

UNFAZED BY MYSTERY

by Frederick Ferré

In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology. By GORDON KAUFMAN. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993. xvii, 461 pages, notes, 3 indexes. \$39.95.

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Gordon Kaufman's *In Face of Mystery* is a book to be absorbed and pondered. It will certainly offend some of the naively faithful by its agnostic candor; but as a philosopher I rise with joy to greet its non-nonsense attitude toward even the most sacrosanct icons of Christian faith. Theological concepts that fail to withstand scrutiny should be dropped, no matter how precious. In contrast, the concepts that can still function religiously for postmodern women and men, Kaufman argues, deserve to be restated with fresh, generally supportable cognitive content and thus survive. Nothing should be propped up by claims of authority or tortured reasoning. Let the chips fall!

In principle, therefore, everything is up for grabs. Surprisingly, however, when the book concludes we are left—despite these opening flourishes—with a highly traditional religious landscape. It turns out that Kaufman is convinced that the grand old symbols, such as “God” and “Christ” and “world,” are all worth retaining and all capable of being plausibly reconstructed.

Perhaps, therefore, the book's subtitle would have been more descriptive if it had read: “A Reconstructive Theology.” Constructivism, a method familiar to philosophers of science, is here clearly being led by a special fondness for “the old, old story.” There is nothing, in principle, wrong in this; as readers of *Zygon* will appreciate, all thinkers—definitely including scientists—are led by hunches, paradigms, and preferred research programs in constructing their theories. But at the same time, *theoretical* constructivists

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functioning as *theological reconstructionists* need to be especially careful that their reasoning is never blandished or bullied into familiar pathways. To those, like Kaufman, raised on the traditional religious imagery, the associations are incomparably warm. And when these images are put in play as models of the ultimate, the stakes are intensely important and comprehensively relevant—therefore hard to abandon or even coolly criticize.

Kaufman does his best. He insists again and again on the incapacity of any human mind to know the ultimate. All of our theories are our own constructions and subject to all of the flaws of our finitude and mortality. Moreover, he takes full responsibility for his own constructive efforts, even abjuring help from potential allies, such as process philosophers. “Doubtless there is much to be learned from Whitehead about contemporary conceptualization of the world,” he writes, “but in my opinion we theologians must do our own work with respect to the question of God, not simply take over someone else’s” (p. 46). And in the end, unfazed by the mystery he faces, Kaufman provides us with nearly five hundred tightly packed pages, a rationally oriented agnostic-believer’s bulwark against faithlessness.

His method of getting from his initial cleared field to the final luxuriant theological harvest is, as he emphasizes, not by some dramatic Kierkegaardian “leap of faith,” but, instead, by what Kaufman calls “small steps of faith” (see chap. 17 and *passim*). These steps are, for the most part, clearly enumerated, and the reader is at each step invited to come along (or not) as the author moves through the familiar but now reconstructed “categorical scheme” of humanity, world, and God.

Our first need is to construct a concept of the human being to give reliable content to the category of humanity. Here Kaufman strives to find a good balance between recognizing the biological roots of human beings and also emphasizing the enormous significance of the human capacity to interpret history. Human beings are not *just* animals, though we are animals. We are beings capable of creating value and meaning. We are self-conscious and self-directing, but we are organisms. As Kaufman puts it:

This acknowledgement of the importance of our unique powers of creativity and transcendence must not tempt us to lose sight of the fact that we remain a part of the complex web of life here on earth: we are related to all other forms of life and through them and with them to inorganic being as well. (p. 106)

Thus Kaufman repeatedly emphasizes the point that we are “bio-historical” beings. Just as responsible thought about the human

cannot neglect the origins of our species within nature, so also sound thinking needs to take proper account of culture.

We cannot understand human reality (in modern terms) apart from the world within which it emerges; but we cannot understand the universe in which we live, either, apart from the evolutionary process through which it has moved, a process which has resulted in the appearance of multitudes of forms of life, some of which are so intricately ordered as to be self-conscious, self-directing, deliberate creators of an entirely new mode of being, *culture*. (p. 115)

From these factual observations, Kaufman proceeds to urge that we should go further, to a normative conception of human creativity and responsibility, namely, to accepting as *good* and *obligatory* the cultivation of well-ordered freedom and ever-higher levels of self-consciousness. He is aware that this is an important move, that norms are not simply included in facts, though he does not yet begin to employ his rubric of “small steps of faith.” Such a move authorizes those who make it with him to look at the world as a locus for the emergence of profound value, embodied in human personhood.

Unfortunately, Kaufman adds a chapter, entitled “An Ecological Ethic,” that is so exclusively devoted to these values of human personhood and so dependent on Kantian perspectives that he forgets his own warning not to lose sight of “the fact that we remain a part of the complex web of life here on earth.” Thus he uses the phrase “ecological ethic” in a merely figurative sense, not to suggest that other entities in the genuinely ecological “web of life” should be recognized as morally significant, but rather

that in our actions we must take into account (so far as we can) *all* that we are doing, long-range ramifications as well as immediate consequences (expedience). . . . Merely to possess the power to realize our immediate desires is no significant freedom at all; it is, in fact, to live in bondage, enslaved to desire. True freedom is a much more impressive matter than that: it is the power to lift our humanity beyond mere desire to a new and significantly different mode of existing, to live as responsible members in communities of freely interacting persons. (p. 207)

Only as an afterthought in the final paragraph of this disappointing chapter does he expand the scope of his anthropocentric view from human culture to nature, but even then the natural environment only appears as a “setting” for human persons. “If our freedom ever reaches its potential . . . and we are enabled to act with a fully ecological self-consciousness, women and men should find themselves able to fit more smoothly and effectively into the natural environment which is the setting for their lives and their activities. And it may become possible at last for humans to feel truly at home in their world” (p. 208).

The category of “world” now needs theoretical reconstruction. This Kaufman approaches armed with two criteria: “[A]ny conception of the world which we adopt must provide a background for and help make sense of (a) modern scientific knowledge (or theories) about the developmental character of the universe in which we live, and about the origins of human life; and (b) the biohistorical conception of the human (including the normatively human) which sums up our contemporary understanding of human being” (p. 239).

After having made the above-noted crucial move from facts to norms, the first of Kaufman’s explicit “small steps of faith,” whether the whole enterprise of reconstruction is worthwhile (p. 244) seems a comparatively easy one. If that is affirmed, then a second “small step” will be the decision to assert the “metaphysical significance of the evolutionary-historical process” (p. 262). Given this, the third “small step” will be “to see the human project with all its hopes and aspirations as significantly grounded in ultimate reality” (p. 268); that is, adds Kaufman, “that we agree to think of the overarching context of human life—the universe—as a serendipitously creative process or movement” (p. 279). The ruling adverb, *serendipitously*, Kaufman introduces (uncontroversially) only to mean that there is a “tendency in processes and events to produce more than was intended by the women and men acting in and through them” (p. 273). Although he explicitly warns that “often these unexpected consequences are not happy” (p. 274), the powerful pull of the noun *serendipity*, which usually carries the strongly normative force of “making *fortunate* discoveries accidentally,” tends to carry attention (including Kaufman’s, eventually) far away from this initial nonnormative stipulation. Once the third “small step,” injecting the notion of serendipity, is taken, it becomes increasingly easy, not merely to acknowledge historical surprises, whether for good or ill, in a neutral way, but to celebrate or rejoice in something called “serendipitous creativity.”

At any rate, Kaufman interprets the third “small step” as authorizing him to start referring to a “serendipitous universe” and thus to push ahead toward a fourth “small step,” as follows:

The trajectory eventuating in the creation of human historical existence could be seen . . . 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. (p. 284)

Now far beyond our initial simple agreement to notice “surprising

outcomes” in history, his fourth “small step” encourages Kaufman to write:

The overflowingness or serendipity or creativity which seemingly expresses itself in and through everything that exists is to be understood as an appropriate construal of the ultimate mystery which grounds all reality, that point farthest back, beyond which we have no way of moving in our reflection. It would be a fairly simple and direct metaphysical extrapolation to see not only the evolution of life and the development of history but *all that is* as having its originary source and foundation in this munificent creativity. (p. 296)

Clearly, in the presence of such honorific language, we must be close to reconstructing the concept of God. As he begins this task, Kaufman defends the continued use of the symbol “God” to provide an ultimate point of reference, so long as it is clear that “the locus of God’s reality is not in some transcendent ‘otherworld’ but rather in the actual evolutionary and historical processes and developments through which human life has come into being in this world” (p. 354). Then, given such qualifications, Kaufman writes:

We are in a position now to take our fifth step of faith toward God, a step that simultaneously becomes faith *in* God. That is, we are now at the point where we can say both what we mean by the symbol “God” and whether we are prepared to commit ourselves to this God. The symbol “God” signifies that ultimate mystery in which all those cosmic and historical processes and powers—which, in concert, have given rise to humanity-in-the-world, which continue to sustain and support our existence, and which lead (or drive) us forward toward a fuller humanization, a more profound humaneness—are unified and held together. . . . From this point of view God is quite properly regarded both as our “creator” and as our “redeemer” or “savior”; it is God, and God alone, who is our proper object of worship and the proper center of orientation for our work and our lives. (pp. 354–55)

After this point, Kaufman returns to ponder the stipulation he began with, that the “serendipity” of the cosmic process is normatively neutral. In his chapter “Sin and Evil,” he reminds us that “our lives are in fact colored and warped, pushed and pulled in many directions by the patterns and momentums of sin and evil in the midst of which we are born and within which we daily live and work” (p. 373). But now he calls the “unhappy” surprises of serendipity *antidivine*. “Our personal and social practices, our ways of thinking and acting, our customs and institutions, our values and ideals—indeed, our very selves—are all permeated to deep levels by these antidivine forces of corrosion and corruption and destruction” (p. 373). It is not made clear to the reader by what “small step of faith” Kaufman has moved from *defining* the symbol “God” by reference to the (mixed) surprises of the cosmos to *redefining* the “divine” in separation from the “antidivine” parts of the “cosmic

trajectory” we began with. It is clear, however, that he feels authorized to do so:

Faith in God, we can now see, is no matter of simple belief in some overarching trajectory carrying us forward willy-nilly toward a wonderful new order of human fulfillment and meaning. It consists, rather, in (a) our discernment that there are in our world some movements and momentums toward a more humane and ecologically sustainable order of life for women and men, (b) our living in the hope that these are the visible evidences of a deeply grounded trajectory along which human history is moving and may continue to move, and (c) our committing ourselves and our lives without reservation to this hope and the possibilities it opens up for us and the rest of life on earth. . . . Faith, thus, is essentially an ongoing struggle with the sin and evil in ourselves and our world, as we give ourselves over as fully as we can to that trajectory—however dimly discerned—which beckons us toward more humane society in a well-ordered world. (p. 373)

Unfortunately for the force of his argument, Kaufman’s honesty here exposes a problem in his consistency. *Either* the symbol “God” is to be reconstructed strictly in terms of a “munificent” but morally mixed historical process that (given a few “small steps of faith”) could commend itself reasonably to tough-minded moderns, *or* the symbol “God” retains its ancient meaning, on the authority of tradition, as “perfect,” favoring exclusively the more “humane and well-ordered” developments we and Kaufman favor. It would have been helpful if Kaufman had confessed this “large step” (leap?) of faith and invited his readers to examine it closely before taking it with him.

Once the influence of tradition has worked its way so far into the tent, other major symbols of Christian faith are quick to follow. The so-called category of Christ requires a sixth step of faith (pp. 376, 395, 411), although since it is optional for non-Christians it is hard to know why the term *category* (normally implying universality) is used for it. It is a weak requirement, implying only that “both the conception of God (the cosmic serendipitous creativity which has brought humanity into being) and the world which provides the context of human life (God’s creation) must also be constructed in terms consistent with the Christ-images (for those who take these images paradigmatically to represent the truly human)” (p. 394). Kaufman keeps his claim modest: “My claim is not that Christian views of human existence and destiny are the only ones which need to be taken seriously, but rather the much more modest one that (at least some) Christian views are quite intelligible, and can be seen to make a certain kind of sense of the unfolding course of biological evolution and human history, and of the many urgent problems with which we humans must today come to terms” (p. 410).

In a similar way, though not offered as a seventh “small step of faith,” the trinitarian conception of God is interpreted. As we should expect, Kaufman disclaims ontological pretensions. “In the position I am setting out here, . . . instead of holding that the trinity is some sort of mysterious substance, all three ‘persons’ of which exist ‘out there’ somewhere, ‘trinity’ is regarded as essentially a conceptual device which holds together the three indispensable and inseparable strands in Christian thinking about God” (p. 417). To the extent that they are indispensable and inseparable, however, they turn out not to be uniquely Christian. Kaufman acknowledges that “one could argue that every religious or metaphysical position implicitly presupposes a threefold intention similar to that articulated in the Christian concept of the trinity” (pp. 420–21). The threefold intention he identifies is simply that every such theory (*a*) intends to speak of reality, (*b*) speaks by means of concepts drawn from highly particular experience, and (*c*) generalizes from these particular concepts to include the whole of experience. What makes the doctrine of the Trinity uniquely Christian? Kaufman answers that the particular concepts utilized as paradigmatic are drawn from *Christ* (p. 421). Thus, just as what is indispensable and inseparable is not uniquely Christian, so also what is uniquely Christian is not indispensable or inseparable.

Besides the overall argument of the book, which has its large-scale merits and deficiencies, this volume is endlessly rich in texture. It contains treasures of rumination that are worth reading quite apart from the overall project. And the overall project is immensely welcome, whether or not it is perfectly executed.

Finally, when one sets this big book down, one cannot help wondering whether its execution might have been enhanced by a greater openness to the sort of help that a discriminating use of Whiteheadian arguments might have provided. Kaufman’s frankly constructivist approach could have been reinforced by Whitehead’s empirically grounded speculations; at the same time, a robust Whiteheadian panexperientialism could have allowed a more detailed ontological portrayal of both humanity and world, quite apart from the question of God. This could have brought many advantages, among them a context in which a more authentically ecological ethic could make sense within an organismic universe. Repeatedly, Kaufman parallels insights that “process” thinkers also advocate, but he is not equipped, metaphysically, to offer the detailed linkages Whitehead’s scheme provides: for example, to relate the “vibratory universe” of physical fields to both the mixed creative processes of history and to a morally providential but noncoercive God, the

“fellow-sufferer who understands.” Kaufman is right in saying that theologians must do their own work with respect to the question of God, not simply take over someone else’s. But since there is so much work to be done, it seems unwise to decline tools that could help in the important job of theological construction.