

RE-CONCEIVING GOD AND HUMANITY IN LIGHT OF TODAY'S EVOLUTIONARY-ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

by Gordon D. Kaufman

Abstract. The anthropocentric orientation of traditional understandings of Christian faith and life, further accentuated by the existentialist terms in which theology was articulated in mid-century by Tillich and others, produced theologies no longer appropriate in today's world of evolutionary and ecological thinking about human existence and its embeddedness in the web of life on planet Earth. This problem can be addressed with the help of several new concepts that enable us to understand both humanity-in-the-world and God in ways in keeping with these present conceptions, thus providing a more intelligible and illuminating way of understanding Christian faith and life today.

Keywords: anthropocentrism; biohistorical; creativity; ecological crisis; evolution; faith; God; historicity; serendipitous creativity; theology; trajectories.

Paul Tillich has greatly influenced my way of thinking about and doing theology, and he remains a stimulating and illuminating mentor. I have learned much from the papers and discussions in the three days of this conference about how, on a fairly broad range of today's issues, Tillich's insights and ideas continue to prove profoundly illuminating to many of you as well.

This does not mean, however (in my view), that it is appropriate for us today to continue simply taking over and employing Tillich's way of thinking

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or his conceptions of, for example, God and humanity, as many of us did earlier in the twentieth century. There have been important changes in our world since the middle third of that century when Tillich was still flourishing—a deepening awareness that human beings are destroying the very basis of human life, and much other life as well, on planet Earth; immense changes in international political and economic arrangements; a growing consciousness of the profoundly pluralistic character of all human life, a pluralism that calls into question our Western and Christian assumptions about the fundamental superiority of our Eurocentric culture and religions over others very different from our own; profound changes (I'm thinking especially of so-called postmodernism here) in the cultural and intellectual sensibility with which we must approach many of our problems today; and so on. And this requires us to formulate our questions and think through our problems in somewhat different ways than anyone could have foreseen in mid-century. Tillich himself, with his profound understanding of the way in which all theological reflection is immersed in, and heavily shaped by, the culture within which it appears, understood all of this very well; indeed, he formulated a theological method, which he thought took it fully into account. But today we can see that his "method of correlation" was itself too parochially conceived, with its supposition that the Christian tradition could provide adequate answers to the deep questions raised in virtually every sort of cultural situation. So, as part of our homage to Tillich, we must move on in our theological work in directions he did not anticipate.

An unspoken presupposition of Tillich's approach to theology, one widely taken for granted throughout much of Christian history, was that faith and theology have to do basically with what we have come to call the *existential* issues of life—how human beings can face and overcome, or live with, the basic problems posed by our freedom, our creativity, our awareness of the necessity to take responsibility for ourselves in face of open and unknown futures. That is, religion and faith, and thus also theology, have sought (for the most part) to address the profound issues posed by human *subjectivity*—despair, guilt, death, meaninglessness, anxiety, sin, and so on, the problems that arise because we are self-conscious subjects and agents. Faith in God, the Ground of all being (as Tillich put it), the Power of being—a Rock of absolute certainty and trustworthiness in which our faith could confidently be placed—could help us address all these tensions of finitude and enable life to go on; such faith would provide us with the "courage to be." This sort of focus and imagery encourages understanding both the Christian God and Christian faith in fundamentally human-centered terms, as bearing largely on certain deep personal problems.

This anthropocentric and personalistic focus of Christian thinking generally (including Tillich) was, of course, deeply connected on the one hand

with the idea that humanity was created in the “image of God” as the very climax of creation and on the other hand with the fact that the traditional conception of God was itself constructed on the model of the human agent. God was envisioned as a kind of cosmic person who had created the world, who cared for his creation (I use male pronouns deliberately here in articulating the traditional understanding of God), who loved humankind and hence entered into human history itself to bring salvation to human beings. This conceptual correlation of God with the human gave the Christian symbol system profound resources for addressing problems arising in connection with what was taken as the distinctive character of humanness (at least of male humanness), namely, subjectivity and agency. Tillich, as well as most other theologians, had confidence, therefore, that there would always be a Christian answer to every existential issue that might arise. With God and the human so closely interconnected, how could it be otherwise? So the “method of correlation,” bringing wide-ranging human problems into direct relation with answers grounded in God’s revelation in Christ, seemed a quite proper formulation of the way Christian theology should be done. (In his last years, it should be noted, Tillich seems to have begun to question this Christian parochialism.)

Today, however, we find ourselves in a period beset by serious problems of a quite different sort. With the advent of the atomic age a half century ago, a great many things began to change. It was becoming evident that we were attaining the power to destroy the very conditions that made human life (and much other life as well) possible; and the notion that God would save us from ourselves as we pursued this self-destructive project became increasingly implausible. Though the nuclear challenge has now receded somewhat, the problem that it symbolized has grown more pressing with our discovery, beginning (for most of us) about thirty years ago, that, whether or not there is a nuclear holocaust, we are rapidly destroying the ecological conditions that make human life possible. Moreover, it seems clear that it is *we* who have to take responsibility for this situation. Humanity, we are beginning to understand, is deeply situated within the evolutionary-ecological processes on planet Earth, as well as within certain sociocultural-ecological processes (as I shall argue presently); and it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine God as one who might, or even can, directly transform and make right what we are so rapidly destroying. So the Christian God (on whom Tillich could still depend and who was at the heart of his method of correlation) no longer seems to provide a clear solution to what is the major problem of human existence today: the ecological crisis—in the broad sense in which I am defining that crisis. This is a very different kind of issue from any that Christians (or other human beings) have ever faced. It is not a matter of finding a way to live with or overcome despair or meaninglessness or guilt or human suffering generally—all largely problems of human subjectivity. Now it is a matter of the

objective conditions that make human life possible: we are destroying them, and it is we who must find a way to set them right.

Moreover, this is not just a specifically Christian or theistic problem; it is a problem in which all human beings are implicated, and we are all called to do our part in its solution. So the central religious issue today confronting humankind is of a different order than ever before. And it will no longer be adequate to claim that Christians have a corner on its solution; nor do Buddhists or the adherents of any other religion. What is now required is a reordering of the whole of human life around the globe in an ecologically responsible manner, something heretofore never contemplated by any of our great religious traditions. All of humankind must learn to work together on this issue, or it will simply not be taken care of. We may not, of course, be able to solve this problem at all; we may already be past the point of no return. We cannot suppose any longer that there will be a distinctively Christian or other traditional answer; we have to think through afresh what Christian theology and other religious and secular orientations can contribute to its satisfactory address. Theology here becomes an essentially *constructive* task in face of a heretofore unimagined situation, and the symbol systems of our various religious and secular traditions have to be reconsidered and reconstructed in light of the character of this nest of problems that today most urgently demands our attention.

What sort of understanding of God and humanity would most help us in addressing these matters? I would like to introduce three concepts here which, taken together, suggest a significantly different understanding than the Christian tradition has heretofore endorsed of God, humanity, and their relationship to each other, an understanding that coheres with our present evolutionary and ecological conceptions of the development and sustainability of life on planet Earth.

First, I want to spell out briefly what I call a *biohistorical* understanding of human being. The natural order, as we are all aware, is the wider context within which humans have appeared on Earth. But it has been especially through the *historical sociocultural* development of humankind over many millennia—not our biological evolution alone—that we have acquired many of our most distinctive and significant characteristics. We need to understand ourselves, therefore, as biohistorical beings, and we will need to understand the ecological problems we face as themselves biohistorical, not simply biological, in character. Second, I want to call attention to what I call the “serendipitous creativity” manifest throughout the universe—that is, the coming into being through time of the new and the novel, whether this leads to what appear (from human and humane perspectives) to be horrifying evils or great goods. I use the concept of creativity here rather than the traditional idea of “God the creator” because it presents creation of the new as ongoing processes or events in the

world and does not call forth an image of a kind of cosmic person standing outside the cosmos, manipulating it from without.¹

Third, because the traditional idea of a powerful *teleological* movement underlying and ordering all cosmic and historical processes (God's purposive activity) has become so problematical in twentieth-century thinking about evolution and history, I propose to replace it with a more modest conception—a conception of what I call *directional movements* or *trajectories* that emerge spontaneously in the course of evolutionary and historical developments. This more open (even random) notion of serendipitous creativity manifesting itself in evolutionary and historical trajectories of various sorts fits in with, but also amplifies in important ways, today's thinking about cosmic processes. It is a notion that can be used to interpret the enormous expansion and complexification of the physical universe from the Big Bang onward as well as the evolution of life on Earth and the gradual emergence of human historical existence. This whole vast cosmic process, I suggest, displays (in varying degrees) serendipitous creativity—the coming into being through time of new modes of reality.

Let us turn, then, to the notion of humans as biohistorical beings. Human historical development over many millennia has been as indispensable to our creation, as we today think of ourselves, as were the biological evolutionary developments that preceded and also continued to accompany the emergence of humankind on planet Earth. As one rather obvious example of this point, consider the impact of the emergence and historical growth of human awareness of, and knowledge about, both the natural world in which we live and our own human constitutions and possibilities. Though taking strikingly different forms in the various cultures of which we are aware, this growing consciousness has in all cultures provided women and men with significant powers over their immediate environment as well as over themselves. In the cultures of modernity human knowledge has become increasingly comprehensive, detailed, and technologized, providing us with considerable control over the physical and biological as well as sociocultural and psychological conditions of our existence, control that goes far beyond that of any other animal. Indeed, we can say that we human beings, and the further course of human history, are no longer completely at the disposal of the natural order and the natural powers that brought us into being as we were, say, ten millennia ago. In the course of human history we have gained—especially in and through our various knowledges and technologies—some measure of *transcendence* over the nature of which we are part. And in consequence, for good or ill, we have utterly transformed the face of Earth and are beginning to push on into space, and we are becoming capable of altering the actual genetic makeup of future human generations.

It appears to be *qua* our development into beings shaped in many respects by historico-cultural processes—that is, humanly created, not merely

natural biological, processes—that we have gained these increasing measures of control over the natural order, as well as over the onward movement of history. In significant respects, thus, our historicity, as we may call it—our being shaped decisively by a history and evolution that have given us power ourselves to shape future history in significant ways—is a distinctive mark of our humanness. On the one hand, in our transcendence of the natural order within which we emerged (through our creation of complex cultures), we humans, as we know ourselves today, are radically different from any other living beings. On the other hand, in our “utter dependence” (to adopt a term of nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher) on the web of life from which and within which humankind emerged, we are at one with every other species.

Our biological nature itself has been shaped and informed by certain important historical developments. The organism that finally emerged as human was, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 67) has pointed out, “both a cultural and a biological product.”² This development of human enculturedness, and the consequent growth of human symbolic behavior, appears to have had particularly strong effects on the evolution of the brain, as brain-scientist Terrence Deacon (1996; 1997) has argued. And our present biological organisms, if left simply to themselves, would be so seriously deficient that they could not function. As Geertz sums up the matter: “We are . . . incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it: Dobuan and Javanese, Hopi and Italian, upper-class, academic and commercial” (Geertz 1973, 49). We are all the way down to the deepest layers of our distinctively human existence, not simply biological beings, animals; we are biohistorical beings.³

Despite the great powers that have come with our knowledges and technologies, we are all aware that our transcendence of the natural orders within which we have emerged is far from adequate to assure ongoing human existence; indeed, the ecological crisis of our time has brought to our attention the fact that precisely through the exercise of our increasing power we have been destroying the very conditions that make life possible on this planet. Paradoxically, our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live, and our growing power over many of the circumstances on planet Earth that have seemed to us undesirable, may in the end lead to our self-destruction.

What moves are possible for human beings to make when confronted with issues of this scope that go well beyond our established knowledge? It is because of deep-seated attitudes of faith and trust and loyalty that we are enabled to continue moving forward into uncertain futures, even though adequate pertinent knowledge and well-verified methods to implement that knowledge are unavailable. Human life is able to go forward in face of profound bafflements because of our “will to believe,” as William James

put it. With this in mind, let us remind ourselves of the sort of faith-moves that have particularly characterized Western religiousness. Unlike most other religious standpoints, in the Hebraic vision, to which the West is heir, human life has been construed as falling within a temporal/historical process: a created world, a world that began at a particular point in time, a world that developed in important ways through time because of God's continuing activity within it. This human story includes both a fall away from God and the emergence of diverse human languages, cultures, and religious practices and beliefs; and it culminates in God's expected overcoming of the sin and evil that humanity had brought into the world, thus bringing it to the perfection originally intended. Many details of the modern evolutionary conception of the development of life differ sharply from this biblical story, but the overall form of these two accounts is much the same: in both, human life is understood within the context of a larger cosmic temporal/historical/evolutionary development.

The biblical account, however, in contrast with the evolutionary story as usually presented, is able to give this developmental process profound human meaning. It displays (a) the human dimension of the story (human history) as possessing an overall unity from beginning to end, brought about by God's purposive presence and activity throughout, an activity (b) believed to be creatively and redemptively moving humankind toward the full realization of God's original loving purposes for humanity. That is, it was the ongoing presence and humanizing activity of *God* in this story that brought the past, present, and future of the world, and of humankind within the world, together into a coherent whole of profound human meaning. Basic orientation for women and men was found, thus, in relation to God—God's purposes, God's ongoing activity, God's will for humankind. Motivation for human beings to orient themselves in accordance with this vision was encouraged by the hope it offered of ultimate human realization and redemption as God's purposes were consummated. The specific character and activity of God bound the human (and cosmic) past, present, and future together into a single coherent and humanly meaningful account.

Is there any way, we need to ask now, in connection with our modern/postmodern, biohistorical, evolutionary story, that the past, present, and future of human existence generally—and of our individual lives in particular—can be situated within a similar unity of development? If we can give a positive answer to this question, we may be able to discern significant human meaningfulness in the evolutionary-historical story that would otherwise not be visible to us. The other two concepts mentioned a moment ago, “serendipitous creativity” and “directional movements” or “trajectories,” can be of help in exploring this matter.⁴

Movement in and through time, as traced today through the long history of the universe and particularly through the evolution of life on Earth,

appears often to result in unprecedented developments and in the appearance of ever new forms, not simply the repetition of patterns that forever repeat themselves. Moreover, these novel developments—for example, the emergence of new evolutionary lines (new species of life)—each have specific potentialities for developing further in some directions but not in others. Such tendencies, as biologist Ernst Mayr says, “are the necessary consequence of the unity of the genotype which greatly constrains evolutionary potential” (Mayr 1988, 435). Ever more complex species have emerged along some evolutionary lines, and we can discern trajectories of a sort eventuating in these new forms. These trajectories are visible, however, only to the retrospective or backward looking view that we take when we survey the past; and there is no reason (from a biological standpoint) to suppose that the process of evolution has actually been directed, somehow, toward this or that specific goal, or toward any goal whatsoever. The processes of natural selection, it appears, themselves bring about the directional momentums that emerge along the various lines along which life has evolved.

On one line, our own, what may be regarded as a new order of reality—historical processes and events—has emerged. The order of history, with its high development of cultures, its diverse modes of social organization, and its exceedingly flexible and complex languages and behaviors, is the only context, so far as we know, within which beings with self-consciousness, with great imaginative powers and creativity, with freedom and responsible agency, have appeared. The evolution of life, of course, has not been a straight-line movement, up from the primeval slime to humanity with its historicity and complex histories; evolutionary developments have obviously gone in many directions. Moreover, it is not evident that the human form is as biologically viable as are many other forms. So from a strictly biological point of view, with its emphasis on survival and perpetuation of the species, there is little reason to think that human life is the most successful or important product of the evolutionary process. However, we are not limiting ourselves here to strictly biological considerations. Our principal concern is to understand our own reality and situation as biohistorical beings in the hope that this will assist us in finding an appropriate way to orient ourselves today in the world in which we are living. As we today look back at the gradually cumulating evolutionary, historical, and ecological development that produced us, outlines of a cosmic trajectory issuing in the creation of beings with historicity become discernible.

There are, no doubt, many other cosmic trajectories as well, moving in quite different directions. But, from where we stand today, with our specifically human needs and interests and our exceedingly diverse configurations of human values, the development of this particular trajectory is obviously of great importance: this manifestation of the serendipitous creativity in the cosmos has given us men and women our very existence, and

it quite properly, therefore, evokes from us both awe and gratitude. Let me make myself clear: I am not claiming that humankind is the best, or the highest, or the most important of all species of life. I am claiming that because of our knowledge and power, especially our power to destroy so much of life, the extraordinarily complex question of our proper place in the ecological order on Earth is one that demands our address today.

To emphasize, as I have just been doing, the connection of what is distinctive about human existence—our humanness, our historicity—with the mystery of creativity in the world is to take a step of faith.⁵ It is, moreover, a movement of faith not as uncommon among intellectuals these days as might at first be supposed. The widespread speculation about, and search for, intelligent life elsewhere in the universe presupposes that there may be some elemental dynamism in the cosmos that can issue in the emergence *in diverse locations* of what I have here been calling historicity—humanlike reality; and this presupposition, this faith, gives rise to the hope that we may, if we search long enough and carefully enough, eventually uncover signs of similar highly complex forms of life in regions far removed from planet Earth. Where the particular trajectory that brought human existence into being on our planet will move in the future we do not, of course, know—perhaps toward the opening of new possibilities for human beings, as we increasingly take responsibility for our lives and our future; perhaps beyond humanity and historicity altogether, however difficult it is to image how that should be understood; perhaps eventuating in the total destruction of human life.

Construing the cosmos in this way, as constituted by (a) cosmic serendipitous creativity which (b) manifests itself through trajectories of various sorts working themselves out in longer and shorter stretches of time, can help us discern our place within the evolutionary-ecological universe that is our home. Our human existence—its purposiveness, its greatly varied complexes of social/moral/cultural/religious values and meanings, its virtually unlimited imaginative powers and glorious creativity, its horrible failures and gross evils, its historicity—has, from this vantage point, a distinctive position within the vast, seemingly impersonal cosmic order. With the emergence of historical modes of being—human being—patterns that are explicitly purposive have appeared in the universe, as human intentions, consciousness, and actions began to become effective. That is, a cosmic trajectory, which had its origins in what seems to have been mere physical movement or vibration, has in this particular instance gradually developed increasing directionality, ultimately creating a context within which deliberate purposive action could emerge and flourish.⁶ With the help of our three new concepts we are beginning to gain some orientation in the universe, as we think of the universe today.

Let us note five points in this connection. First, this approach provides us with a frame within which we can characterize quite accurately and can

unify into an overall vision what seems actually to have happened, so far as we know today, in the course of cosmic evolution and history. Second, this approach gives a significant but not dominant place and meaning to the distinctive biohistorical character of human life within this cosmic process; and in so doing, it identifies the ecological niche that humankind occupies within this process as necessarily a biohistorical one. Such a niche can be properly defined and described only by specifying carefully not only the physical and biological features required for human life to go on but the importance of certain historical features as well. It is, for example, only in sociocultural contexts in which some measure of justice, freedom, order, and mutual respect sufficiently prevail and in which distribution of the goods of life (food, shelter, health, education, economic opportunity, and so on) is sufficiently equitable that children in each new generation can be expected to have a reasonable chance of maturing into responsible and productive adult women and men who can take the sort of responsibility for their society and for planet Earth that is now required of human beings worldwide.

Third, the biohistorical features of our human ecological niche themselves thus make possible a way of thinking that can assist communities and individuals, as we develop further our notions of value and meaning, to understand better and assess more fully both the adequacy of the biological context of our lives and the import of the historical sociocultural developments through which we are living, thus enabling us to take up more responsible roles within these contexts and developments.⁷ For example, the disastrous consequences of the growing power of today's global corporate capitalism for the people living in Earth's southern hemisphere come clearly into view when they are examined and assessed in light of the ecological necessities that must be maintained if human existence is to survive there.

Fourth, because this approach highlights the linkage of serendipitous cosmic creativity with our humanness and the humane values so important to us, as well as with our ecological niche, it can support hope (but not certainty) for the future of our human world. It is a hope about the overall direction of future human history—hope for truly creative movement toward ecologically and morally responsible, though still quite pluralistic, human existence.

Finally, fifth, a hope of this sort, grounded on the mystery of creativity in the world, a creativity that, on our trajectory, evidences itself in part through our own creative powers, can help motivate us men and women to devote our lives to bringing about this more humane and ecologically rightly ordered world to which we aspire. In this way our human past, present, and future are drawn together in an overall vision of the ongoing biohistorical process in which we are situated—our niche within the ecology of

planet Earth—a vision, moreover, that will help us identify and address the problems in today's world that most urgently demand our attention.

This frame of orientation or vision of reality is not, of course, in any way forced upon us; it can be appropriated, as I have suggested, only by means of our own personal and collective decisions, our own acts of faith in face of the ultimate mystery of life and the world. This is a frame with sufficient richness and specification to provide significant orientation for our time, but it can accomplish this only if we decide to commit ourselves to it, ordering our lives and building our futures in the terms it prescribes. Acceptance of this vision can help women and men in our world—not only those who think of themselves as religious in some more or less traditional sense but also those of quite different persuasions—to gain some sense of identity, some sense of who they are and what they ought to be doing with their lives. And the hope that the momentum of our biohistorical trajectory will move forward creatively toward a more humane and ecologically well-ordered world can help motivate us to give ourselves in strong commitment to that trajectory's continuing growth and development.

Today we are being drawn beyond our present condition and order of life by creative impulses in this trajectory, suggesting decisions and movements now required of us. If we respond in appropriately creative ways to the biohistorical ecological forces impinging upon us on all sides, there is a possibility, though no certainty, that a niche for humankind better fitted to the wider ecological order on Earth than our present niche may be brought into being. However, if we fail to so respond, it seems likely that humankind may not survive much longer. Are we willing to commit ourselves to live and act in accord with the imperatives laid upon us by the biohistorical situation in which we find ourselves, in the hope that our actions will be supported and enhanced by cosmic serendipitously creative events? In my view it is this kind of hope, and faith, and commitment to which the trajectory that has brought us into being now calls us.

I have thus far deliberately refrained in these remarks from closely connecting the ideas of serendipitous creativity and of evolutionary and historical trajectories with the more traditional notions (to which they correspond) of God and God's activity. It has seemed to me important that the questions about the appropriateness and usefulness of these ideas be considered in their own right as facilitating a suggestive interpretation of the evolutionary-ecological universe in which we today take ourselves to be living, whatever may be their specifically theological significance. But I would like to point out now in conclusion that the world picture I am beginning to sketch here opens a significant way to construe the symbol "God" today. The serendipitous creativity to which this world picture calls our attention is, in my view, that which can most appropriately be

thought of today as God. If we take up, in this way, this most comprehensive and profound symbol of the ultimate mystery of things with which our Western cultures and languages have provided us, the full religious potential and significance of the idea of creativity is brought directly into view. As I have tried to show in my book *In Face of Mystery* (1993), it is not difficult to set out the main outlines of this world picture in theocentric—indeed, specifically Christian—terms.

It will be obvious to all, I presume, that a world picture of this sort, heavily dependent as it is on contemporary evolutionary, historical, and ecological thinking, evokes a significantly different faith and hope and piety than that associated with the Christian symbol system as traditionally interpreted—or, for that matter, as interpreted largely in Tillichian terms. Because creativity is manifest throughout the cosmos, as well as in all human cultural and religious traditions and activities, thinking of God in these terms undercuts the arrogant stance of much traditional Christianity vis-à-vis the natural order as a whole and toward other religious and secular traditions in particular; Christians may no longer consider themselves to be authorized in what they say and do by God's special revelation. Nevertheless, important continuities with traditional Christian understandings as well as Tillichian understandings remain, continuities significant enough to warrant considering this picture of the world and the human place within it appropriate for Christian faith today.

First and most important, understanding the ultimate mystery of things, God, in terms of the metaphor of serendipitous creativity manifesting itself in a variety of evolutionary and historical trajectories instead of in terms of the essentially anthropomorphic (or, more precisely, andromorphic) creator/lord/father metaphors that constituted the traditional picture of God, with his largely anthropocentric purposes, facilitates even more effectively than the traditional imagery did maintaining a decisive qualitative distinction, though not an ontological separation, between God and the created order. Such a distinction, perhaps the most important contribution of monotheistic religious orientations to human self-understanding, provides the basis for regarding God (creativity, in this proposed scheme) as the sole appropriate focus for human devotion and worship, that which alone can properly orient human life in today's world. All other realities, being finite, transitory, and corruptible—created goods that come into being and pass away rather than the creative good from which other goods all come, as H. N. Wieman (1946, chap. 3) put it—however important and valuable, become dangerous idols, which, when worshipped and made the central focus of human orientation, bring disaster into human affairs. This distinction between God and the idols is strongly emphasized in the symbolic picture I am sketching here, as it is also, though in a quite different way, in Tillich's symbolic picture, developed in terms of the metaphors of being-itself, the ground of being, and the power of being.

Second, in keeping with this first point, conceiving of humans as biohistorical beings who have emerged on one of the countless creative trajectories moving through the cosmos, instead of as the climax of all creation, distinguished from all other creatures as the very “image of God,” makes it clear that human beings are indissolubly a part of the created order and not in any way to be confused with the serendipitous creativity that has produced not only us but the entire cosmos as well, in all its complexity, order, and beauty. So, in the picture I am sketching here, the too-easy anthropocentrism of traditional Christian thinking is thoroughly undercut (more decisively, I think, than in Tillich’s theology). Humankind can exist only, as far as we are aware, within the boundaries and conditions of life found on the particular trajectory within the created order in which we have appeared.

Though strikingly different in important respects from some traditional Christian emphases, this understanding of God and of the human is clearly a form of *radical monotheism*, to use H. R. Niebuhr’s term (see Niebuhr 1960), that is appropriate to the constraints of modern/postmodern thinking and existence. Moreover, it is a conception that can be developed into a full-orbed Christian interpretation of human faith and life if the creativity that is God is brought into significant connection with the poignancy and power of the story and character of Jesus—regarded by Christians as the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15) that is paradigmatic for the human sphere of life.⁸ I therefore propose this reconstruction of the conceptions of God and humanity as providing a way for Christian faith—and perhaps some other faiths as well—to reconstitute themselves in light of our contemporary evolutionary/ecological sensibility and knowledge.

NOTES

I feel highly honored to have been invited to address this International Paul Tillich Conference on “The Religious Situation at the Dawn of the Third Millennium.” Tillich was a very important figure in my own theological development. It was my good fortune to have been able to participate in two seminars on philosophical theology that he offered at Yale while I was a graduate student there, and I devoted much attention to his theological and philosophical ideas in my doctoral dissertation. Over the years I have continued to read Tillich regularly with my graduate students.

1. The issues at stake here are discussed at some length in my book *In Face of Mystery: a Constructive Theology* (Kaufman 1993), especially chaps. 19 and 22.

2. The sociobiologists C. J. Lumsden and E. O. Wilson (1983), with their concept of “geneculture coevolution,” appear to concur with this judgment.

3. This notion is worked out in much greater detail in Kaufman 1993, Part 2.

4. A more extensive discussion of “serendipitous creativity” and of evolutionary and historical “trajectories” will be found in Kaufman 1993, especially chaps. 19 and 20.

5. For elaboration of the notion of “steps of faith,” see Kaufman 1993, especially chap. 17 and pp. 284–88.

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 just!) for the birth of new forms—new life through death and decay of the old” (Peacocke 1984, 430).

7. A much more elaborated sketch of the ethic implied by the distinctively biohistorical character of human existence is in Kaufman 1993, chaps. 10–15.

8. In *In Face of Mystery* (Kaufman 1993) I have attempted to present such a Christian world picture; for a somewhat briefer version, see Kaufman 1996.

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