

Book Symposia

CONCEPTUALIZING HUMANITY, WORLD, AND GOD

by Maurice Wiles

In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology. By GORDON KAUFMAN.
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Gordon Kaufman is well known for his insistence that theology is a work of imaginative human construction. This view is argued in his *Essay on Theological Method* (Scholars Press, 1975) and provides the title for his later collection of essays—*The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Westminster, 1981). It is one thing to sketch the appropriate method for theology; to show what such a method involves by putting it to work on a grand scale is a very different matter. Not every one who writes about theological method goes on to do the latter, more demanding task. Kaufman is warmly to be commended for having done so.

The aim of the book is clearly conceived, and clarity of both style and argument are well sustained throughout. Kaufman's purpose is to offer reasoned answers to the "questions of who or what we humans are, what sort of world this is in which we find ourselves, which God must be served" (p. xi). Another way in which he expresses the same goal is in terms of offering a fundamental review of the three basic symbols of the monotheistic categorial scheme—humanity, world, and God—together with the basic Christian symbol—Christ. This latter account provides the structure of the book. After an introductory section on the method to be followed, the

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main body of the book presents in turn a construction of the concept of the human, of the world, and of God. No privileged place is accorded to any special revelation or sacred text, nor is the process claimed to be logically coercive or the only defensible form of truth. It is a matter of imaginative construction and it involves choices or small steps of faith along the way, which are neither arbitrary nor inescapable. Other routes can reasonably be taken and, of course, often are. That ought not to be matter for surprise for those who live "in face of mystery."

How far and how convincingly can so open a project take us? The construction of the human draws on wide reading that has passed through the prism of mature reflection. Its primary stress on the historicity of human existence carries no great surprises but is clearly and compellingly spelled out. Two aspects of that historicity are particularly emphasized. There is first a strong social emphasis. Concepts of selfhood and agency cannot be applied straightforwardly to the individual; they only make sense in a social context. "Human beings cannot then be conceived as essentially separate and autonomous individuals, as we all too often suppose" (p. 161). Second, it is a question not merely of historicity but of biohistoricity. Our existence is grounded not only in our social context, but in that of the whole ecosystem of our planet.

One way in which this latter emphasis finds expression is in repeated criticisms of "anthropocentrism." Yet there is a sense in which Kaufman's own approach is highly anthropocentric. The full title of his second main section is "Constructing a Concept of the Context for Human Existence: The World." And the basic norm for his moral evaluations is the criterion of that which makes for humaneness. His gravamen is not against giving centrality to the human; it is against a misconception of the human, which thinks that the human can be conceived apart from the physical world that has constituted it historically and continues to do so in the present.

The main emphasis in Kaufman's understanding of the world corresponds to that inherent in his understanding of humanity. As men and women are not timeless selves that happen to have a history but are historical beings through and through, so the world is not a structured order within which evolution happens to take place; it is a cosmic evolutionary process through and through. And that evolutionary process is characterized by what he calls "serendipitous creativity" and "directionality." We do not have to think in terms of purpose or pretend that there has been an uninterrupted development from primeval slime to human life to be able to speak justifiably of a directional movement toward more complex, "higher" forms of life.

The full title of the third main section is "Constructing a Concept of an Ultimate Point of Reference: God." If the symbol "God" is so construed, how is God to be conceived? It is in his answer to that question that we meet the most controversial element in Kaufman's project. "God," he says, "is no longer to be conceived primarily in terms of the personalistic and political metaphors of the tradition, but rather as the serendipitous movement which we discern in the cosmic evolutionary and historical processes that have created human existence" (p. 342).

How are we to evaluate such a proposal? It is not straightforward pantheism. God is not identified as the whole evolutionary process but as the serendipitous creativity within it. Nor can it be dismissed as a form of human fantasizing; as Kaufman points out, such a God is "not a mere figment of our imaginations" but "something objectively real" (pp. 401-2). Moreover, and, for Kaufman, most important of all, it has rich spiritual and practical implications. On the proposed understanding "to believe in God . . . is to devote oneself to working towards a fully humane world within the ecological restraints here on planet Earth, while standing in piety and awe before the profound mysteries of existence" (p. 347). By contrast, the traditional conception of God as a supreme transcendent being seems to Kaufman to have grave disadvantages. Its underlying human analogue is based on a false conception of human agency as something conceivable apart from its social context. It implies an implausible, dualistic worldview in which God belongs to some "other world." Morally and politically it has a marked tendency to give rise to tyranny and oppression.

But difficulties can also be raised about Kaufman's own proposal, even from within the terms of his own approach. I want to raise three such difficulties. First, Kaufman affirms the important unifying function of the symbol "God" (cf. pp. 354 and 418). But there seems to me to be force in Macmurray's claim that action is more unifying than process.¹ Kaufman's insistence that agency is inconceivable apart from social context has force against some individualistically anthropomorphic views of God, but it does not most naturally point to a replacement of the concept of God as agent with one of God as process (however particularized). It challenges too unipersonal a conception of God. Some contemporary theologians have tried to meet the difficulty through the development of a strongly Trinitarian theology. Although I do not find their arguments by which the two motifs are neatly tied together altogether convincing, I do think that the nature of the problem calls for a modification of the idea of a personal, transcendent God rather than

its replacement in the form here proposed. Kaufman's own insistence on the interconnectedness of social context and agency (rather than the priority of one over the other) seems to me to point in that direction also.

Second, the phenomena that lead to Kaufman's linking of the symbol "God" with serendipitous creativity correspond to the same kind of phenomena (but differently understood in the context of a different scientific awareness) that gave rise to old forms of the teleological argument. Kaufman frequently refers to such creativity as that to which we owe our existence, that which has brought humanity into being (pp. 394, 404, 418). That is a fair enough description—up to a point. But it leaves untouched those concerns which underlay the cosmological form of argument, namely the mystery of why there should be anything at all. Kaufman's conceptualization of God seems to be related almost exclusively to the mystery of our *human* existence. But we need to take account also of the sense of wonder at the mystery of existence as such. Is this not a point at which a further step of faith, similar in character to those that Kaufman commends, is a reasonable option?

Third, I am not convinced that the very important pragmatic arguments, which weigh so strongly with him, require us to adopt the conceptualization of God that he proposes. The relation between forms of belief and the moral and political attitudes that they commend and support is always significant, but it is not always as coercive in character as is sometimes suggested. A more personal view of God than Kaufman allows need not necessarily have tyrannical or authoritarian consequences. No conceptualization we adopt will ever be more than a pointer toward an appropriate apprehension of the mystery, and it may be right that such conceptualizations should vary with the needs of the time. The shift within the personalist understanding of God that gave more significance to the individual within the community, which we see reflected in some Old Testament writings, may have been what was needed at the time (cf. the story of Achan and Jeremiah's vision of the New Covenant); the excessive individualism of the modern West may rightly indicate the need for a less straightforwardly personal view in our case. But history suggests that such a move would have its own moral and political risks. The implications of Kaufman's moral and political concerns are not as clear-cut or as decisive for his argument as they tend to appear.

When Kaufman turns to the fourth, specifically Christian symbol—Christ—he faces problems that every historically sensitive theologian shares. He rightly emphasizes that what our sources enable us

to grasp with any confidence is the character of the "Christ event" rather than of Jesus of Nazareth, and that within the New Testament itself the term "Christ" is not just an alternative name for Jesus but is already used in a wider symbolic sense. These features of the scriptural record, familiar to the scholarly world, chime in well with his general emphasis on the inseparability of individual agency and social context. In seeking to show the importance of both Jesus himself and the transformative movement that stemmed from him as normative guides for Christians today, the inevitable selectivity of the process is clearly apparent. The textually questionable "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (p. 397) and the surely secondary parable of the Sheep and the Goats (p. 388) are given as prime examples of what is to be learned by focusing on "Jesus himself," and the egalitarian communities assumed by some tentative historical reconstructions of the very early Church play a similar role in relation to the lessons to be learned from the wider movement. Only those who believe that their own reading of the texts can offer more secure accounts for the guidance of contemporary believers will cast the first stone—or, at least, cast their stone very hard. Kaufman's handling of the issue serves primarily as a reminder that the Christ symbol, understood in terms of its scriptural expression, cannot safely function in a normative role by itself. The nature of the evidence is such that it can only function responsibly in conjunction with wider grounds for determining the proper character of the humaneness that is incumbent upon us.

This is a careful and detailed work of scholarship, highly critical of the form that much religious, particularly Christian, belief and practice have taken in the course of human history. But it is also a deeply religious book. It sees religious understanding as having a strong, positive contribution to make to the continuation of human flourishing on our planet. But to fulfill that role there is need for a radical revision of how religious, and particularly Christian, belief is understood. Such a revision has to make sense in terms of our modern knowledge of the universe to help create and sustain a more humane attitude toward our world and still maintain continuity with the traditional symbols of belief. Kaufman's own proposal is an unusually radical, but also an unusually well worked out account of what that might involve. He would be the first to emphasize its character as proposal rather than prescription. I have indicated the reasons and the degree to which I differ from the particular form of its central proposal, but its overall approach is one that Christians need to pursue, despite their reluctance to do so. I hope it will receive wider discussion than its lengthy format is likely to secure it. Its

challenge to the style and the assumptions of much contemporary theology needs to be heard.

NOTE

1. J. Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (Faber and Faber, 1957) chap. 10. "The World as One Action," pp. 203-22. My attention was first drawn to Macmurray's argument and its significance in this context by Kaufman's own writing. See "On the Meaning of 'Act of God' " in his *God the Problem* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972). p. 138 n. 16.