

# NATURE, HISTORY, AND GOD: TOWARD AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUALIZATION

by *Gordon D. Kaufman*

*Abstract.* In this paper I attempt to bring the ancient symbol *God* into a meaningful and illuminating conceptual relationship with modern understandings of the development of the cosmos, the evolution of life, and the movements of human history. The term “God” is taken to designate that reality (whatever it may be) which grounds and undergirds all that exists, including us humans; that reality which provides us humans with such fulfillment or salvation as we may find; that reality toward which we must turn, therefore, if we would flourish. I suggest that the cosmos can quite properly be interpreted today in terms of two fundamental ideas: (1) a notion of “cosmic serendipitous creativity,” (2) the expression of which is through “directional movements” or “trajectories” of various sorts that work themselves out in longer and shorter stretches of time. In a universe understood in these terms, the symbol “God” may be taken to designate the underlying creativity working in and through all things, and in particular working in and through the evolutionary-historical trajectory on which human existence has appeared and by which it is sustained. The symbol “God” can thus perform once again its important function of helping to focus human consciousness, devotion, and work in a way appropriate to the actual world and the enormous problems with which men and women today must come to terms; but the ancient dualistic pattern of religious piety and thinking in which God is regarded as a supernatural Creator and governor of the world—so hard to integrate with modern conceptions of nature and history—is thoroughly overcome.

*Keywords:* cosmic process; cosmic trajectories; dualism; evolutionary process; God; human history; mystery; myth; serendipitous creativity; teleology.

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Over twenty years ago, I published an article entitled "The Concept of Nature: A Problem for Theology." In this article I attempted to show that running through the striking ambiguities, diversity of meanings, and internal tensions in modern Western concepts of nature, there were certain implicit all-embracing metaphysical claims that directly rivaled those made by the symbol "*God*." For this reason, I argued, a profound conceptual tension is unavoidably generated between naturalisms of all sorts and theisms, a tension which, I believed, could not be resolved or dissolved.<sup>1</sup> I now believe that I have found a way through or around the impasse described in that article, and in this paper I shall seek to sketch it.

## I

It is within the broad horizon of what may be called the profound mystery of human life that the meaning and interconnection of our concepts of natural patterns of order, historical patterns of order, and God should be explored. At its deepest level, we must say, human life confronts us as mystery (Kaufman 1993, chs. 4–5). We do not know, and we can see no way in which we will ever be able to plumb, the ultimate meaning of human existence—or whether there is such a thing as "ultimate" meaning. We humans have many questions about ourselves and our world: Are some forms or modes of life more "authentically" human than others? What is a truly "good" life, and how would one possibly know? Are there some identifiable central problems, or malformations, or diseases of human existence or the human spirit (sin) for which lasting solutions or cures (salvation) are available? Are some religious or philosophical or moral or scientific traditions of more value than others in addressing such matters, or are all in various ways both helpful and misleading, leaving us in a problematic relativism? Should the world, and human life within it, be understood most fundamentally with reference to "God," to "material energies," to "Brahman," to "life," to "Nirvana"? Or should we try to banish all such questions from our minds and live out our existence, so far as possible, simply in terms of the day-to-day questions and problems that confront us? This inscrutable mystery—or these many mysteries—of life provide the ultimate context of our existence. Paradoxically, thus, it is in terms of that which is beyond our ken that we must, in the last analysis, understand ourselves.

In our culture, this ultimate mystery of things has often been called *God*, but the symbol "God" has more definiteness and specificity than the concept of mystery. "God" is the name ordinarily used to

designate that reality (whatever it might be) which grounds and undergirds all that exists, including us humans; that reality which provides us humans with such fulfillment or salvation as we may find; that reality toward which we must turn, therefore, if we would flourish. The symbol "God," thus, leads us to attend to and reflect on the ultimate mystery of things in its aspect as that which creates, sustains, and enhances human (as well as other modes of) existence. How should we think today of this reality so important to human being and well-being? According to contemporary scientific and historical understandings, what actually creates and sustains human life are the physical, biological, and historical processes which provide its context; in my opinion it is with these matters, therefore, that a theological perspective for today should connect what it calls "God." The name "God" can take up and hold together these vast and complex processes in a distinct and powerful symbol that accents their meaning for human existence. As we seek to order our lives and activities in terms of this vision of human existence situated among many other realities in a vast ecosystem, the symbol "God" can focus our consciousness, devotion, and work, thus providing orientation and direction for the concrete everyday decisions and actions of life.

The symbol "God" has always functioned in this way, as the focus for a worldview (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 21-23). For example, in the biblical world-picture in which this symbol was given its most influential form, however much God's radical independence and self-subsistence were emphasized, God was not portrayed as a being whom humans encountered directly in its solitary splendor, a being to be understood entirely in and by itself. On the contrary, a central biblical theme was that no one ever has direct or immediate contact with or experience of God. Even Moses, through whom God is said to have made Godself known decisively, was not allowed to see God's "face," we are told, but only God's "back" (Exod. 33: 23), for no one can see "[God's] face . . . and live" (Exod. 33: 20). The inaccessibility of God is a theme that is frequently repeated; for example, Job, in the midst of his tribulations, seeks God for an explanation, but God is nowhere to be found:

Lo, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him. . . . Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him (Job 9: 11; 23: 8-9).

In the Fourth Gospel (John 1: 18) and again in I John (4: 12), we are told that "no one has ever seen God." For the biblical traditions in the main, God is simply not the sort of reality that is available to

direct observation or experience.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, subsequent theological reflection has taken this same line: It has held that all knowledge of God is analogical or symbolic; that is, it is never unmediated or direct but is based on likenesses drawn from ordinary objects of experience.

God-talk has not developed, then, on the basis of direct perceptions or experiences of the divine being itself, but rather in connection with a *world-picture* which was constructed by the human imagination over many generations, a picture in which the dominant active power was seen as a creator/lord/father ruling from on high. With the help of this symbolic focus, believers' imaginations could bind everything in their world together into a meaningful whole within which all life's vicissitudes would have a proper place and significance. And the image of the creator/lord/father provided an ample focus for human devotion, meditation, and service, a focus to which women and men believed they could give themselves without reservation. The meaning of the idea of God derived principally, thus, from its employment as the symbolic center and focus for this overall world-picture, not from direct encounters, which some women and men had from time to time, with a superhuman being.

This monotheistic world-picture is essentially *dualistic*: It employs materials drawn from our human experience within this world to speak of an *other* world. In so doing, it presents to humans who are on this side of the great divide in reality what is important that they know about the *other* side.<sup>3</sup> This idea of an "other world" or "other side"—the idea of a Most Important Reality outside this world in which we live and have our experience—leads us to imagine and speak of things which, though totally inaccessible to us, we nevertheless come to believe we know a good bit about. In the biblical stories, we are told much about God, and about what God does; but of course the only basis we have for this information is the stories themselves—these myths created by the human imagination thousands of years ago. Rudolf Bultmann's proposal that we demythologize stories of this sort, by dropping their time-bound details in order to get at their profound existential significance, really does not address the most fundamental issue which they pose; for he seems to retain the idea of the "other side"—another reality outside this life, this world of our experience—which is more important than anything on "this side," since it is the real foundation of life and its meaning. That is, he retains the fundamentally *dualistic* presupposition on which the traditional understanding of God and the world is founded (though he wishes to drop many of the more incredible details of particular stories). It is, however, precisely this dualism that

is the most problematic feature of this product of the human imagination.

We should, in my view, go much further in our reconception of God and the world than has Bultmann, by refraining from postulating an “other side” or “other world” at all. There seems no good reason for such a postulate—except that this is the way these ancient myths, regarded as authoritative in our religious traditions, spoke. I maintain that since we now can see that such stories—including the dualistic way in which they present the context of human life—are all creations of the human imagination, we should today undertake our own imagining; but we should do this in a critical fashion unavailable to the ancient prophets and poets, a fashion informed and disciplined by modern scientific and historical knowledge and philosophical reflection (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 2–3). In particular, we should, when we today construct conceptions and pictures of humanity, the world, and God, acknowledge that we are in a position to speak only in terms of *this world*, of the realities of *this life*—making as clear as possible the respects in which what we say has a firm basis in our experience and knowledge, as well as the respects in which it is an imaginative elaboration and interpretation. In all of this, of course, it is important that we keep in view the fact that our “knowledge” of this world in which we live, and all the realities within it, always shades off into ultimate mystery, into an ultimate unknowing. (In bringing in our awareness of the ultimate mystery of things in this way, I am seeking to retain what is valid in dualistic ways of thinking, without falling into their fallacies.)

The sharp dualism characteristic of virtually all traditional theological thinking stems principally from the importance given to the creator/creation distinction in defining the relation of God to all other reality. In this paper, I shall try to show that if we develop our conception of God in terms of the idea of *creativity* (cf. Bergson, Alexander, Whitehead, Wieman) instead of the idea of “creator,” we will not only be able to address the paradoxical dualism of God and the world, but we will throw some light on the complex conceptual issue of the interconnectedness of history, nature, and God as well. I will present a conception of what I call a “serendipitous” creativity manifest throughout the universe, bringing into being the new and the novel—whether, from human and humane perspectives, this leads to what appear to be horrifying evils or great goods (see Kaufman 1993, ch. 19). The picture of a powerful teleological movement underlying and ordering major cosmic and historical processes—to which the symbolism of an agent-God (in our religious traditions) gave rise—

has become quite problematic in the twentieth century; I shall replace it with the much more modest conception of “directional movements” or “trajectories” that emerge in the course of evolutionary and historical developments (see Kaufman 1993, ch. 20).

This more open (even random) notion of serendipitous creativity expressing itself in evolutionary and historical trajectories of various sorts represents more accurately, I believe, much that has occurred as these processes have actually unfolded. It can be extended, moreover, to cover the enormous expansion and complexification of the physical universe (from the Big Bang onward), which preceded the evolution of life here on earth and was the condition of its possibility. I suggest that it would not be inappropriate, thus, to speak of the whole vast cosmic process as manifesting (to some degree) serendipitous creativity. It is a process that has often produced much more than one would have expected, given previously prevailing circumstances; indeed, more than might have seemed possible—even moving eventually, along one of its lines, toward the creation of history and historicity.

No coercive proof, of course, can be provided that the universe is a serendipitously creative movement; to take such a position, therefore, involves a kind of step of faith. Since this notion can, however (as I shall attempt to show), be quite useful in helping to orient human existence today, I propose that—as a tentative preliminary step of faith (and toward faith) in God—we agree (for now) to think of the overarching context of human life, the universe, as a serendipitously creative process or movement (for the concept of “steps of faith” see Kaufman 1993, ch. 17). I also propose that with that in mind, we consider the significance of the fact that this creativity is the source of both the richness and fullness of our human existence and of the continuing context and sustaining environment which makes it possible. We men and women are the only living beings (so far as we know) who can deliberately and self-consciously set purposes for ourselves, and can deliberately and self-consciously work toward their realization. That is to say, in and through and with us, activity that is straightforwardly intentional or purposive—explicitly teleological activity—has become operational within the world. What does this imply about the evolutionary process which has brought us forth; and ultimately, what does this imply about the world?

## II

To begin to answer this question, let us take note of some important characteristics of the evolutionary process. First, we may observe that

movement in and through time, as we trace it through the long history of the universe and particularly through the evolution of life on earth (as we now understand these matters), seems to be irreversible and in this respect unidirectional (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 19–20). That is, although many whirls and eddies and detours appear in cosmic and evolutionary development, and many cycles of night and day, of seasonal change, and of birth, growth, and decay are to be found here on earth, there seems to be an essentially continuous movement onward toward new forms, toward unprecedented developments—not simply patterns which forever repeat themselves. Moreover, these new developments, to the extent that they involve the appearance of new evolutionary lines (i.e., new species), each have specific potentialities for developing further in some directions but not in others. Such tendencies, as Ernst Mayr says, “are the necessary consequence of the unity of the genotype which greatly constrains evolutionary potential” (Mayr 1988). To the extent that a new evolutionary tendency enables a new species to adapt to its environment more successfully than its predecessors, a certain momentum of development in a particular direction is set up; and increasingly effective adaptation may appear over successive generations, leading to the emergence of further new species. From our human standpoint, well aware that more complex species have emerged as the evolutionary line has developed further, there may seem to be a kind of trajectory here toward such forms. This appears, however, only from a retrospective viewpoint, and there is no reason (from a biological perspective) to suppose that the process is actually directed, somehow, toward this specific goal, or toward any other goal, for that matter. The processes of natural selection, it appears, can of themselves bring about directional movements along the various lines down which life evolves; and thus time, in the evolutionary process, seems to take on an increasingly linear and directional character.<sup>4</sup> This becomes evident also from another side: When living forms which have emerged become extinct, as many, if not all, eventually do, they do not reappear again at some later point, but are forever left behind. Cosmic time, then, to the extent that it is to be understood in light of evolutionary processes continually branching out and developing in many different directions, is (in certain respects) irreversible, creative of the new, and in that sense linear and unidirectional.

Second, evolutionary development here on earth has not stayed on a level plane. It is not entirely incorrect to see some of the momentums set up by natural selection to be moving toward what (from our anthropic perspective) appear to be “higher” forms;<sup>5</sup> along one line

(our own), such movements have given rise to what is actually a new order of reality—history. We must be very careful about what we say at this point. It is not that the evolution of life has been a sort of straight-line development, up from the primeval slime to humanity. Obviously, that is a misleading image: Evolutionary developments (as we have been noting) have gone in many different directions. Most of these lines have died out, although some have achieved a basic equilibrium with their environment and have thus become stabilized. Moreover, it is not evident that the human form is as biologically viable as are, for example, some insects. So, from a strictly biological point of view (which emphasizes survival, perpetuation of the species), there is little reason to think that human life is the most successful product of the evolutionary process.

However, here we are not taking a strictly biological point of view: We are concerned, rather, with our profoundly human need to find a way to orient ourselves in life and the world. For us, therefore, it is of considerable significance that the human sociocultural order (which, for convenience, we will designate here with the label “history”) has emerged within (or out of) the order we call “life.” The order of history, with its high development of cultures and modes of social organization—within which appear beings with creativity, freedom, self-consciousness, and responsible agency, beings with “historicity”—cannot be understood simply in terms of such notions as nutrition, metabolism, reproduction, and the like. Hence, although historical being is in important respects but one among many forms of living being, in some significant ways it can be regarded as having moved beyond the strictly biological and become a distinctly new order of reality.

Beings with “historicity”—fully *human* beings—did not appear simply as the last stage of a long biological process (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 8–9). It was only after many millennia of distinctly *historical* development (to be distinguished from further biological evolution, though it was interwoven with the latter) that human existence as we presently think of it really came on the scene. Clifford Geertz sums up what occurred in this way:

As our central nervous system—and most particularly its crowning curse and glory, the neocortex—grew up in great part in interaction with culture, it is incapable of directing our behavior or organizing our experience without the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols. What happened to us in the Ice Age is that we were obliged to abandon the regularity and precision of detailed genetic control over our conduct for the flexibility and adaptability of a more generalized, though of course not less real, genetic control over it. To



supply the additional information necessary to be able to act, we were forced, in turn, to rely more and more heavily on cultural systems—the accumulated fund of significant symbols. (Geertz 1973, 49)

The beings that we humans now are, thus, are quite as much a product of long and complex historical and cultural developments (going in significantly different directions in different parts of the world) as we are of evolutionary biological processes. Moreover, it is only from the particular *historical* standpoint of late modernity that this biological-historical movement eventuating in contemporary humankind has become perceptible. As we look back now over this gradually cumulating evolutionary and historical development, the outlines of a kind of cosmic “trajectory” moving toward the creation of beings with significant historical powers, beings with historicity, may begin to come into view (see Kaufman 1993, ch. 20). (There are, no doubt, many other cosmic “trajectories” as well, moving in quite different directions.) It is important to be clear that (in keeping with our observations thus far about biological evolution) neither the “creative advances” nor the “directionality” visible in this trajectory need be attributed to some causative power pushing evolution and history forward toward a particular goal. But however that may be, from where we stand with our anthropic interests and modern values, it would be strange indeed were we not to affirm the forward movement of this trajectory as *good*, to be valued (at least by us). And in connection with this, we may well wonder whether there might not be some sort of movement or tendency in the ultimate nature of things which encourages the emergence of ever higher and more complex forms of being (even though there is, of course, no strictly *scientific* warrant for such a notion).

If we take an affirmative position on these questions, we do not need to view the long upward march visible in our line of the evolutionary process as due entirely to chance, whatever role chance genetic variations and other physical and biological conditions of extremely low probability might have played in its occurrence. The trajectory eventuating in the creation of human historical existence would be seen, rather, as a significant expression of the serendipitous creativity manifest in the cosmos as a whole; and thus the appearance of human modes of being in the world would be properly regarded not as a metaphysical surd, but rather as grounded in the ultimate nature of things, in the ultimate mystery. Such a view clearly requires an act of faith that goes beyond the general affirmation of pervasive creativity in the universe (our initial step of faith). This is not, however, as uncommon among intellectuals these days as one might at first suppose. All speculation about, and search for, intelligent life

in other parts of the universe rests on precisely this assumption—that there is something in the world which is everywhere pressing toward what we have here been calling “historicity”; and we may, therefore, if we search long enough and carefully enough, eventually uncover some signs of such highly complex forms of life in regions far removed from planet earth. Whither the particular trajectory culminating in historicity on our planet will move in the future, we do not, of course, know—perhaps toward the opening of ever new possibilities for human beings, as we increasingly take responsibility for our lives and our future; perhaps going beyond humanity and historicity altogether, however difficult it may be to imagine what that might be; perhaps coming to an end in the total destruction of human life.

I am suggesting that with the introduction of two basic ideas, we can develop a conceptual framework which will enable us to interpret the evolutionary cosmos in which we live in a way that will assist us in finding our place in the world. The two basic ideas are: (1) the notion of cosmic serendipitous creativity, which (2) expresses itself through trajectories of various sorts that work themselves out in longer and shorter stretches of time. According to this interpretation, the universe displays (throughout the evolutionary process) directional movements, trajectories which—when viewed retrospectively from our late twentieth-century standpoint—seem in some respects prototeological. Moreover, with the emergence of historical modes of being, genuinely teleological patterns appear in the world, as human intentionality, consciousness, and purposive action begin to become effective.

Thus, just as physical energies and vital dynamisms in individual human beings gradually become sublimated and transformed through processes of socialization and enculturation into strivings of and toward spirit—that is, toward ideal values such as truth, beauty, and goodness—so also cosmic trajectories, which have their origins in what seem to be mere physical movement or vibration, may (in some instances) gradually develop increasing directionality, ultimately creating a context within which deliberate purposive activity can emerge.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that we are able to regard the existence of us humans, of our historical and purposive mode of being, as a significant clue to or sign of the direction of at least one important trajectory on which the serendipitous creativity working through all things is moving, we begin to discern a metaphysical grounding for the human spirit—for its aspirations, projects, and prospects—in the ultimate nature of things, the ultimate mystery. Talk of this sort, of course, is often scornfully rejected. If we choose to read the evidence positively, however, we move a step toward an understanding of

human existence as having significant meaning in the cosmic scheme of things—i.e., a step toward what faith in God has meant; for faith in God has always involved affirmation of the meaningfulness of human life.

Our two metaphors (“trajectory” and “serendipitous creativity”) taken together point up rather well the character of our historical existence as a process which is in many respects directional—even quasi-teleological—but which has a creativity working within it that remains deeply mysterious to us. The notion of serendipitous creativity taken simply by itself is much too open and random to illumine satisfactorily either the full significance of the emergence of historical forms of order out of biological, or the overall movement of human history itself. To use the idea of teleology to interpret this development, however, is to suggest a process too unswervingly and unqualifiedly goal-oriented to be plausible any longer (this is a major problem with nineteenth-century notions of progress, as well as with traditional conceptions of the sovereignty of God). In this respect, the somewhat vaguer notion of trajectories (directional movements) has significant advantages for a contemporary understanding of the world and of human life; and these two concepts taken together thus generate a way of conceiving the world within which one can meaningfully ask how human life should be oriented today.

The import of this can be shown briefly by mentioning five points. First, this approach provides a frame within which we can characterize quite accurately, and unify into an overall vision, what seems actually to have happened, so far as we know, in the course of cosmic evolution and history. Second, it gives a significant, but not dominant, place and meaning to the distinctive character of human life and history within this cosmic process. Third, this approach can therefore provide a basis for developing general principles of interpretation in terms of which communities (and individuals) can attempt to understand both the biological context of their lives and the historical developments through which they are living, thus orienting them in a manner which should encourage their taking responsible roles with respect to these contexts and developments. Fourth, this is an approach which, because of the significance it gives to humanistic and humane values within the cosmic order as a whole, can provide a ground for hope (though not certainty) about the future—a hope about the direction of human history and a possible movement toward a new humanity living in a new age. Finally, fifth, a hope with a cosmic grounding of this sort—even though carrying much less assurance than traditional religious expectations of the coming of God’s kingdom—can help to motivate women and men

to devote their lives to bringing about this more humane world to which we all aspire.

This frame of orientation or vision of reality is not, of course, in any way forced on us: It can be appropriated only by means of our own personal decisions, our own acts of faith; it will provide orientation for us only as we decide to commit ourselves to it, ordering our lives and building our futures in the terms it prescribes.

### III

Is it possible, now, to connect this interpretation of the cosmos more directly to our central inherited religious symbol, "God"? To answer this question we must ask ourselves about the role(s) the symbol "God" has played in the traditional monotheistic picture of the world and of humanity in the world. What does this symbol add to, and how does it otherwise qualify, the ideas of the world and of humanity, thus giving theocentric frameworks of orientation for human life their distinctive character? To put this in somewhat different words: For those living within a monotheistic world-picture, how does the image/concept "God" provide significant meaning and orientation for life? Surely it does not serve merely to answer such speculative questions as, Where did the world come from? or, Is there an ultimate power behind everything, and if so, what is it? What else, then, does it do? My summary answer to these questions is this: For those living within a theocentric worldview, *the symbol "God" focuses human devotion and activity in a way intended to orient human existence on that which is believed to bring human fulfillment (salvation)* (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 21 and 23). For this reason, it is the principal focus for consciousness, devotion, and service, providing overall orientation and guidance for human life. For this reason also (for those with faith), God provides a kind of ultimate security in life, profound consolation in moments of deep sadness, healing in situations of despair. God, that is to say, is regarded as that reality—and the symbol "God" is therefore taken to express that complex meaning—to which each person must give herself or himself, and on which communities must orient themselves, if human life is to gain wholeness, meaning, salvation.<sup>7</sup> I want to suggest now that the symbol "God" can, in important respects, focus and concentrate the evolutionary-historical conception of the world which I have been presenting here, while simultaneously relativizing it; and in this way it can continue significantly to orient human existence in the cosmic scheme of things and help motivate human life effectively.

What kind of focus—what sort of symbol or concept—is needed

today for the orientation of men and women in life? The concept of the universe taken by itself, of the evolutionary-historical process as a whole, cannot provide this; nor can the notion of the ultimate mystery of things. The one presents us with such enormously complex patterns and such multiplicity of detail that it can scarcely be grasped by our limited minds; the other is so vague and amorphous in its meaning that it can tell us nothing specific about what we should be or do. Moreover, since both of these notions are intended (each in its own way) to be inclusive of everything, neither can provide us with clear norms or criteria for making choices; for decisions always involve giving preference to some things over others—to some possibilities, some forms of life, some persons or loyalties or causes. Neither the concept of mystery nor the concept of the world can be of much help, then, in guiding our day-to-day decisions or providing direction for our lives as a whole.

What we need is a symbol that can draw upon both our understanding of the world and our awareness of the ultimate mystery of things in a way that holds before our minds in sharp synoptic focus what is essential for the orientation and guidance of life today. Such a symbol will have a double bearing: (1) on those dimensions of the serendipitous evolutionary-historical process to which we need to attend as we seek to identify and address the major problems and evils with which life today confronts us, which can assist us, thus, in the practical decisions of day-to-day life as well as provide us with overall orientation in today's world; and (2) on the questionableness, the problematic character of all our attempts to provide ourselves with adequate orientation in life, the danger of giving ourselves over too completely and too uncritically to these values, meanings, and conceptions of life and the world, all of them having been constructed by finite humans like ourselves.

The image/concept of "God"—properly reconstructed—can provide both these desiderata. For this symbol, more than any other in our language, has ordinarily represented, on the one hand, that which gives us humans our being and continues to sustain us in being, which heals our diseases and brings us salvation from evil, that in relation to which women and men finally find fulfillment; but that which, on the other hand, must ultimately be acknowledged as mystery. It holds together before the mind—in a unified complex of powerfully evocative images and concepts—those values and meanings, criteria and norms, which can orient men and women in the world and motivate them to address their most pressing problems while simultaneously alerting them to the questionableness and necessary tentativeness of all their this-worldly commitments. It thus

provides a focus or center for consciousness, devotion, and work, which can draw all the diversity and multiplicity of life—indeed, of the entire world-process—together into a coherent pattern or order or unity in terms of which the concrete decisions of daily life can be made. The symbol “God” calls us today to seek out and consciously attend to that—in the evolutionary and historical processes that provide the context of human existence as we understand it—which gives us our humanity and which will draw us on to a more authentic humanness.

Humanity evolved beyond its animal origins as it grew into self-consciousness and gradually acquired the ability to participate in its own further development, through creating practices and imagining idealized conceptions which communities and individuals could employ to order their lives. Many sorts of symbolical focusing and ordering of human life have appeared in the enormously variegated cultural and religious traditions that women and men have created. It is not the case, however, that choices among these alternatives must be completely arbitrary. Concepts and images—foci of attention and devotion—which tend toward a freezing of further human development, which lead to the creation of rigid, unchangeable patterns of selfhood and social structure and thus stultify further humanization, are clearly undesirable. In contrast, images and concepts which orient and order human life in ways that open up our possibilities for realizing more fully our human historicity—which augment our powers of creativity and freedom and the capacity to take responsibility for ourselves and our world—help to promote the creation of women and men as free and responsible persons; that is, they contribute to our further humanization, and thus to the forward movement of the human evolutionary-historical trajectory (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 10, 13, and 14).

With these considerations in mind, we can see the importance of the emergence of the image/concept of God in ancient Israel. This was a symbol that (1) provided a sharp and distinct focus for human consciousness, devotion, and activity; and (2) provided a focus which, through orienting humans on an image of powerful moral agency outside themselves (God), drew them beyond themselves toward higher reaches of freedom, self-understanding, responsibility, historicity. If God is appropriately reconceived today, such devotion can continue to be an important element significantly promoting the further development of humanness and humaneness within history, and thus a fuller and truer historicity. With respect to our concerns here, the primary importance of the symbol “God” derives from its capacity to provide a powerful focus for human

consciousness and devotion which can help orient human life toward the potentialities latent in our historicity.

I cannot develop this in detail here, but I would like to mention three points in this connection. First, because of the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric features which have characterized this symbol (as it has developed in Western cultural and religious history), it has provided a vision of the human and of the humane—of justice, righteousness, love, etc.—which could (and often did) become significantly normative in the reflection and action of men and women, and in the ideologies and institutions to which they devoted themselves. Second, these humanizing ideas and ideals helped to generate interpretations of what was going on in the surrounding events and movements of history that bore on issues of further humanization and humanness. Third, because the symbol “God” had normative significance (on the one hand) and made ontological claims (on the other), it could perform important relativizing functions in human life: Since it signified that which underlay and expressed itself through the entire world-process—the ultimate mystery of things—and was therefore not of merely local importance to human beings, it provided a point of reference in terms of which all human values, meanings, concepts, judgments, activities, practices, and institutions could be called into question, assessed, and reconstructed.

Can the symbol “God” bring our modern picture of the world to a focus capable of significantly orienting human life in a similar way today? The world, I have suggested, is a serendipitous process that has produced a variety of trajectories, one of which has brought into being the historical order, and which may be continuing on in further creativity. This trajectory (on which humanity finds itself) appears to be at least one significant direction in which the cosmic process is moving, and we humans are being drawn beyond our present condition and order by this ongoing creative movement; but if we fail to respond appropriately to the historical and ecological forces now impinging upon us, we may not even survive. *God*, I now propose, should be understood as the underlying reality (whatever it may be)—the ultimate mystery—expressing itself throughout the universe and thus also in this evolutionary-historical trajectory culminating (to date) in human historicity.

In this interpretation, the anthropomorphisms (essentially idealized human characteristics) which our traditions have ascribed to God become transmuted into an idealized conception of human historicity; and this is taken to be the key in terms of which the direction of the cosmic-historical trajectory on which we find ourselves is

understood. But this anthropomorphic dimension of the symbol is limited and constricted by the motif of God's "absoluteness" or "transcendence," which is appropriated (in this conception) in our awareness that the ultimate meaning of this whole cosmic process—where it is going and what its ground is—is beyond us and will never be accessible to us. Thus, the symbol "God" (as conceived here) holds two motifs together: God's connection with our humanness and our struggle for humaneness (the vision of a cosmic-historical trajectory moving toward a more idealized historicity); and God's "transcendence" of everything human (the irreducible mystery of things). Further, it holds them together in a way which enables us to understand and respond to this ultimate ground, source, and directionality in the cosmic process as that which creates and sustains our humanity and undergirds our further humanization. Devotion to God here is significantly humanizing because it promotes orientation on that which (1) draws us beyond what we presently are toward an existence more truly humane and better attuned to the environment in which we live; and (2) helps break our parochial and destructive idolatries, enabling us to become centered on the cosmic-historical movement which has actually given us our being and is drawing us toward greater humaneness and greater ecological sensitivity (see Kaufman 1993, chs. 22–24).

The symbol "God" as here construed can perform and hold together a number of functions which are important to the proper orienting of human life in the world as we know it today (all of them to some extent visible in the ancient imagery of the creator/lord/father, which initially gave it definition). These functions include: First, giving profound meaning to human life and its tasks—summed up here in the concepts of humanizing, historicity, and humaneness—which are taken to be grounded in the divine creative activity; second, providing believers with identification and interpretation of what is of genuine importance to human existence in both the natural world and the historical developments around them, through seeing the trajectory toward humanization and historicity as God's activity; third, relativizing, and thus providing critical leverage upon, every aspect of our pictures of humanity, the world, and God, through emphasizing that these are all grounded beyond what is visible to and imaginable by us—that is, in the ultimate transcendent mystery, in the God whom "no one has ever seen" (John 1: 18). If the symbol "God" is interpreted as identifying and holding together in one the ultimate mystery of things and the serendipitous creativity at work in the world (particularly as it has expressed itself both in the evolutionary-historical trajectory on which humankind has appeared



and in our interconnection with the web of life that environs us), it can continue to provide a proper focus for human devotion, meditation, and work.

With the image/concept of God, we humans attempt to symbolize that which grounds our humanity, that which makes possible our very existence even while driving us, or drawing us, beyond what we now are. On the one hand, thus, the word God stands for something *objectively there*, a reality over against us that exists whether we are aware of it or not: We did not make ourselves; we were created by cosmic evolutionary and historical processes on which we depend absolutely for our being. On the other hand, however, the word "God" functions as a symbol within our minds, in our self-consciousness as beings who are not entirely made from without, but who significantly contribute to our own creation, shaping and forming ourselves in accordance with images and symbols to which we are devoted. This self-making through devotion to idealizing images is central to our historicity and significantly distinguishes us from all other animals. As a focus of devotion, this unifying symbol can bring order and meaning into the whole of life, providing values which facilitate the assessing, disciplining, and transforming of both communities and individual selves. Thus, it is precisely through its functioning *subjectively*, in and through our minds—that is, as a focus for consciousness, devotion, loyalty, and sacrifice—that the symbol "God" has important *objective* effects, that it becomes a powerful incentive toward and support for the emergence of full historicity in individuals and communities.

#### IV

If we do not take the name "God" to refer to a literally existent being, why continue to use it? Why not just speak of "cosmic and historical forces" working toward humanization and ecological order? The symbol "God" has served as a focus for worship and for orientation in life for many centuries. In focusing our attention and devotion with the aid of this symbol, thus, we are associating ourselves with those many generations of women and men—and with those ancient religious communities—for whom it similarly evoked and focused commitments to a humane and responsible ordering of life. We make clear (both to ourselves and to others) that we do not regard ourselves as a generation basically disconnected from our forebears; we see ourselves, rather, as participants in an ongoing history and community (a historical trajectory), the values, priorities, and commitments of which have shaped our own, and from which, in fact,

most of our beliefs about the importance of the personal and the humane and the responsible have come. The principal focus for devotion and loyalty avowed by this ancient community from which we come, and of which we are also a part, was God. When we commit ourselves to God today, we acknowledge all this by accepting the central symbol of this community as our own, and by confessing our desire to associate ourselves with this history and to enhance its strength in the modern world—as we all move onward into a future which seems likely to be increasingly dominated by antihuman and antiecollogical values and styles of life. It seems doubtful that there will ever be a worldwide community, cutting across all classes, races, and human conditions, which is grounded on and committed to the idea of “cosmic and historical forces” working toward humanization and ecological responsibility; that conception is much too abstract and intellectual to be able to generate universal interest and support. To commit ourselves to *God*, however, is to express just such a stance and loyalty by means of a symbol which is capable of drawing together and unifying persons of differing degrees of sophistication in all walks of life.

When we use the symbol “God” (and not just the concepts of “cosmic and historical forces”), our attention and understanding are focused in a particular and distinctive way: “God,” as a proper name, does not lead us to think in terms of a miscellany of forces that somehow accidentally combined so as to throw up human existence on this planet some time in the past; instead, it focuses our minds so that they will grasp as significantly unified and of existential import to us what we might otherwise take to be simply diverse processes and powers. What justification can be offered for this sort of focusing of our attention and understanding? Human selves—with their historicity, consciousness, and freedom—are centered beings, beings that can act. As far as we can tell, this centeredness did not simply appear completely unaccountably one day; rather, it came about through a gradually cumulating biological/historical process. That is to say, the creativity which produced us expressed itself through an evolutionary-historical trajectory in which both directionality and centeredness seem steadily to have increased; and in due course, an organism was produced which was capable of sustaining symbolic activities of sufficient complexity to make possible self-consciousness and responsible action. When we use the name “God” now to identify this trajectory, we are led to focus our attention and interest on this movement of increasing unifiedness and directionality that has brought into being human historicity; and we affirm that this trajectory is grounded in the serendipitous creativity

at work in the nature of things. (As we have noted, this affirmation represents, of course, a significant act of faith.)

Bringing in the name "God" here does not commit us to the existence of some additional *being* (either in the world or beyond the world) from which these evolutionary forces proceed, any more than speaking of selfhood, for example, commits us to an additional "something" alongside the body which brings about our bodily movements.<sup>8</sup> Rather, what we are doing by employing the name "God" is calling attention to the special significance of the *unity* and *direction* which gradually developed in this particular evolutionary and historical trajectory (features which were to grow later, as human life emerged into what we call "purposive activity" or "intentionality"). These cosmic forces and movements were becoming ordered in such a way that humanness could come forth from them. What they collectively produced, eventually, was not a simple perpetuation of their own seeming multiplicity, but rather the unified or centered beings which we men and women are. "God" (with its accent on that which grounds our humanness) is the principal word available in our language for focusing our minds on this growing unity of *directedness toward the human*; faith, in its retrospective perusal of the trajectory which has produced us, discerns and affirms this unity amid all the enormous diversity of cosmic powers and movements. "God" holds together in one these seemingly disparate cosmic and historical powers and forces which produce human existence, with its unique centeredness. To deny any such directionality within the diversity of cosmic forces—and thus to affirm that human existence in its most distinctive features has no significant cosmic or metaphysical grounding—is to deny God's reality; to affirm this directionality, however—to affirm that there is some tension toward humanity and humaneness in the cosmic order itself—is to confess the reality of God.

We introduce the name "God," then, not simply to designate the collection of disparate cosmic powers that have produced us, but to direct attention to the mysteriously increasing unity and directionality of these powers in the trajectory which has created human existence. In the use of the word "God," no claim to knowledge of how and why this all came about is being made. On the contrary, precisely the mystery in it all is being accented: For here, in and through this evolutionary-historical trajectory, the ultimate mystery of things appears to be disclosing a human- and humane-affirming quality—at least, so the faith that celebrates this as a manifestation of *God's* reality affirms. Such an affirmation about the ultimate mystery of being and value does not, of course, involve the claim that

we ourselves now know what is in fact truly human, humanizing, and humane: It expresses, rather, a commitment to opening ourselves to being drawn out from where we now are and what we now believe, to new levels of insight, action, and being with respect to these concerns, levels which we cannot now even imagine. With its mythic overtones of mystery and transcendence, the symbol "God," as a center of devotion and commitment for selves and communities, can open us to what is beyond our present comprehension in a way difficult for more strictly conceptual language to achieve. Thus, it helps order and reorder our lives in ways and respects unavailable to more abstract ideas. From a pragmatic point of view, therefore—that is, from a point of view interested in the actual reordering of human affairs in a more humane and ecologically responsible direction—it can be both meaningful and important to employ this symbol; always, of course, with discrimination and care. By providing a principal focus for communal and personal devotion, service, and overall orientation, the image/concept of God itself promotes our humanization, making its own distinctive contribution to forwarding the cosmic tendencies toward the human and the humane.

## V

I have been arguing here that the most adequate way to conceive God today is in terms of the "personality-producing activities" going on within the universe (to use Shailer Mathews's phrase [1931, ch. 8]) on the one hand—the activities which have brought humanity into being and which continue to sustain us as responsible members of responsible communities—and the ultimate mystery of things, on the other. I have also argued that what we devote ourselves to (that is, which symbols and concepts focus our devotion and energies, and thus provide us with orientation in life) has important effects on our personhood and our communal life, and on their enhancement or their diminishment with respect to freedom and responsibility, peace and justice, and a sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment. When the symbol "God" is understood not in terms of the specific content which the tradition originally gave it (based on reification of the imagery of the creator/lord/father), but rather in terms of the evolutionary-historical trajectory which has in fact brought human life into being and continues to sustain it, there is really no question about whether God "exists." The correct question is, rather, who or what is *God*? That is, what reality (or configuration of realities) actually gives us our being as humans and draws us on toward more

profound humanization? When the question is refocused in this way, it becomes clear that the name "God" is being used to designate the ultimate reality with which we humans in fact have to do. There should be little question, then, that faith in God, commitment to God—if interpreted along the lines proposed here—is of as much importance to us contemporary men and women as it was to those many generations over the centuries who found it indispensable to human being and well-being.

## NOTES

1. This article, published in the *Harvard Theological Review* (1972), was subsequently reprinted as chapter 8 of *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Kaufman 1981). There were some editorial changes suggesting that I was beginning, by that time, to see glimmers of a way to approach the conceptual dilemma set out in the original article. In the present paper, I sum up the proposal for addressing this set of issues, which is worked out (in greater detail) in my new book, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Kaufman 1993); most of the text of this article is drawn from that work with the permission of Harvard University Press. To assist readers interested in pursuing some of the positions taken here, but which could not be discussed further, I refer at a number of points to relevant chapters of that larger text.

2. The Bible is not entirely consistent in this emphasis; some "theophanies," for example, are reported in the Bible, but these seem to be more manifestations of God's power than of God in Godself. However, Enoch "walked with God" (Gen. 5: 22, 24), we are told; God "appeared" to Abraham (Gen. 17: 1; 18: 1) and spoke to him; Jacob wrestled with "a man" all night long (Gen. 32: 24) and then later said he had "seen God face to face" (32: 30). But it is not evident that much should be made of these stories theologically, especially in view of the explicit claims that humans cannot "see" God.

3. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann's famous definition of the mythology of the New Testament: "Mythology is the use of imagery to express the other world in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side" (Bultmann 1953, 10n.).

4. J. Bronowski states flatly that "It is evolution, physical and biological, that gives time its direction" (Bronowski 1970, 34). "In a history of three thousand million years, evolution has not run backward. . . . the building up of stable configurations . . . [has] a direction . . . which cannot be reversed. . . . And it is not a forward direction in the sense of a thrust toward the future, a headed arrow. What evolution does is to give the arrow of time a barb which stops it from running backward; and once it has this barb, the chance play of errors will take it forward of itself" (Bronowski 1970, 28, 31f., 34).

5. Even so resolutely antiteological a writer as Ernst Mayr cannot avoid acknowledging that if we look backwards from where we stand, an almost teleological movement comes into view: "Who can deny that overall there is an advance from the prokaryotes that dominated the living world more than three billion years ago to the eukaryotes with their well organized nucleus and chromosomes as well as cytoplasmic organelles; from the single-celled eukaryotes to metaphytes and metazoans with a strict division of labor among their highly specialized organ systems; within the metazoans from ectotherms that are at the mercy of climate to the warm-blooded endotherms, and within the endotherms from types with a small brain and low social organization to those with a very large central nervous system, highly developed parental care, and the capacity to transmit information from generation to generation?" (Mayr 1988, 251f.).

6. It has recently begun to appear possible, even likely, that the continuous increase

in entropy over time in the universe may itself, in the natural course of events, give rise—through the development of so-called dissipative systems—to complex forms of organization, eventually including living systems: “The picture that is emerging in . . . recent thermodynamic analyses . . . [suggests that] the movement of the [entropic] stream *itself* inevitably generates, as it were, very large eddies *within* itself in which, far from there being a decrease of order, there is an increase first in complexity and then in something more subtle—functional organization. . . . There could be no self-consciousness and human creativity without living organization, and there could be no such living dissipative systems unless the entropic stream followed its general, irreversible course in time. Thus does the apparently decaying, randomizing tendency of the universe provide the necessary and essential matrix (*not juste!*) for the birth of new forms—new life through death and decay of the old” (Peacocke 1984, 430).

7. In this paper, I am concerned exclusively with bringing the symbol “God” into significant relation with contemporary cosmological and historical patterns of thinking. I have not engaged here in the sort of critical deconstruction of the imagery constituting the traditional concept of God (the “creator/lord/father”) which is necessary for any adequate contemporary reconstruction, in view of what we now know of the consequences of the use of such imagery—its oppressiveness to women, its promotion of religious imperialism, its encouragement of various sorts of infantilism and immaturity, etc. This paper does not pretend to present a full-blown conception of God for today (such a task is undertaken in the larger book from which it is excerpted, see especially, Kaufman 1993, chs. 21–27); it is devoted entirely to one small part of that larger project: finding an “imaginative space” for God (so to speak) within a thoroughly up-to-date cosmic picture.

8. Our traditional Western *substantival* patterns of thinking and speaking lead us to expect proper names to designate particular “somethings” with distinct boundaries separating them from other “things”; when dealing with historical (and other) events and processes, however, we understand perfectly well that such sharp boundaries cannot be drawn and the names we use are, for the most part, heuristic devices which are somewhat arbitrary: Did World War II have its beginnings in Hitler’s invasion of Poland or Czechoslovakia? Or must we trace it back to earlier actions of the Nazis, and perhaps even to the Germany of the twenties, to the Versailles treaty, and ultimately to World War I? Though no sharp lines can be drawn at any of these points, and arguments can be given for a whole range of answers to these questions, this does not interfere with our using the proper name *World War II* quite intelligibly and comprehensively in many different contexts; in fact, it is difficult to see how we could think or speak clearly about human life and experience in the twentieth century without using this name (or some equivalent). Similarly, since what we are concerned with in our theological world-picture here is a particular configuration of cosmic, evolutionary, and historical *processes* and *events*, there is no reason, linguistic or logical, why we should not use an appropriate proper name to lift these up, hold them together, and bring them into focus for us. There is no better word in our modern language than “God” for designating precisely the especial importance of this particular configuration of processes and events to us human beings, as we seek to orient ourselves in what we today take to be the real context of our lives.

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