# A RAFT THAT FLOATS: EXPERIENCE, TRADITION, AND SCIENCES IN GUSTAFSON'S THEOCENTRIC ETHICS

*by Harlan Beckley*

*Abstract.* Although James Gustafson's use of the Christian Bible and tradition is not fully displayed in the essays published here, Bible and tradition are a crucial part of a composite rationale, which includes experience and the sciences, for his theocentric ethics. Gustafson's theocentric ethics employs the sciences to back, inform, and correct the Christian tradition and offers grounds for respecting the natural piety and morality of "nonreligious" persons while explaining and justifying why Christians draw on major themes and metaphors from their tradition that should penetrate their piety and morality. His proposal should reorient the thinking of theological ethics more than it has thus far.

*Keywords* experience; James M. Gustafson; sciences; theocentric ethics; tradition.

---

James M. Gustafson's *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (1981–84) is the first proposal in theological ethics since Paul Ramsey's *Basic Christian Ethics* (1950) with a potential to reorient the field and the first proposal with such breadth of Christian and non-Christian sources since Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941–43). Whether the watershed of Gustafson's book will match or exceed those of Ramsey's and Niebuhr's is not yet clear. It has generated controversy, a situation that prompted Edward Farley to quip that Gustafson's critics "praise him with shouted damns" (Farley 1988, 40). This controversy is of special interest to the readers of *Zygon* because of the principal sources of contention: the authority Gustafson grants to the sciences in relation to the Bible and tradition, and the impact of the sciences on the content of his theology and ethics (see Cahill 1985, 22–36; McCormick 1985, 53–70). Philosopher

Harlan Beckley is Professor of Christian Ethics and Theology at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA 24450.

[*Zygon,* vol. 30, no. 2 (June 1995).]
© 1995 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon.* ISSN 0591-2385

Robert Audi writes that he knows of no major theological framework that takes the sciences more seriously (Audi 1988, 181).

The teaching and scholarship of numerous theological ethicists have been deeply shaped by aspects of Gustafson's theocentric ethics, but widespread resistance, open and in less public forms, continues from those associated with institutional Christianity. In the meantime, Gustafson has relocated professionally so that his intellectual exchange with persons in disciplines outside of Christian theology has become even more intense than at the time he developed his theocentric ethics. It appears that he is now prepared to turn his attention to "the cultured despisers of religion in our time," secular scientists and others whom he believes have a *sensus divinitatis* that will permit them to embrace, or at least respect, a theocentric perspective (Gustafson 1995b, 189).

His articles published here reflect Gustafson's continuing conviction that theologians and ethicists have something to learn from the sciences. He concludes his comparison and contrast of Reinhold Niebuhr and Melvin Konner with the claim that the sciences can back, inform, and correct an account of the well-being of life that draws on the Christian Bible and tradition. Indeed, one might infer, though mistakenly, from these essays alone that Gustafson sees little at stake in whether an interpretation of the human draws on a religious tradition. "Truthfulness about the human situation," Gustafson concludes, "can be found in both scientific and religious sources" (Gustafson 1995a, 174). "Traditional religious and theological language" he observes, "can impede mutually open and critical interaction" (Gustafson 1995b, 189).

These statements are compatible with the relations between the sciences and the Christian Bible and tradition that Gustafson proposed in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* and earlier books. Still, the present articles do not fully reflect the influence of the Christian religious tradition on Gustafson's theological ethics. In what follows, I first explicate briefly Gustafson's controversial proposal for Christian theological ethics to draw on experience and the sciences along with the Bible and tradition. This explication shows how this proposal backs his claim in these essays that "an exchange between theology [and ethics] and the human sciences need not be a polarized confrontation" (Gustafson 1995a, 174)—though there is potential conflict between them. I will then explain how that proposal, which Gustafson developed within an intense self-consciousness of his vocation as a theological ethicist, grants greater weight to the Bible and tradition and to justifications for consenting to them than is apparent from reading these essays.

I intend for this explication and explanation to make a case, as much as is possible in a brief essay, that Christian ethicists will more adequately exercise their vocational responsibility to persons within and outside the church and to society insofar as they adopt something similar to Gustafson's approach. They will be in a position to draw from the resources of the Christian tradition to inform intelligible and respectful participation in a discourse about the moral life and moral decisions with many persons in contemporary societies. They also will be able to help revise aspects of their religious tradition that conflict with the well-established sciences and with the experience of many morally conscientious people, and that may distort the moral judgments of persons in the church.

Gustafson does not begin with theology and ethics (i.e., traditions of critical reflection on the religious and moral life). He begins with how persons are and become religious and moral. Hence, he does not start with theories or methodologies for relating science and theology, which he calls "philosophy of theology" (Gustafson 1995b, 177), but with an account of how persons experience particular objects and events in nature, history, culture, and society (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:204-23). These experiences nearly always evoke "senses" (affective and cognitive responses) of dependence, gratitude, obligation, remorse or repentance, possibility, and direction (Gustafson 1981-8, 1:129-34), but these senses are not necessarily religious. Persons become religious if these senses are "related to the powers that sustain us and bear down upon us" (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:195). Such persons "sense the reality of" that which is "beyond the means of scientific investigation and proof," and this sensing "distinguishes the religious consciousness from the secular" (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:135).[1] Gustafson sometimes calls this state of being "natural piety" and distinguishes it from "religious piety," which requires the additional step of "participation in a [religious] tradition that affects the perception of the phenomenon" that one experiences (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:233).

Two crucial observations are implied in this account of the connections among experience, the senses, natural piety, and religious piety. First, the religious consciousness, whether in natural piety or religious piety, feels and articulates the presence of a reality that is beyond what can be inferred from scientific investigation. Gustafson does not derive religious beliefs from the sciences. Second, there are religious persons, those who manifest natural piety, who, because they are bored with or offended by traditional religious language and symbols, do not take the additional step of consent to a religious tradition (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:135). These are the persons whom

Gustafson refers to as having a *sensus divinitatis* that gives them a "real sympathy" with Gustafson's reasons for affirming a theocentric perspective (Gustafson 1995b, 189). Some of them are scientists like Melvin Konner.

There is no step-by-step progression from nonreligious experience to natural and religious piety. Experience, though prereflexive, is never purely prereflexive; it is always informed and tested by traditions of interpretation in which we participate and which we internalize in our prereflexive responses. Sciences and religions are such traditions. Since many persons participate in both traditions, the traditions interact with each other and with the data of our common experience in ways that enable and shape the development of the senses of dependence, gratitude, and so forth. On the other hand, these traditions remain reflections on and articulations of experience. Neither theology nor the sciences is capable of unmediated knowledge of the objects they study. Even the scriptures are reflections on "the meanings of common human experience in light of an experience of the presence of God"; they are not a direct revelation of God (Gustafson 1981–84, 1:146).

Three significant observations follow from this interaction between experience, the Christian religious tradition (which includes the Bible), and the tradition of the sciences. First, Gustafson does not share the view, emanating from the great nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, that experience issues in a religious piety based on an "original revelation" or immediate consciousness of God (Schleiermacher [1830] 1928, 17–18). For Gustafson, prereflexive experiences, because they are in the first place of particular objects and events and are shaped by internalized traditions in which we participate, evoke senses and piety that are always mediated responses to the presence of the divine, and never direct experiences of the divine. Second, since experience and reflective traditions are partially intermeshed, circularity exists between experience shaped by internalized traditions and consent to traditions that is backed by that experience. This circularity explains why consent to a tradition is not a radical leap of faith or act of the will unsupported by reasons of the heart and mind (Gustafson 1981–84, 1:226). It also weakens the justification for consent based on experience when the consent is partially a product of a socialized interpretation of experience. Consent should not, Gustafson acknowledges, be given "merely because it is 'subjectively satisfying'" (Gustafson 1981–84, 1:235). He notes this difficulty in Niebuhr's appeal to experience as a warrant for faith (Gustafson 1995a, 000), and consistently acknowledges it in his own theology (Gustafson 1981–84, 1:233–34; 1988, 210–11; 1994, 45–46). Third, as Edward Farley comments,

"Gustafson refuses to posit the doctrinal accomplishments of Christianity as the a priori ground of theological ethics" (Farley 1988, 39). Consent to the tradition must be confirmed by the senses and piety that emerge from particular experiences and by other tests of its adequacy; otherwise, the tradition has no justifiable authority.

Gustafson's turn to the Christian Bible and tradition cannot be anchored in revelation, conclusively justified by reason, or confirmed by a direct experience of God. Tradition, along with experience and the sciences, is part of a composite rationale for his theology and ethics. In a metaphor employed by John Reeder, which Gustafson frequently cites, appropriation of the religious tradition is one board, albeit a critical one, in a "raft" of reasons Gustafson employs to keep his theocentric ethics afloat (see Reeder 1988, 119–37). The role that the sciences play in this composite rationale, except insofar as they are internalized in our response to experience, occurs after consent to the tradition in the selective retrieval of themes, symbols, and ideas from the Christian tradition. Piety, *and not the sciences*, is the necessary condition for ideas from the Bible and tradition to be meaningful and intellectually persuasive, but these ideas "cannot be incongruous" with and must " 'be in some way indicated by' " the well-established, relevant sciences in order to be incorporated into theocentric ethics (Gustafson 1981–84, 1:257, drawing on Ernst Troeltsch).

I doubt this use of the sciences to back and correct retrieval from the Christian tradition (Gustafson 1995a, 174) would have sparked such controversy had Gustafson not gone on to argue that well-established sciences render dubious several traditional Christian claims: God as a personal agent, the good of humans as the chief telos of creation, individual and collective salvation in the eschaton (including immortality), radical human freedom before God (here Konner's bioanthropological explanations are pertinent), and Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God or, at least, of the character of God (Gustafson 1981–84, 2:264–79). Whether or not these substantive revisions of the tradition provoked them, many of Gustafson's critics have assailed his reliance on science rather than argue, from within Gustafson's criteria for using the sciences, that some or all of these beliefs are not incongruous with, and are in some way indicated by, the sciences. Robert Audi's discussion of Gustafson's views of God as a personal agent, eschatology, and human freedom is an important exception (Audi 1988, 171–77).

Gustafson's use of the sciences avoids polarizing theology and the sciences and makes possible intelligible communication with scientists who possess a sense of the divine or natural piety, but it does not preclude an important place for the Bible and tradition in

theological ethics. Recall, piety emerging from experience, not beliefs derived from the sciences, is the principal basis for consent to the tradition. Moreover, the subjective aspect of this "justification" from piety is mitigated by the authority of religious perceptions and construals because they have met the test of time (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:234-35). Specific themes, symbols, and ideas of the tradition carry weight in Gustafson's composite rationale because the "tradition is not an ancient bag of irrational nonsense [but] carries a way of relating . . . to God that has been forged by human experiences both similar and dissimilar to our own" (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:234). It has authority apart from its detailed accordance with our experience (or with the sciences). Participation in the tradition and its rituals is further justified because it is necessary if piety is to become a vital aspect of our religious and moral being (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:317-25, 2:290-92). These reasons for retrieving elements of the tradition warrant Gustafson's affirmation of God as creator, sustainer and governor, judge, and redeemer (Gustafson 1981-84, 1:236-51), and aspects of these metaphors for understanding God deeply penetrate his understanding of the religious and moral life.

Two illustrations will suffice to show how distinctive elements from the Christian religious tradition inform Gustafson's depiction of the religious and moral life. Both illustrations can be understood, though in an overly simple fashion, on the basis of Gustafson's view of God as redeemer. Redemption does not promise freedom from sin and death, but it does affirm possibilities of special grace for altering the conditions of fatedness through intervention and of sin through forgiveness. This affirmation helps Gustafson discern that life in families enables and requires "a readiness to forgive and to be forgiven" (Gustafson 1981-84, 2:168) and that we have opportunities and obligations to remove conditions of despair that can otherwise lead to suicides (Gustafson 1981-84, 2:207-12). These are opportunities and obligations that persons of natural piety also may discern. For Gustafson, perhaps unlike Niebuhr, no interpretation of events or discernment of obligation is limited only to those who consent to the tradition (see Gustafson 1975). Nevertheless, the tradition is a source of wisdom and insight that, analogous to Konner's use of literature, discloses the wider significance of events that natural piety and the sciences alone cannot easily discern (Gustafson 1995a, 174).

In accord with his observation that the sciences inform ethics as well as theology, Gustafson's chapters on the ethics of family and marriage and suicide also draw on the sciences. Biology and the social sciences help to explain why stable forms of the family are necessary for specific aspects of the well-being of its members and of society,

and psychology and related disciplines inform Gustafson's view that in circumstances of extreme and relentless despair rational persons may be justified in taking their lives. The sciences are a part of the composite rationale for ethics as well as for theology, but the Bible and tradition can also make a difference in both religion and morality. Gustafson remarks that Mary Midgley's "moral outlook" is similar to his own without her invoking the name of God, much as Reinhold Niebuhr's and Melvin Konner's outlooks are similar (Gustafson 1995a, 165ff). Nevertheless, Gustafson writes, "*if* God is the Ultimate Orderer and Power . . . natural piety is both focused and intensified. . . . There is a difference in human disposition and affectivity. In these respects, at least, I perceive myself to be very much in a biblical tradition" (Gustafson 1988, 216–17).

I believe that an even "more finely grained" analysis of Niebuhr's and Konner's understandings of human nature would reveal important differences in valuations within their similar outlooks. For example, Niebuhr's view of human freedom permitted him to conclude that "the human spirit cannot be held within the bounds of either natural necessity or rational prudence" (Niebuhr 1941–43, 1:122). Thus Niebuhr contended that humans could not rest easy in conscience short of "sacrificing our life and interest" in conformity with divine love (Niebuhr 1941–43, 2:74–75). As Gustafson notes, Konner does not share Niebuhr's expansive notion of human freedom (Gustafson 1995a, 166), nor would Konner's affirmation of the physiological bases of love permit him to recommend Niebuhr's ideal principle of sacrificial love (Konner 1982, 291–324). Niebuhr's realism about the human condition chastened his hope for a social ethics based on self-sacrificial love and Konner's sense of wonder in the face of expressions of love that he deems a mystery "profoundly baffling to almost every notion of orderliness in affection" (Konner 1982, 324) may bring them within the boundaries of a similar outlook on human nature. Still, Niebuhr considered his understanding of human freedom and ideal of self-sacrificial love necessary ingredients for the moral disposition and reasoning required to approximate the kingdom of God. The point here is not to challenge Gustafson's interpretation of Niebuhr; he recognizes these differences between Niebuhr and Konner. The point is to show that these differences, when refined beyond a general outlook, demonstrate how Niebuhr's retrievals from the Christian religious tradition have a potentially significant influence on his depiction of how moral judgments should be made, even though a distinctively Christian difference in moral conduct cannot precisely be identified.

In the case of Niebuhr, Gustafson's composite rationale permits a scientific corrective of excessive claims for freedom and love in recent

Protestant theological ethics (see Gustafson 1981–84, 1:287–93, 2:164). The porous boundaries between the sciences and theology and ethics allow work like Konner's to correct aspects of the religious tradition that Niebuhr draws on. Yet other aspects of the religious tradition that inform Niebuhr's and Gustafson's ethics (e.g., God as redeemer) penetrate the moral life in ways that may distinguish it from morality based on natural piety alone: for example, in the requirement to forgive in family relations and in the obligation to forgive and to intervene for persons in deep despair. Whether Konner's sense of wonder and hope for a "sublunary nurturance" of the good in the hearts and minds of humans (Gustafson 1995a, 169) can substitute for believing and piety shaped by the metaphor of God as redeemer is an open question that can be answered only in a "finely grained" comparison of particular religious perspectives with the perspectives of persons who possess natural piety.

Gustafson's claim that consent to the Bible and tradition may make a difference in the senses and the piety that penetrate the moral life is displayed more clearly in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* than in these articles. Furthermore, his consent to the tradition is justified, though not logically or conclusively, through experience and the sciences. The justification is much more elaborate than Konner's reasons for using literary sources to bolster his claims for the human spirit (Gustafson 1995a, 174).

What I have written supports, rather than gainsays, Gustafson's claim that the sciences and theological ethics need not be polarized. The sciences should back, inform, and correct theological ethics. I have indicated how Gustafson's theocentric piety can offer a better basis for communicating with the cultured despisers of religion than do theologians who begin with an a priori commitment to the Bible and tradition. Moreover, there is no reason to condemn the morality of those who live in accord with a sense of the divine or natural piety, though there may still be good reasons for them to consider consent to a religious tradition. I also have challenged critics who claim that Gustafson's theocentric ethics is a proposal based on science and experience without granting a decisive role to the Bible and tradition. My explanation of the place of tradition in Gustafson's composite rationale supports his assertions in other writings that he takes the Bible and tradition "more seriously than is probably apparent to [his] readers and critics" (Gustafson 1988, 206) and that his theocentric perspective is "deeply informed by the Bible and traditions that flow from it" (Gustafson 1994, 46). Gustafson's composite rationale, drawing on experience, religious traditions, and the sciences, should, I believe, compel a rethinking of the methods and substance of much of Christian theological ethics.[2]

## NOTES

1. Gustafson notes elsewhere that these persons are sometimes offended by Christian symbols due to their ignorance of how the symbols have been interpreted and used (e.g., Gustafson 1995a, 167). Readers of *Zygon* may recall a recent issue in which philosopher Michael Ruse insisted, in a response to Philip Hefner, that either Jesus Christ was the Son of God in such a way that non-Christian religions are false or that he was a fraud (Ruse 1994, 79). Ruse lacks knowledge of the diverse ways in which the title Son of God has been understood and used in Christian piety and theology. The offense of this learned man at what he does not understand poignantly illustrates Gustafson's point.

2. Students in my spring 1994, seminar on Gustafson's theocentric ethics greatly assisted my preparation for this essay, especially Kelly L. Brotzman, who presented a paper on natural and religious piety, though she is not likely to concur with my conclusions. I also wish to thank Kelly L. Brotzman, Winston B. Davis, J. Benjamin Eggleston, Jr., Stephen J. Pope, Kenneth P. Ruscio, O. Kendall White, Jr., and H. Thomas Williams for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

## REFERENCES

Audi, Robert. 1988. "Theology, Science, and Ethics in Gustafson's Theocentric Vision." In *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics: Interpretations and Assessments*, ed. Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey, 159-83. Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press.

Cahill, Lisa Sowle. 1985. "Consent in Time of Affliction: The Ethics of a Circumspect Theist." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (Spring): 22-36.

Farley, Edward. 1988. "Theocentric Ethics as a Genetic Argument." In *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics*, ed. Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey, 39-58. Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press.

Gustafson, James M. 1975. *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

———. 1981-84. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. Vol. 1, *Theology and Ethics*. Vol. 2, *Ethics and Theology*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

———. 1988. "Response." In *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics*, ed. Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey, 203-24. Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press.

———. 1994. *A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.

———. 1995a. "Explaining and Valuing: An Exchange between Theology and the Human Sciences." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 30 (June): 159-75.

———. 1995b. "Tracing a Trajectory." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 30 (June): 177-90.

Konner, Melvin. 1982. *The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

McCormick, Richard A., S.J. 1985. "Gustafson's God: Who? What? Where? (Etc.)." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (Spring): 53-70.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1941-43. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*. 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Ramsey, Paul. 1950. *Basic Christian Ethics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Reeder, John P., Jr. 1988. "The Dependence of Ethics." In *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics*, ed. Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey, pp. 119-37. Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press.

Ruse, Michael. 1994. "A Few Last Words—Until Next Time!" In *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (March): 75-79.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. [1830] 1928. *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart. English trans. of 2d German ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.