordinated to it. Why is multiplicity the minority position in Christianity and, if it bears witness more faithfully to
the incarnation of Jesus and his divinity, what remains distinctly Christian about Christianity?

**Beyond Monotheism — 6. Monotheism, Western Science, and the Theory of Everything**

Chapter 6 completes the narrative of the “logic of the One,” showing how it culminates with Western science and its modern and contemporary desire to unify everything in a single, overarching order. Schneider does not spend much time discussing medieval Christianity, but she posits a continuity between traditional European monotheism and modern science: “although the empires of Christendom stumbled and frayed, the logic that had grounded their orthodoxies took on a life of its own, eventually erupting in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the ‘scientific revolution’” (75). Here Thomas Aquinas and the Protestant Reformers both contribute to this fantastic idea of uncovering “a single, unchanging divine order” (77) that underlies the scientific quest for universal laws.

Schneider makes an important distinction between modern science as methodology, which is more flexible and potentially capable of accommodating multiplicity, and as ideology, which asserts and defends the unity of the cosmos as truth. The ideology of scientific truth applies a strict method of verification based upon the principles of simplicity (Occam’s razor) and non-contradiction: a phenomenon is either true or false. This process of verification is dualistic, and this dualism is a result of clinging so tightly to the logic of the One. Schneider later distinguishes between tool and truth in the context of Occam’s razor.
The need to overcome the empirical multiplicity of experience takes two forms, the designation of apparent contradictions to this unity as either errors in knowledge or errors in judgment. An error in knowledge is a strategy employed by the logic of the One to assert that any apparent contradiction will disappear as scientific knowledge grows. An error in judgment is a complementary strategy to force a shift in perspective to accommodate any perceived contradictions. Here is an important parallel to religious truth: an error in judgment is ‘solved’ by resorting to an inclusive oneness, whether in physics or religion. “From the proper distance, at least according to the ‘error in judgment’ strategy, all different religions represent paths to the same, and the differences ultimately resolve into sameness, at the proper distance” (85).

Ironically, the logic of the One is dualistic in practice, because it forces experience into the categories of true or false. Schneider begins this chapter with the assertion of “the dualism of One” and she comes back to it near the end. These dualistic strategies of the One applied to multifaceted experience have had enormous success in modern science and technology; however, “the true/false dichotomy also establishes limits to the social and religious imagination and sense of the queer possibilities for existence. And perhaps it limits access to divinity” (87). This last sentence is crucial, because it suggests that divinity is better accessed by multiple modes of imaginative attention to alternative possibilities for existence.

The reductive logic of the One excludes fundamental otherness. One way to get beyond this logic is to follow Luce Irigaray by “‘thinking the body,’ since, despite everything we try to do to control, repress, or compress them, bodies do prosaically tend to resist oneness” (88). At the end of the chapter Schneider returns to the problem of specifically
Christian oneness, and challenges us to think the Other without the One. Usually we project the other as the nemesis of the One, but if there is no One, how do we think the Other? How do we think multiplicity in terms of multiplicity? This is an extremely difficult task, but we can get a clue for its possibility by attending to the fact that the logic of the One inevitably betrays itself. This conclusion sets the stage for Schneider’s extraordinary reading of Dante in Chapter 7.

**Reflections/Questions:** I’m struck by both the simplicity and the complexity of Schneider’s thought here. On the one hand, as in earlier chapters, there is a sweeping, almost totalizing narrative that approaches caricature: monotheism=imperialism=Christian orthodoxy=Western science, all wrapped up in one and designated as ‘bad.’ At the same time, within this narrative she makes important and subtle distinctions, like between science as methodology vs. ideology, which complicate this narrative (I think Anthony referred to these as ciphers last week). I read this book last year too quickly, and appreciated it, but not as much as reading it more slowly now. I wonder if it’s too easy to slide across the surfaces of the book, without digging into its body and grappling adequately with its complexity?

Does Schneider move too quickly from modern to contemporary science? She barely acknowledges but does not treat counter-instances to the logic of the One in contemporary science, including relativity and quantum physics, but also chaos and complexity theories. She perhaps over-emphasizes the attraction of some physicists to the “theory of everything,” as well as the desire to reduce all things to the workings of sub-atomic particles or quarks. Her discussion of complementarity in relation to quarks on p.85 is a little misleading, since it was photons that exhibited wave/particle duality early
in the twentieth century. She could also reference the contemporary cosmological hypothesis of the “multi-verse,” or the idea of multiple universes, as well as the discovery of dark energy, which makes up over \( \frac{3}{4} \) of all the matter/energy in the universe. Are there more scientific resources to bolster her case for multiplicity?

I think one of the significant developments or sea changes of postmodernism is the awareness that there are as many if not more continuities between early and medieval European Christianity and the modern Western world as opposed to discontinuities, and certainly Schneider’s book here accentuates that continuity. This perspective seems to have become relatively pervasive, and I have asserted that we are in an age of counter-enlightenment, because the Enlightenment is rarely seen as a unique break. I wonder, however, whether we are in danger of going too far in the other direction, and losing some critical understanding of what precisely is unique about modernity and how it shapes who we are and how we think about ourselves. Specifically, I wonder about unity-in-multiplicity of modern capitalism, which Schneider does not explicitly discuss, and the extent to which the celebration of multiplicity/multiculturalism constitutes a mask to obscure the function of the unity of the market and/or globalization, as critics like Zizek and Badiou have pointed out. Specifically, in *The Clamor of Being*, Badiou argues that Deleuze’s celebration of the multiple occurs under the hidden sign of the One. I do not think that Schneider operates with a superficial notion of multiplicity, but I do wonder about how insidious and pervasive the logic of the One is. What specific form does it take under capitalism? Could multiplicity itself be another guise of the One.

*Beyond Monotheism — 7. When hell freezes over*
In this chapter Schneider really shows off her writing chops. On one level, the uncharitable reader might argue, this is due to the material. Hell is, after all, as much the writer’s delight as it is the sinner’s. If you cannot write rouge-lipped, florid prose about eternal damnation, you should stick to writing insurance actuarial documents or something. Ah, but that’s the great thing about this chapter. It is as though Schneider realized her crushing vision of science’s ideology of the One was on the verge of crippling her reader, and that we needed a breather. She, in essence, then, breathed in our exasperation at the really shitty hand we as inheritors of Christian ontology have been dealt, and in this chapter exhales fresh air — albeit, fresh air tinged with sulfur. (E.g., a sentence like “He has, one could say, removed the blinders on his mundane life and glimpses, through the porosity of dream, vision, and the poet’s pen a closely abutting world of difference” just kind of sings, no matter the context in which it is used.)

Here, to my absolute delight, Schneider turns her attention to Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*. Like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, *La Divina Comedia*’s place in Christian theology is a curious one. Both have long captured the popular religious imagination, even amongst those who have never read neither. Both epics are, by now, encoded in the Western Christian’s religious DNA, what for their poetic depiction of the sublime things people really care about, fallen angels, hellish torment, and heavenly splendor — about which the Bible is, in its best moments, mealy-mouthed. More to the point, though, both also have a curious way of undermining the orthodoxy that, with varying degrees of integrity and success, appropriated them. For her part, Schneider clearly and provocatively exposes the extent to which Dante’s epic, whether it was his intentions or
not, for what work of art can maintain its interpretive longevity purely on the back of where its author wanted it to go, resists this appropriation.

Schneider wastes no time in telling us where she intends her reading to take us:

Throughout the world, fables and parables have often borne the most startling and dangerous messages, wrapped in cloaks of poetry, art, and story-telling. In the case of Dante’s inferno, the difficult truth lies quite literally in the center of Hell, namely, that the metaphysics of absolute and eternal stasis on which the monotheistic doctrine of God is founded, is a lie. [emphasis hers]

The rest of the chapter is an impressively dense explication of the lie, and the shocking truth it perhaps doesn’t deny so much as it distracts us from.

Orthodoxy is right, she notes, in recognizing the tortures of Hell in Dante’s vision. The punishments meted out are deliciously appropriate to the choices the damned made while alive. Rude bosses, horrible neighbors, etc., they all get their comeuppance. Indeed, arguably the popularity of La Divina Comedia, throughout its long history, has been the ribald fun in identifying even ourselves amongst the damned — a dark, ironic exhortation of our own depravity. A You-get-what-you-deserve system (what Schneider calls “a vision of intimately embodied consequence,” another great turn of a phrase) is, in a way, kind of harsh, but it is not especially cruel. “What is unspeakably cruel,” Schneider notes, “is the unendingness of the consequence. Indeed, the theme of eternity is the only truly horrifying dimension of Dante’s journey through Hell.”

Schneider’s observation regarding Eternity is crucial. Contrary to popular thinking, eternity is not an indefinite extension of temporality — a timeline endlessly extending into the horizon. Rather, eternity is pure stasis, “devoid of change and so devoid of the
punctuations in sameness that temporality bestows on the living with such generosity.”

This is the horror of Hell’s punishments. Significantly, though, in Schneider’s reading the horror of Hell are ultimately indistinguishable from the promise of Heaven. This is because, in Dante’s vision, Heaven, residing deep in the bowels/the womb of Satan, is ultimately contingent on the stasis of Hell’s eternity — a (literally) chilling stasis, Schneider notes, that is manufactured by the billowing wings of God’s purported Adversary. Schneider writes:

The stunning assertion here is that Satan is the foundation of the universe. His position is pivotal not only as an axis in the world, but the hairy place where hip meets thigh is apparently the point upon which the edifices of Purgatory and Heaven—the whole realm and creation of God—are built.”

That this is a “profound critique of the metaphysics of Christian monotheism” is, I should say, a significant understatement. But, significantly, it is a critique that emerges from the very logic of Christian monotheism. If this is the case, summoning her best Altizerian Southern drawl, Schneider concludes: “God is Satan, who is the repressed body, mess, and worldliness of divinity.” (I should note, though, that while this is a very Altizerian sentiment, it is pretty obvious that Schneider is not reveling in this identification dialectically or apocalyptically.)

The upshot: those damned to the eternal reaping of what they sow in Hell, they are not the opposite of the placid, bleary-eyed citizens of Heaven bored-to-tears by their heavenly blessings. They are, rather, the repressed flip-side. The latter have been “liberated” from the body, and thus from the tortures of Hell; but at what cost and to what reward? Hell is, for Schneider, where Heaven’s disembodied repress all that is abnormal,
different, and, in short, particular about themselves: their race, class, sex, gender, desires, etc.

**Thoughts for Reflection:** For Schneider, the ice at the heart of Hell is both a metaphor for the “disease of stasis at the core of Christian metaphysics (and theology) and a dismantling of it at the same time.” She describes the disease quite well. But I wonder about the dismantling. She will unpack this in the remaining sections of the book, but one must wonder at this point whether the solution is primarily a product of knowledge or will. That is to say, is there power in knowing the lie around which monologic operates — is the lie still operational if nobody believes it, even if it is still told? Is there something to be said for maintaining the vestiges of a lie of our choosing, in light of the seeming recalcitrant currency of monologic? Or, and this is certainly the direction Schneider heads, is the solution more a matter of whether we have the will to, as it were, thaw out hell, and let Heaven be damned?

**Beyond Monotheism – 8. Starting the Story Again**

Schneider’s keen, subtle sense of narrative, of which Clayton made an astute comment a couple of days ago, is especially clear in this chapter devoted to the theological significance of narratives, of narrative’s significance to theology. Her resistance to the stasis of a frozen theological content, as discussed in last chapter’s reading of Dante, carries over starkly in her resistance to a kind of blinkered theological discourse so self-consumed that it, in effect, brackets out the the very stuff that constitutes its (theology’s) vitality and significance. “It is,” she writes, “past time for theologians, storytellers, and poets to listen again to each other and inspire one another. The disenchantment that the logic of the One now requires along with
various estrangements between belief, imagination, story, and credibility in the telling of Christian theology have weakened theology, particularly those theologies that have turned away from poetry, tears, laughter, and deep (or tall) tales.”

It is striking to note that theology, in Schneider’s presentation, is weakened most by its refusal of those elements of experience that highlight contingency, frailty, and error. In short, theology is most weak when its attempts at systematization are most rigorous and/or complete—when it (provisionally) attains the self-perfection toward which it traditionally strives.

A theology that separates myth and poetry from its so-called big questions (in her words, the “ontological engagement with divinity”) is weakened because it fails to own up to its place in the world from which it emerges. Such a theology might give lip service to “context,” with cosmetic and metaphorical tweaks here and there to make it more culturally palatable, but there is something disingenuous about a contextual/metaphoric adaptation that is uni-directional. Life, however, does not work like that: when A adapts to B, it is simply not the case that B remains wholly unchanged. Similarly, contextual adaptation and the implementation of metaphor, the very building blocks of narrative, change everything—from the storyteller to the audience. And, indeed, the stories themselves. Because once you admit to adaptation and metaphor, and thus to the telling of stories, they (and the stories they ride in on) all tend to mount endlessly—like when you lie, and find yourself creating lies on top of lies, even those that are only tangentially related to the original lie, which often has been largely forgotten. Adaptation speaks to an ever-growing (or, in Schneider’s preferred imagery, ever-deepening) stack of tall tales, where intention and ownership are not so much inconsequential as they as just another
story. Of course, in the view of theology held sway by the logic of the One, this is sufficient warrant to separate the promise of truth from the present reality of fiction. The One, Schneider emphasizes, echoing the previous chapter, like any good storyteller should, cannot countenance fluidity.

A value of a theology of multiplicity, she writes, is that it owns up the fractured, heartbreaking, amorous, and hilarious experience of being embodied in the world. Inasmuch as it is open to the old stories as stories (those of any religious tradition, not just Christianity), that is, stories that are to be repeated in such a way that leaves far more room for error and humility than dogmatic defensiveness, such a theology is capable of “help[ing] people to experience and to be open to the creating, loving, and evolving divinity that flows in the world…”

Schneider concludes her chapter with two “Tehomic” examples that highlight the fluidity of storytelling, and that illustrate the weakness inherent to pursuing strength.

**Thoughts for Reflection:** My thought for reflection here relates to the one from yesterday. Namely, to what extent does knowledge that the monologic of traditional theology rests on a repressed narrative somehow betray its repressive power (in defiance of the vulgar reality of this repressiveness)? Or, alternatively, if our hope to activate a theology of multiplicity rests in the will, that is, our will to be tellers of tales, does our hope lay in a critical mass of people doing so? And, if so, what does a community of infinitely unfolding tales actually look like? How do we prevent narrative improvisation from spilling into the incomprehensible stasis that is noise? The answer, I think, is a kind of trial-and-error—the stuff of more stories—whose successes are perhaps spectacularly momentary and fleeting—the stuff of legend.
Beyond Monotheism — 9. Thinking being? Or why we need ontology . . . again

There is not so much an argument in this chapter as there is a strangely defensive assertion that ontology is gravely important. Theologians, Schneider claims, have over the centuries become increasingly wary of making ontological claims about God (and thus, by extension, about reality). This is due in no small part to their inability of their brightest stars, from Aquinas to Schleiermacher, actually to prove the existence of God; but also because of the theologian’s increased cultural sensitivity to contradictory claims about reality, as well the emergence of philosophical theological models where the ontological reality of God is preferred suspended. Despite this aversion, ontology never quite left theology. Indeed, this is because ontology makes a claim on us, whether we be theologians, politicians, or plumbers. “Ontology is not a fusty matter for the bookish. It is a matter of import for everyone who lives—and dies.” All of us, even if it occurs on the “sub-atomic” level of our everyday consciousness, attend to ontological questions about what is real, what is false, what is of the highest value, etc. Importantly, these questions need not assume or lead us to God: “Although contrary to aphoristic wisdom, atheists do persist in foxholes, it is no mystery that times of great danger, hope, death, birth and uncertainty can pull back the covers on whatever ontological questions may have dozed through the routines of less fragile times.” Some of us, many of those who frequent this blog, find ourselves dwelling on these questions naturally. Others perhaps realize them stimulated by a piece of music or art. And still others discover the dormant questions articulated in the stories of others. We all, however, find ourselves inevitably, in the course of living and dying lives, asking
fundamental ontological questions. For this reason, Schneider reasons, precisely because it is so related to our embodied nature, i.e., because they arise most starkly in moments of crises, desire, etc. that break up the mundane patterns into which most people’s lives settle, a theology of multiplicity cannot help but concerned with ontology.

**Thoughts for Reflection:** I don’t know too many readers of this blog who are likely to disagree with her assertion. This may make her defense of theological ontology redundant for us, but for that no less passionately inspired. I was particularly taken by her description of what a theological ontology does, and found it a nicely succinct way of describing the task of theology: “Theological ontology that is rooted in lived religion seeks to bring an understanding of reality at its most extreme limits into narrative focus and comprehension, through story, ritual, and song. it concerns the big picture of origins, orientation, and ends that come into question for real people in situations of real uncertainty.” I take “that is rooted in lived religion” to describe theology that is not merely an intellectual game, something for which Schneider has expressed disdain in previous chapters. This is nicely put. But, in defense of theology-as-intellectual game, a hypothetical party-trick or sophistical drunken bar conversation that will not be recalled the next day, is it not also plausible that the claim ontology makes on us motivates, be it subconsciously or otherwise, even the most ironic theological inquiry? I wonder, that is, whether even the most disingenous theological inquiry implicitly ultimately pursues the same end that Schneider describes. I recognize the pitfalls in affirming this to be the case. Namely, it leads perilously close to affirming basically anything as theology—a circumstance, by the way, that is as much a loss as it is a gain for both theology and
disingenuousness. But, and this is just a thought, nothing I’m willing to die for here and now, perhaps this is just the cost of ontology.

**Beyond Monotheism — 10. Thinking multiplicity**

Schneider is really laying her cards on the table in this chapter, which provides a happy philosophical release from the anticipation built up by all the necessary but preliminary historical work in the first part of the book. Here she weighs in with appraisals, assessments, and expressions of solidarity. The basic question of the chapter is: how to think multiplicity and so work our way out of theology’s dead end?

I think some of Schneider’s greatness is revealed in this chapter, and it is a greatness of compilation. She puts together series of formulations that change the way theology is thought, and draws insights from a variety of backgrounds in order to apply them to old questions. She also takes steps towards putting together some canons of thinkers that we might not have put together otherwise. These tools of thought help us to see similarities and so new interpretations of their work.

And the first way in which we may think a logic of multiplicity in theology is to take the incarnation seriously (and the failure to do so are is apparently initiated by Pelagius and broken by Ruether). This means not just reflecting on what it was that took flesh, but also examining the implications of the fleshiness that became divinised. Schneider claims that the recent return of the body to theology allows us to see other sexualities as divine, God as in solidarity with the tortured, enslaved and oppressed, and the goodness of divine development (over against stasis). All these moves may awake in us an awe regarding the unprescribed mystery and potential of the body (and here she perhaps surprisingly draws
in Spinoza to provide the conclusion of these developments within liberation, process and feminist theology).

One major problem with the bodiless God is its lack of particularity. God becomes the fulfilment of everything in the abstract, but nothing in particular. As such the word God loses its power of reference to reality. It becomes removed and powerless. I found Schneider’s understanding of the body helpful here insofar as it did not fall into a dualism (as often) as other ‘body theology’ does: ‘divinity conceived as a primordial principle or a completion – even as a transcendent lure – can easily remain aloof to what makes particular bodies particular, namely their utter unrepeatability. With this avoidance of particularity by virtue of a summation of all particularities, the logic of the One remains intact and satisfied, if somewhat humbled.’ (pp140-1)

At the same time, the effort to think particularity is forever frustrated by the fact that in order to attain to particular people, events, characteristics (this dog, that day, this colour), you have to use general concepts that are shared with the rest of the world (this small brown dog, that day in September, this light blue). Schneider falls, with the early modern philosophers, on the problem of general ideas. But this very implication of the general in the particular leads us to an understanding of multiplicity. When we describe something particular, it is as if we wish to attain to a logical atom (and here her work does smack of Wittgenstein’s early desctruction of Russell’s misunderstood logical atomism), but the more detailed our analysis, the less we are able to distinguish between predicates and substantives.

Schneider follows this up with a brief (oh, so brief!) discussion of multiplicity among her continental canonical philosophers, Braidotti, Irigaray, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari,
Nancy, Badiou, and Baudrillard. Here she makes important elucidations of her thesis of multiplicity, whereby one is not subordinate to the many, the notion of number is necessary but not necessarily as built on the number one. She also aspires to write a logic of multiplicity, unwilling as she is to be marginalised to a dialect or idiom. This of course parallels her concern for ontology, and the last chapter’s resistance to leaving established ontologies in place.

The final section of the chapter sketches out a history of ways in which theology can and has thought ontologies of multiplicity, together with the accusations directed at the logic of the One since theology’s withdrawal from ontological debate with Kierkegaard and in response to Heidegger. The list of positive responses (which also act as motivations for thinking multiplicity) is a curious bag: firstly, physicists working after Einstein’s theory of relativity and Gödel’s incompleteness theory; secondly, thinkers reacting to the Eurocentric (and Pythagorean-inspired) tradition; thirdly, existentialist and phenomenologist theory who think ‘Multiplicity as the simultaneity and presence of unique becomings and passings away’ (p149); and fourthly, black, postcolonial, and white feminist psychoanalytic thinkers responding to the oppression of dark-skinned and female bodies.

Schneider closes by asking what ‘embodied thought’ might mean. One constructive suggestion is the non-demythologising interpretation of parallels. Instead of abstracting from Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God in order to ascertain some abstract lesson, she wants to take these life-stories as direct stories of what it actually is. To resist transferring the stories to some metaphysical context of bodiless bliss and to see the divine in life stories.
Thoughts for reflection: No doubt others are able to assess Schneider’s interpretation of Deleuze, Nancy and Badiou better than I. I found her attempts at getting beyond the dualisms of the logic of the One either only partially successful or over-ambitious. They were partially successful when she asks to focus on the “carnation” rather than the “in”, which of course re-instates the distinction. And this is one of the problems of any discussion of the body. Perhaps it is a merely pedagogical problem. They were over-ambitious when trying to retain a logic, but discard the true/false dualism and embrace ‘meaningful contradiction.’ It is certainly unclear what logic can be without those. However, her work on locally circumscribing theological characteristics and the ontology of the multiple was excellent.

Beyond Monotheism — 11. Divine Multiplicity …

And so we come to systematic theology. Schneider decided that she has to get down to God-talk, and do some doctrine. So this chapter has a bit of theory, followed by some constructive theology in two parts: firstly on water, and secondly on rock. God is fluid and porous. The notion of linguistic competence is in the background throughout. The theory is actually fairly familiar stuff for anyone used to reading constructive theology. She lays down the principle of metaphoric exemption at the beginning which is somewhere between apophatic theology and a theory of the indeterminacy of language: ‘everything we think or say, teach or proclaim, believe or catechize, is not God, not the Deep, not multiplicity, not enough.’ (p153, italics original)

She then starts to work her theology around the two poles of the greatness and the there-ness of God. That God evades our knowledge, but at the same time is known in the most familiar, intimate, and experiential moments of life. God is there. God comes. Schneider
calls this a contradiction: presumably one of experience rather than a logical contradiction. Whilst she doesn’t mention the terms, it is difficult to avoid being reminded of the puzzle of a transcendent/immanent God.

Knowledge about God is therefore cast back upon our local, particular forms of language and life. All our knowledge and life is a shared experience, and so knowing God is an attempt at developing fluency in theological talk and practice. Fluency rather than mastery: the ability to try out new formulations, assess their results and listen flexibly. Schneider wants us to be poets of the divine in the sense in which we can both experiment with and destroy our language.

She wants to preserve the open-endedness of God-talk, that makes it ever open to revision. Rather than being soothed into blessed assurance, we should be able to talk without self-assertion. Like adults. Which is why we need an image of God that is not static and reliable but dynamic and supple, open to transformation (and here she refers to the ways in which Theology has overcome challenges posed by the Copernican revolution by adaptation rather than resistance).

Such a theology is porous, it does not insist on its own boundaries. Just as our bodies and lives are not as self-contained as we would like to think (we moult, sweat, change shape and are regenerated), so there can be no hard and fast separation between God and the World. Which is not to say that they break down into each other, but that you can’t necessarily see the join, though you can make the reference. Difference is not static, but dynamic and ever-changing.

The ways in which we are in the world as non-monadic beings is in other ways reflected in God’s being-with the world. We know God through the flesh, and indeed Christian
theology must begin with the flesh, because without the fleshiness of the world, there is no God. Which is to say that to think divinity without incarnation is reductive theology, rather than a more fully transcendent theology.

**Thoughts for reflection:** in contrast to the last chapter, Schneider refers to her task here as a dialect rather than a logic of multiplicity, and this obviously reflects her concern with localised thought. In responding to the challenge of weaving together the skepticism of her metaphoric exemption with the chaos of experiential God-talk, she asks ‘Might divinity be responsive like an idiom, specific and local like a dialect? Might theology thereby articulate localized concepts, language, and practices of faith that assume postures of fluency rather than mastery?’ (p155) She contrasts this with the ‘Constantinian’ temptation to making a universal dialect (and presumably this would apply to all sources of authority too, including scripture). A beautiful advantage of this approach is the different implications a doctrine may have in the various dialects. A good example arises when she locally interprets the doctrine of immutability: ‘The God Who Does Not Change is the fantasy lover who will never age, never look away, never betray.’ (p157) Granted. But surely it is also a remedy to the fantasy of an infinitely pliable lover, who (like Pooh) always wants what I want? In conversation we may develop an even more particular and specified dialect, but one that aspires to be a language: one that can say no to despotic God-fantasies, like a logic.

**Beyond Monotheism — 12. …In a World of Difference.**

In many ways this chapter culminates Schneider’s theology of multiplicity, building on the previous three chapters, and then opening onto her final section on ethics. She argues here that the distinct characteristics of divine multiplicity, fluidity, porosity and
interconnection, enter into the world in particular places and times as a body. This embodiment or enfleshment is what she means by incarnation. What bodies and divinity both possess are heterogeneity—positive concrete differences. Anything that exists is intrinsically singular, distinct, unique, and it is unique as body. Divinity incarnates itself in and as heterogeneous body: “incarnation is a revelation of divinity-in-flux” (166).

Every body is absolutely different and irreplaceable, in ontological as well as in ethical terms. “Bodies become difference and so create the world” (167), and these bodies cannot be exchanged for each other according to any common standard of evaluation. Jesus represents an incarnation of divinity in a singular body, and his silence before Pilate is understood by Schneider as a refusal to submit his body to the standards of legal categorization, interrogation and justification. Ontology and ethics are encapsulated in stories, and stories are stories of bodies and their relationalities, which is an a-centered relationality (building upon but slightly distinct from Barbara Holmes’s notion of omnicentrality). Schneider draws from Deleuze a good deal in this chapter, including her petition of a logic of rhizomality for thinking about modes of relationality.

Stories, like the incredible stories told at the Pentecost about Jesus that occur in strange tongues but are understood by disparate listeners, make and unmake worlds, as she concludes (181), and these worlds are worlds of bodies that become differently, uniquely, by means of being incarnated divinity. There is an interesting relationship here between story and body, language and beings, which are not opposed, but intertwine in complex and significant ways. Schneider suggests that if we tell and hear the stories of Jesus better, “he becomes too particular to be Everyman but more and more a body of murky, intemperate flesh, refusing to disappear into the flattening regime of names, ranks,
classifications, and answers to charges” (175-76). We could say that story (when understood along the lines Schneider lays out) re-members body.

Jesus’s body incarnates divinity, but no more or no less than any body.

**Thoughts for Reflection:** (Why) would Schneider still claim to be Christian? Is Christianity committed to the singular uniqueness of Jesus’s body to such an extent that it excludes the divinity of other bodies? Of course, some liberal Christians have relativized Jesus and made him more of an example or a model rather than the divine itself, but what does Schneider get out of maintaining a Christian identity, if she does? Obviously Christianity is multiple and exceeds the logic of the One in many respects, but so is every religious tradition, right? Is there anything distinctive about the logic of Christianity that needs to be retained once you relativize and singularize body and multiply story in the way she has done?

There is a contemporary metaphysics of the body that Schneider is drawing upon, and it risks idealization of body as body, when bodies are read as intrinsically possessing modes of resisting their capture in ideas and concepts. It’s so easy to slide from body to signification, and Schneider cannot be charged with doing this in any simple manner, but I still worry about the tendency/temptation to inscribe bodies with our ethical values. We could say that bodies express themselves but then they are already in the mode of language. So then body and language are not opposites, but both are characterized by multiplicity over against the logic of the One. It’s a very subtle implication. I understand this largely in terms of Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*, where you have a series of language and a series of bodies, and the event is a kind of spreading of language to incorporate body in a way. But then Deleuze decides this is too structuralist, and he writes *Anti-*
Oedipus with Guattari and now the event is produced by desiring-machines, from below as it were. Is there a reason that for Schneider incarnation is more properly described in terms of body rather than Word? If body as body can be characterized as divine incarnation, then is divinity different from body before it takes on body, and if so, what is divinity prior to its embodiment?

**Beyond Monotheism — 13. A Turn to Ethics:**

**Beyond Nationalism**

Schneider begins this chapter, which signals the book’s final part, with an introductory “snapshot memoir” (185). This recounts her trip, just after graduating from college, to the German village from which her grandfather emigrated to the USA. Here she finds, inscribed on an obelisk, the conjunction: “One people, one nation, one God” (185). It is against this background that she commences discussion of the link between monotheism and nationalism. The connection that the natives of her ancestral village saw between monotheism and nationalism is all too common. We can understand why a theology critical of monotheism will be interested in applying the same criticism to the logic of nationalism. Thus Schneider remarks that “it is not difficult to see in nationalist feeling everywhere distinct elements of religious feeling, and in definitions of ‘the nation’ ambiguities similar to those inherent in doctrinal explanations” (186). Nonetheless, while theologians often observe the duplication of monotheistic sentiment in political ideologies, contemporary social scientists are less likely to return the favor. This is primarily due to the latter group’s allegiance to objectivity, which makes theological categories (such as “soul” or “spirit”) rather
unattractive. What is necessary is a “more flexible posture” (188) whereby the
problematics of religion and nation are understood to be imbricated in one another.
Schneider makes clear that the relationship she has in mind is one in which monotheism enables the imagination of national identity.

‘Monotheism’ is an umbrella term for the unitary logic that frames the cultural imagination of global leaders in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Supplying legitimation and weight to the moral economy of nationalism, it is a symbolic force of Ptolemaic proportion that could be said to be (but only with some irony) the founding ‘deep symbol’ of our time. (190)

Accordingly, breaking the spell of nationalism must involve breaking the spell of monotheism. But this is not easy, for these have become second nature to us, they have “worked for a very long time” (190). Perhaps we now see the dawn of an era in which they will no longer work, given movements of human population, globalization, and hybridity. Schneider, on one hand, wagers on the possibility that the emergence of these factors will make monotheistic nationalism obsolete. “As nations begin already to dissolve in the contemporary world of porous exchange there is an opening not only for a theology of multiplicity but for a politics of multiplicity as well” (194). On the other hand, she notes that this development is by no means automatic, that a labor of imagination is exigent. Only a combination, it seems, of historical shift and imaginative intervention can set forth a theopolitics of multiplicity.

It is important that a theopolitics of multiplicity propagate a peace that is positive rather than negative. Examples of the latter, in which peace amounts to the absence of war, can be found in both Roman and American imperial orders. Theopolitical multiplicity should
not be founded on the desire for security, which sacrifices the wilder edges, the anomalous, to order (note that this connects to the ethic of love advanced in the next chapter). Rather, it should aim to engender spaces where people can tell different stories and can imagine new ways of relating to one another.

Schneider’s insistence on these positive, differential encounters concludes her chapter, but I think it serves nicely as a way of looping back to her brief critique of Neo-Orthodoxy, which I will now mention. She has in mind here one who would protest that monotheism, properly understood, ultimately stands against nationalism. Rightly, in my mind, she invokes the most popular example of this critical monotheism—Barth against the Nazis. Whatever the ameliorative attributes made available by Barth may be, they are blunted by their residence in a framework whose spirit is one of intolerance and exclusion. It is the logic of George W. Bush, who claims that you are with us or you are against us, pick a side. Schneider cites Barth, who says, “beside faith in Him there are religions only as religions of superstition, error and finally irreligion” (193). Barth has shown his cards, he “slips into fundamentalism and a desire for the utter elimination of difference. This is the logic of the One at work, manifest even in the critique that radical monotheism is supposed to achieve” (193).

The point, I take it, is that radical monotheism must either refuse any iconic manifestation as falling short of the One, in which case it literally becomes meaningless, or allow one (which is to say: “One”) specific emergence of itself, in which case it becomes exclusivist and rejects multiplicity. As Schneider says: “For specificity to meet the demand of oneness, there can be only one specific revelation. The logic of the One insists that truth is one, and so the one revelation also sets the truth of divinity against all
falsehoods” (193). Neo-Orthodoxy thus imagines multiplicity, and the encounters that feed off of and engender it, as a realm of falsehood.

**Reflections/Questions:** I find the critique of Barth & Co. to be quite well-stated, and believe it is worth foregrounding. There is, in Barthian thought, a certain valorization of particularity (or specificity), and there is also a certain valorization of, let’s say, “exteriority”—i.e., God cannot be identified with x or y or whatever. But how does the relation between these valorizations function? Schneider shows that this relation does not substantively evade precisely what is problematic about a logic of the One. If she is right, and I believe she is, then a number of apparent theological innovations can be seen as inadequate.

Also, I think it might be intriguing to think further about the role of imagination. A work of imagination is clearly called for, but is there some way of providing an immanent evaluation of imagination?

**Beyond Monotheism — 14. A Turn to Ethics: Unity**

**Beyond Monotheism**

Schneider articulates straightaway one of the main concerns of the chapter: “A logic of multiplicity is not opposed to unity (the inclusive sense of One) or oneness (the exclusive sense of One), which means that divine multiplicity does not exclude either unity or oneness except in their absolute or eternal sense” (198). The fact that multiplicity opposes the One does not mean that it abandons any account of unity (or to use a more DeleuzoGuattarian term, “consistency”)—it is simply that multiplicity refuses to absolutize unity, to make it something that transcends and pre-exists the flux of existence. Thus oneness and unity “are proximal and partial aspects of the divine,” but
never “the ‘whole’ story of reality” (198). They are, one might say, the effect rather than the cause of reality.

To think in terms of unity or oneness is helpful and necessary, for when we fail to do so the world becomes senseless and overwhelming. Furthermore, a failure to think in terms of unity and oneness renders us incapable of appreciating individuals—each individual, while specific and contextual, is nonetheless “a kind of One-itself” (198). Schneider recognizes a certain tension here, given that she has constantly polemicized against the logic of the One, often in the name of the particular, inexchangeable individual, and that she now advocates the logic of the One as a condition of possibility for an inexchangeable individual. She thus makes clear that the object of critique is not a contingent form of unity, but rather the tendency to move from unity-within-fluidity to originary unity, a move that is occasioned when “the logic of the One mistakes the nominal, sanity-producing value of oneness and unity for ontology, for reality” (199).

She continues on in this direction, showing from a number of angles how oneness and unity can be helpful—for instance, the importance of “functional unities” (200) in peacebuilding efforts, the way that humans filter out certain smells, and the moment of recognition between Mary Magdalene and the post-resurrection Jesus in the garden outside the tomb. In short, a practical, as opposed to a metaphysically reified, account of unity and oneness is necessary, and in many ways helpful, and thus should not be precluded from an account of divine multiplicity.

The chapter, having accounted for the relevance of practical unities (at least when set against/within a background fluidity), then shifts rather noticeably to a call for an ethics that is “capable of navigating a shifting surface without collapse, capable of responding
to the velocity and gush of the embodied, real world” (202). Anticipating, perhaps, that some might discern an ineluctably antinomical structure within a call for promiscuity from within Abrahamic traditions—how can a God that stands against idols (recall Barth, in the last chapter, as an extreme version of this) achieve consistency with an ethics of plurivocal encounters?—Schneider contends that divine jealousy comes from humans rather than from the divine. After all, she notes, the command, “You shall have no other gods before me,” implies monolatry rather than monotheism. There are other Gods in play.

So she imagines it the other way around, in an intriguingly perverse Feuerbachianism: “What if the commandment, from within monotheism reflects not the jealousy of the Divine, but the jealousy of the people, a jealousy that naturally follows in the wake of the logic of the One?” (203) Here we should recall the very early chapters, where Schneider argued that the emergence of the logic of the One arises in light of traumatic experience and the need for security and/or certainty. Here we can see one of the payoffs of such a tale of origins. The same anxiety that engenders the logic of the One also makes us jealous of God. After all, God does not cease being multiple just because humans imagine God as One, so it makes sense to understand “divine jealousy” as in fact humans’ jealousy of God for being multiple. As Schneider says, “the people wish to control God’s promiscuous pursuit of lovers—of the world itself—and to somehow contain the very heart of God” (203).

The ethics Schneider suggests is one whereby people learn to imitate God’s promiscuous pursuit of lovers. Love means “being present” (204) to/in the multiplicity that is the world. She makes clear, following Bonhoeffer and Levinas, that such love “is grown-up,
and it is not cheap” (205). It is a kind of differential repetition of incarnation, for what love demands is a being present to the world in its excesses, making divinity inseparable from the contours of the world. I will leave the final word (at least the final word prior to my “relections/questions”!) to Schneider, whose expression is quite elegant:

“As the conceptual shape of divinity, multiplicity is therefore the embodiment of love. And love is what divinity is because love cannot be One, as Augustine realized. Love, necessitating the existence of others, of difference, gravity, and encounter, is the divine reality of heterogeneity even among those usually classed as ‘same.’ And love is the only commandment that is possible in a logic of multiplicity, because at its simplest level, ethical ‘love’ is the actualized recognition of the presence of others, acceptance of the dangerous gift of the world itself” (205).

**Reflections/Questions:** I love the love. That said, how does the discourse of intrinsically excessive love intertwine with the apparent impossibility of such love? (Schneider mentions Derrida, but does not engage the relevant paradox that Derrida saw in the impossible possibility of hospitality.) And how does an ethics of being present cohere with the constant making-absent that is necessitated by a logic of difference? Also, while I appreciate Schneider’s desire to provide an alternative account of oneness, I think it remains inchoate as it stands (which may of course be fine given the already wide-ranging—and successfully effected—aims of the book). Is oneness a pragmatic necessity that evades the reality of difference? Or is it somehow one aspect of reality? Is the goal to license a Kantian account of the phenomenal and noumenal, or a Deleuzian account of the actual and virtual, or (less likely) a Thomist account of the analogy of identity and difference, or something else?