

Gordon Kaufman's Legacy to Theology and Science

with Myriam Renaud, "Gordon Kaufman's Humanizing Concept of God"; Jerome P. Soneson, "The Legacy of Gordon Kaufman: Theological Method and Its Pragmatic Norms"; J. Patrick Woolley, "Kaufman's Debt to Kant: The Epistemological Importance of the 'Structure of the World which Environs Us'"; Thomas A. James, "Gordon Kaufman, Flat Ontology, and Value: Toward an Ecological Theocentrism"; and Karl E. Peters, "A Christian Naturalism: Developing the Thinking of Gordon Kaufman."

A CHRISTIAN NATURALISM: DEVELOPING THE THINKING OF GORDON KAUFMAN

by Karl E. Peters

Abstract. This essay develops a theological naturalism using Gordon Kaufman's nonpersonal idea of God as serendipitous creativity in contrast to the personal metaphorical theology of Sallie McFague. It then develops a Christian theological naturalism by using Kaufman's idea of historical trajectories, specifically Jesus trajectory₁ and Jesus trajectory₂. The first is the trajectory in the early Christian church assuming a personal God in the framework of Greek philosophy that results in the Trinity. The second is the naturalistic-humanistic trajectory of creativity (God) that evolves from nonpersonal interactions in the universe and life to creativity in persons and is manifested in Jesus as love. This is elaborated further with Dean Keith Simonton's Darwinian understanding of genius and Marcus Borg's analysis of Jesus as Jewish mystic, teacher of alternative wisdom, and nonviolent resister to the domination system of the Roman Empire. What makes Jesus a religious genius is his exemplifying unconditional, universal love—a new mode of creativity (God) that has evolved from nonhuman to a human form.

Keywords: Christology; creativity; Darwinian evolution; Gordon Kaufman; metaphor; nonviolent resistance; religious naturalism

Can a Christian be a naturalist: one whose life orientation is rooted in Jesus Christ, who knows things through sense experiences, everyday or scientific, who understands the causes of things to be in nature and human history,

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and who finds the meaning and purpose of life in this world? This essay develops a view that it is possible to be both a naturalist and a Christian.

Other religious traditions might also be thought out naturalistically. Buddhism and Confucianism seem to have an affinity for naturalism. Judaism and Islam certainly focus on how humans should live here and now. My focus will be on Christianity and based on the fact that Gordon Kaufman is both a bio-historical naturalist and a Mennonite Christian. I will develop a Kaufmanian Christology drawing on Darwinian theory and some current New Testament scholarship. The structure of my remarks will be based on Kaufman's two big ideas: the idea of God as serendipitous creativity and the idea of historical trajectories leading to a Christology, an understanding of who Jesus was and what he means for us today. As Jerome Stone proposes, "a Christian naturalism definitely needs: (a) some notion of God, and (b) probably needs something like a Christology, both within the framework of a naturalist world view" (Stone 2011, 205).

PERSONAL AND NONPERSONAL CONCEPTS OF GOD—MCFAGUE AND KAUFMAN

I first became aware of Kaufman and his theology when I read Sallie McFague's *Models of God* in the late 1980s. When I saw her critique of his concept of a nonpersonal "God," I said to myself, "this is also a critique of my idea" (McFague 1987, 79–54). I immediately bought and read Kaufman's *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985). Not since I did my doctoral dissertation on Henry Nelson Wieman and his idea of God as the creative event had I encountered anyone with whom I resonated theologically more than Kaufman (Peters 1971). Both of us were working out, in similar ways, what Wieman called "naturalistic theism" grounded in knowledge from the various sciences. Its goal was to orient human beings for living in relation to "God" in a nuclear, ecological age—God being the unifying symbol for the processes of nature and history that have created humans and that can make humans more humane.

Both Kaufman and McFague have been addressing the current human/world crises of how to continue to live here on Earth in a way that is sustainable, compassionate, and just. Both emphasize that theology is constructive: all religious ideas are constructed by the human imagination in relation to experience. Concepts are human constructions, even in the sciences and in religious traditions. Where the two differ is on the kinds of concepts that should be constructed theologically today. McFague advocates personal metaphors, while Kaufman uses nonpersonal metaphors for God.

McFague develops a personal model of God that uses metaphors drawn out of our experiences of the human person. Such a model is effective because it is based on what we are most familiar with. It also has a richness

because it is based on “the most complex part of the whole that is the universe—that is on the model of ourselves” (McFague 1987, 82). Yet not all personal models are to be affirmed. In *Models of God*, she counters metaphors of God as Father and King from the Christian patriarchal tradition with metaphors of God as Mother, Lover, and Friend that draw on other parts of the biblical story as well as current feminist thought (McFague 1987, 91–180). In both of these personal models, it would be idolatry to take these metaphors literally as descriptions of what God is. Idolatry does not acknowledge that all metaphors are human constructions and subject to change. Both patriarchal and intimate metaphors are relational. They can be evaluated by unpacking the kind of relationships they imply as to how humans should live in relation to whatever it is that “God” is. Is that relationship one of submission to a distant divine reality or of interactive cooperation with an immediately present God? How one responds to such a question is influenced by the cultural context. McFague’s relational metaphors of generation, intimacy, and commitment can help support human bonding with the sacred in more egalitarian, democratic societies, especially in varieties of liberal or progressive Christianity.

A significant problem, as Kaufman points out, arises when theologians try to apply a model of God based on human persons to the evolutionarily wider and much older aspects of the universe. Even scientists sometimes speak with personal metaphors about human relationships to the universe. Eric Chaisson, for example, writes, “we are children of the universe” (Chaisson 2006, 433). Others talk about “grandmother star,” the supernova that created all the elements that are the basis for earth and its life (Swimme 1993, 116–17). That these statements are metaphorical is clear. We are offspring of the processes that have brought us into being. There is no danger of these metaphors being interpreted to say that the universe has for all time and space, prior to the evolution of humans, the personal qualities of a parent or grandparent. However, when theologians use metaphorically a personal model of God, the model is usually extended to the earliest times, to the very beginning of the universe. It is taken as the characterization of God throughout the billions of years that the universe has evolved. This may be a holdover from a Platonic way of thinking that is largely nontemporal and in which the highest or most perfect form of each created thing is an aspect of the divine creative reality—for all time.

Such a generalization of the human person as a model of the creative reality that underlies the universe worked well when the history of the universe was believed to be relatively brief. However, we now have what Philip Hefner has called the “problem of scale” (personal communication). Today our universe is scientifically thought to be 13.7 billion years old with 100 billion galaxies, each with roughly 100 billion stars. To realize how big a number this is, Chaisson points out that it takes about fifteen minutes to count to 1,000, more than two weeks to count to 1,000,000,

and fifty years to count to 1,000,000,000 at one number per second, for eighteen hours a day (Chaisson 2006, 2). Impressed by the “magnificent panorama of creativity” from the big bang to the diversity of life today, in an interview with the Boston Globe, Kaufman has said of the traditional, personal model of God, “How can we think of [a] human being running that show?” (Barlow 2006). McFague would reply that God is like no other person. Yet, it seems to me that the personal metaphorical model of McFague and others is stretched beyond its limit when one considers the problem of scale. On the other hand, some nonpersonal metaphors such as forces and processes of creativity can be regarded as continuous throughout the immensity of space-time. Thus they have a universality that personal metaphors do not. Recognizing this helps one better comprehend one of the underlying tensions between the sciences and those forms of religion that think of the divine or sacred with the language of human persons.

In contrast to McFague, Kaufman’s constructivist methodology eschews personal language because of its associations with God as a being or agent and because of the problem of applying the personal model to the entire history of the universe. Instead Kaufman uses language that is nonpersonal. His primary metaphor for God is ongoing *serendipitous creativity*, which points to interactions within the natural world and human history that unpredictably give rise to new forms of matter, life, and human culture. It is important to recognize that this creativity is not an additional cause operative in the universe, beyond those causes that are discoverable by empirical and scientific inquiry. Rather *serendipitous creativity* is a unifying symbol for all creative physical, chemical, biological, and historical causal processes. It includes the creativity found in cosmic, biological, and human cultural evolution. It includes the human creativity that constructs the story of this scientifically grounded epic of creation, this “big history” of our universe including ourselves. It also includes the mystery of creativity itself, of whatever it is that gives rise to universe and to its ongoing creativity (Kaufman 2004, 76). Further, the serendipity of this creativity means that it always remains *mysterious*, always beyond the human ability to foresee accurately the future. There is always room for surprise.

Hence God, that is creativity, *relativizes* all that has been created to date, including all that humans have created. Nothing created can be taken as absolute; it is only relative to its historical context. This includes the results of all human endeavors—science, art, political and economic systems, and religions. In Wieman’s terms, our most fundamental faith or commitment should always be to ongoing creativity and not to anything that has been so far created, to “creative good” and not to “created goods” (Wieman 1946, 54–58; cf. Kaufman 2006, 8). To give allegiance to what has been created and not to creativity is idolatry.

The distinction between the Creator or God and what has been created or the Creation is an important feature of Western religions. However,

the distinction has usually been framed as between God and the World, and thus it tends toward dualism and supernaturalism. Instead, Kaufman, following Wieman, maintains the meaning of this distinction within a naturalistic, evolutionary world view, so what has been created (e.g., a political, economic, educational, religious or any other organizational system) does not become an idol. In the end, it really is how one is oriented in one's life that matters—whether one is open to the possibilities of new things emerging from the serendipity of the world's causality, or one holds on to the causal repetitiveness that keeps things in being as they are (Peters 1993, 201–07). Of course, both innovation and conserving are important and need to be in balance in dynamic equilibrium. Yet, in a continuously evolving world, creativity should be affirmed as more fundamental than what at any time has been created.

KAUFMAN AS A CHRISTIAN NATURALISTIC THEOLOGIAN

What we have said so far qualifies Kaufman as a naturalistic theologian but not a Christian naturalistic theologian. In recent years I have begun to think about the significance of Kaufman's Mennonite heritage. He was born into a Mennonite family, was ordained, and continued his ordination as a Mennonite Christian minister. He has regularly characterized the normative Mennonite orientation as being compassionate and seeking peace and justice (Kaufman 1988). Mennonites are well known for their social gospel. In an extended reflection on his life and thought, he writes that "the central Mennonite theme—about the interconnection of a radical ethic of love with radical faith in God—has been at the center of my intellectual development, indeed, at the center of much of my life" (Kaufman 2001, 6).

How can these two themes be united in a naturalistic Christology? We can begin with Kaufman's idea of historical trajectories. Along with his concept of God as serendipitous creativity, this is his second major idea and contribution to religious thought. There are countless historical trajectories emerging as a result of the causal interactions of serendipitous creativity—cosmic, biological, and human-cultural. Out of particular trajectories, new trajectories emerge. Examples are the emergence of our solar system from an earlier generation massive star that "died" as a supernova (grandmother star), and the emergence of a new species through Darwinian variation and selection. Likewise, human history contains many cultural trajectories. Each can give rise to further trajectories such as the emergence of Christianity from Judaism in the context of the Greco-Roman world.

Within Christianity Kaufman writes of two different historical trajectories stemming from Jesus. One trajectory leads to a supernatural understanding of Jesus. "Jesus trajectory₁" begins with his baptism by John the Baptist, teachings of the coming Kingdom of God, and his crucifixion. Next, there is among his followers the emergence of the belief that God

has raised him from the dead and that he is the Son of God who is himself bringing God's Kingdom. The third conceptual step in this trajectory is the emergence of the conviction that Jesus ascended to heaven and that in his life on earth he was the incarnation of God. Finally, Jesus trajectory₁ culminates in the church's development of the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the Son (Jesus Christ) has equal divine status with God the Father and the Holy Spirit (Kaufman 2006, 11). This trajectory assumes a dualism of the natural and supernatural, so that the person Jesus becomes divinized and understood to be fully God and fully human. As fully divine and fully human he is the mediator between human beings and God, saving humans from sin and promising eternal life.

The second Christian trajectory, "Jesus trajectory₂," leads to a naturalistic-humanistic understanding of Jesus, represented by Kaufman himself. This trajectory becomes clearer after the rise of historical, biblical scholarship in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. This scholarship enables a reconstruction of Jesus and his significance for today that is in keeping with the idea of God as serendipitous creativity, which now takes shape in the form of a normative moral standard. Kaufman writes:

The reconstruction of Jesus' ministry, leading up to his death as a dangerous rabble-rouser in Roman Palestine, is plausible historically and presents us with a Jesus in many respects still quite attractive: his forthright challenge to the conventional religion of his time; his forceful preaching punctuated with striking parables; his beautiful vision of the coming kingdom of God in which the sick are healed, the poor are cared for, and the outcast and despised are welcomed to the dinner table; his radical emphasis on love as the overarching posture within which humans should live their lives—love of God, love of neighbor, indeed love of enemies; his unwavering conviction that he must not respond violently against those who were forcing upon him the bitter death of crucifixion; his profound hope that God was bringing in a New Age. (Kaufman 2006, 21)

Regarding the resurrection and the appearances of Jesus after his death to his disciples, instead of following Jesus' trajectory₁, Kaufman "demythologizes" the worldview of two thousand years ago, including the idea of an anthropomorphic deity (Peters 2008, 277). In twenty-first century language, the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus symbolizes "that the ultimate divine creativity—God—has participated (and continues to participate) in the human sphere in a special way." Jesus becomes the "criterion or model for those Christians of what human life ought to be, a model that the divine creativity made possible. Although the early Christians understood and spoke of this matter largely in mythic terms that modern Christians may no longer find useful or even intelligible, this claim about Jesus' *normativity* in human affairs remains important to most Christians today" (Kaufman 2006, 24).

The Jesus model for how humans should live is universal, unconditional love. This love is both the norm for understanding how humans should live and for understanding what God, serendipitous creativity, has become for humans. Kaufman's book *In Face of Mystery* develops this idea using the Johannine New Testament tradition (Kaufman 1993, 406–07). In Christ, God loved the world (John 3:16); if one loves one another, she or he is related to God, for God is love (I John 4:7–8). In *Jesus and Creativity* Kaufman relates the idea “God is love” to his understanding of God as serendipitous creativity. In the natural world, which includes humans, serendipitous creativity is ambiguous from our human point of view. On the one hand, after billions of years it gives rise to humanity and countless other species of life on Earth. On the other hand, creativity in the natural world often shows no regard for human well-being. In Jesus this nonpersonal, ambiguous creativity (God) takes the form of a person who shows unconditional, indiscriminating love, and who continuously seeks peace and justice in the inhumane, unjust, and brutal world of Roman occupation.

Thus Jesus represents a new mode of creativity that is normative for understanding what “God” means for humans and for how humans should live more humanely. Serendipitous creativity continues in its cosmic-biological mode, nonpersonally, without regard for human well being; in this mode it is nonmoral. However, this all-compassing creativity that is the origin of all things does provide one criterion for a life orientation, namely that it calls into question the idolatries of giving ultimate commitment to whatever has been created (Kaufman 2006, 52). In Jesus this creativity becomes personal, a creativity among humans that is life orienting, providing meaning and moral direction that responds to the challenges of living with love, peace, and justice.

This is a very important point and may mark one of Kaufman's most significant contributions to contemporary thought. Let's review Kaufman's two big ideas (serendipitous creativity and trajectories) to emphasize how God *becomes a new mode of creativity* in Jesus. In a Platonic way of thinking, God is unchanging, the same always and forever in contrast to the temporal changing world. Kaufman suggests that God evolves: over billions of years in the course of new developments in the evolution of the universe, the natural-historical creative processes themselves evolve—unified for us today by a humanly constructed, expanding theological symbol “serendipitous creativity.” From what we know from recent science, in the earliest phase (for the first seven billion years) we can symbolize serendipitous creativity (God) as the interaction of energy, physical-chemical forces and laws that created atoms, stars, galaxies, and molecules. In a second phase, we can expand this metaphor of serendipitous creativity into a symbol not only of physical-chemical processes, but of Darwinian type interactions (variation, selection, retention) that create new forms of life on Earth over

four billion years. In a third phase we can expand this symbol further to include the creativity of humans, emerging in the past one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand years as sentient, self-conscious, and intentionally self-directing beings. Thus serendipitous creativity comes to symbolize God in a way that includes all creativity including the creativity of human persons. In other words, even though “creativity—the coming into being of new realities—is an inscrutable mystery” (Kaufman 2006, 7) we can from our limited perspective construct the idea of a trajectory of what is symbolized as serendipitous creativity. Simply put, the trajectory of creativity runs from physical-chemical forces and processes, through Darwinian interactions among life on Earth, to interactions among human persons and between humans with the rest of the world. Only in the latest phase does the universal creativity (God) become personal. Personal metaphors, then, are appropriate for understanding human persons and for understanding the significance of Jesus (and other religious leaders) for our lives. However, they should not be applied to the creativity of the world before the emergence of humanity.

In its human phase, as humans throughout history interact with one another in their wider social and natural environments, systems of thought and values for the guidance of human living are formed. Understandings are created as to how the world and humans came into being. A diversity of worldviews are created and a few become major religious traditions, each with its own way of engaging with creativity to provide guidance for living. For example, following Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, many practices of meditation have become the central focus of ways to live in at peace, as one is involved with the ever changing flow of all created, transient beings. Following the way of Moses, Jews have developed a creatively evolving Torah of stories and rules to provide guidance in an ever changing Hebrew-Jewish history in relation to other societies. From the perspective in this essay that is attempting to develop a Christian naturalism, the universal-historical serendipitous creativity evolves into the mode of creativity present in the interactions between Jesus and his followers to offer a new understanding of “God” and how people should live. Jesus becomes the focal point for a new trajectory (Jesus trajectory₂) of how people should live in relation to one another, the wider world, and to creativity itself. The heart of this trajectory is unconditional, universal love.

METAPHORS FOR JESUS AND HIS SIGNIFICANCE

According to Jaroslav Pelikan, in the history of Christianity there are many symbols of Jesus that show his significance for the Christian community in the varying, wider cultural context (Pelikan 1985). Reflecting on the metaphors in Pelikan’s *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, I can see that some of these metaphors are biblically based: Rabbi in

relation to Judaism at the time of Jesus, Light to the Gentiles as Christianity spreads beyond the boundaries of Palestine, King of Kings in the context of the Roman Empire, the Son of Man who revealed both the promise of human life and the power of evil in fifth century Christian psychology and anthropology, Christ Crucified of the Middle Ages when the suffering of Jesus on the cross became the primary image of salvation in Christianity (Brock and Parker 2008, 223ff.), and the Prince of Peace in the resurgence of pacifism among the Anabaptists (Kaufman's heritage). Other metaphors reflect philosophical developments in the culture and Christian theologians responding: the Cosmic Christ of Christian Platonism, the Divine-Human Model that inspired Francis of Assisi to transform the way of Christian living and the institutional Church. Still others are rooted in the culture itself as expressions of the significance of Jesus: the Universal Man of the Renaissance, the Mirror of Eternal truth in the Protestant Reformation, the Teacher of Common Sense Morals during the Enlightenment, the Poet of the Spirit in the nineteenth century Romantic movement, and the Liberator in the social gospel and human rights movements of the last two centuries. One might add Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "the Man for Others" in the context of Nazi Germany (Bonhoeffer 1972, 382; see also Beck 2010).

The point I wish to make is that Christologies can be rooted in diverse root metaphors that offer a variety of lenses through which the religious significance of Jesus can be understood. Kaufman, who has been influenced by Mennonite social justice teachings and feminist theory (Fiorenza et al. 1991), draws on the peace and liberation traditions. As a constructivist theologian he might also have drawn on the metaphors of Universal Man, Teacher of Common Sense Morals, and Man for Others. They too are possibilities for a Christian naturalism.

In this context of multiple metaphors, we can ask what new symbols might portray the significance of Jesus in a naturalistic worldview, symbols that are compatible with contemporary science and, in our pluralistic world, with many other religious trajectories, some with their own significant, culturally transformative individuals. I would like to offer for our consideration a new metaphor in the spirit of constructivist theology—namely Jesus as a "Religious Genius."

If creativity is ever present in the world and among humans, how can we understand Jesus as a religious genius? Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton has spent much of his professional life studying creativity and genius. Following Campbell (1960), he takes a Darwinian approach and develops a blind variation, selection, retention (BVSR) model of creativity (Simonton 1999, 26–27). A creative person is marked by bringing into being new products, solutions to problems, scientific theories, technological inventions, kinds of music, works of art, and ways of living that are both original and useful—new variations that are selected and retained in a culture. There is everyday "little c" creativity, in which many engage, such

as finding an original use for a piece of furniture, playing a catchy new tune, constructing an original bouquet of flowers, or improvising a new recipe. There also is “Big-C” Creativity where “originality is much more striking and the usefulness much more pervasive.” There is no precedent for the result, and it “revolutionizes a whole domain of achievement” so that a scientific idea (Einstein), mode of music (Bach), form of art (Picasso), or kind of poetry (the sonnet) becomes an exemplar that influences others and acquires imitators, admirers, and disciples. In other words, the result is what Thomas Kuhn has called a “paradigm shift” (Kuhn 1996). “Big-C” creativity is creativity at the level of genius.

In his work, Simonton considers geniuses in a wide variety of domains such as the sciences, arts, and politics. However, he intentionally decides not to discuss religious genius as identified in an earlier work by Michael Hart, who rated Mohammed, Isaac Newton, and Jesus as the top three most influential people in history (Hart 2000). Simonton thinks that the idea of genius would be demeaning for the prophet Mohamed or Jesus as the Son of God (Simonton 2009, 15). It seems to me that Simonton is thinking here in the context of traditional supernaturalism. If one takes an evolutionary perspective, as both Simonton and I do (Peters 1982), the idea that Jesus and other founders of religious movements are geniuses becomes worth exploring.

To see how Jesus may be understood as a religious genius, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg’s analysis of Jesus in terms of comparative religions is helpful. After decades of work with others in the Jesus Seminar distinguishing the historical Jesus from later Christian thinking about Jesus, Borg sees three dimensions to that which he calls the “pre-Easter Jesus” (Borg and Wright 2007, 7): a spirit dimension, a wisdom dimension, and a political dimension. Together these lead to a vision of the Christian life with the same three dimensions.

In the spirit dimension Borg says that Jesus was a Jewish mystic, comparable to mystics and shamans in a variety of societies around the world. He was one who was centered in God and had experiential knowledge of God, one in whom the sense of separation and distinction was replaced by a sense of union, of connection with “what is,” one for whom the boundaries of the self had grown soft and the dome of the protective ego had fallen away (Borg 2006, 132–33.) We might say, in Kaufman’s terms, that Jesus lived completely in creativity. This experiential connection guided Jesus’ teachings (wisdom) and actions (politics).

In the wisdom dimension, in contrast to knowledge about the world and ourselves (from experience and science), wisdom is about how we should live. Wisdom teachers are found in all cultures. Some teach conventional wisdom: the morality and mores in which people should be socialized that already have been created. Others, like Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, Socrates, and Jesus teach an alternative wisdom that challenges existing

norms, a result their being open to creative possibilities in the flow of things. Through his teachings Jesus challenged an elaborate system of rewards and punishments that marginalized some people (he declared that all are children of a loving God). He challenged the purity codes of his day (he ate with sinners and tax collectors), and the egotistic striving to be first to get rewards and preserving one's life about all else ("the first shall be last," dying to self and being reborn leads to abundant life).

In the political dimension, according to Borg, Jesus was a "non-violent revolutionary," challenging the "domination system" of his day, the Roman Empire that had been accommodated by some Jewish leaders. This system exhibited its own creativity in promoting itself at the expense of others. With alternative wisdom Jesus opposed the Roman domination system by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was occurring among the people he was with as he ate with and healed social outcasts and told stories that encouraged people to look at themselves and society in new ways. Examples are the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He also developed for his day what New Testament scholar Walter Wink calls "Jesus' third way"—a path between submission and engaging in a violent response against evil, which only furthers evil behavior (Wink 1998, 98–111). This is the way of nonviolent resistance in the face of unjust systems of domination. We have seen the effectiveness of this "third way" in recent history, significant changes creatively catalyzed by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar (Suu Kyi 2010).

Jesus was an exemplar of this third way in his teachings and during his final week in Jerusalem. The Palm Sunday procession, the throwing the money changers out of the Temple, the debates with Jewish leaders, all are actions of a nonviolent revolutionary that protest the domination system on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Borg writes that "the opening act of this week is the Palm Sunday procession." This was not the only procession at that time. Each year at Passover, the Roman governor Pilate rode into Jerusalem with his armed forces from the West. He came from the governing city of Maritima on the Mediterranean coast to guard against things getting out of hand among the Jews. Jesus came into Jerusalem from the East. The biblical texts tell us that this was not accidental. It was a procession that Jesus planned. According to Borg, "His decision to enter the city as he did was what we could call a planned political demonstration, a counter-demonstration. The juxtaposition of these two processions embodies the central conflict of Jesus's last week: the kingdom of God or the kingdom of imperial domination . . . two visions of life on earth" (Borg 2006, 232).

This brief analysis of Jesus's actions suggests that Jesus is a "religious genius" in terms of originality. There were other rabbis who summarized the teachings of the Torah as loving God and neighbor. However, Jesus through

his teachings and actions exemplified a historically original contribution for his place and time: a new ideal of universal nondiscriminating love and justice for all people. He himself was an exemplar of that love (Borg calls it “compassion”) that led to a passion for justice.

This ideal and inspiration took on a life of its own in the further creative interactions among his followers. Regardless of how we might view their experiences of Jesus after his death, the love of Jesus continued. One way of understanding this is in light of the thought of Wieman, for whom everything is an event—an interaction among a variety of parts in relationship. In the New Testament, the life of Jesus is told as a series of events, and his parables portray events. In such events Jesus catalyzed creative interchange with his disciples which transformed them so that they became capable of such interchange with one another. Immediately following the death of Jesus, this interchange seemed to cease, only to return in a new way. During Jesus’ life it had been limited in scope to its Jewish context. However, with his death and resurrection creative loving broke through this cultural limitation to become available to the wider world, universal in its scope (Wieman 1946, 39–44, 278).

This kind of event continues as the unconditional, undiscriminating loving that Jesus practiced during his life. People today participate in the Christ event (which they may call by other names) whenever they expand the boundaries of their communities with acts of compassion and justice for all. In effect then, Jesus is a religious genius, an example of Big-C creativity, both in terms of originality (new variation) and usefulness (cultural selection and retention). This is the heart of Christian Naturalism.

True, as Christianity grew in numbers and complexity, there have emerged within it idolatrous trajectories supporting systems control, war, and domination. Nevertheless, following the thinking of Kaufman, the undiscriminating love, peace, and justice emerging from the serendipitous creativity at work in Jesus and his followers can be regarded as a set of cultural selection pressures for guiding human behavior today.

As a result of new knowledge from various sciences and their technologies, humanity has become more unified, cultural pluralism is more widely experienced, and the importance of being dependent on the wider ecological matrix of planet Earth is better understood. In this new bio-cultural environment, behavior that is based on human tendencies toward excessive consumption, domination, and violence is the inhumane way to future diminishment, decay, and death. In contrast, Jesus’ example of universal, undiscriminating love inspires a religious orientation that leads to the creation and continuation of wholesome relationships with one another and other species. In other cultures there are also evolved trajectories with similar goals, which can be understood naturalistically. All these trajectories are needed if humans everywhere are to flourish together with other forms of life on our planetary home.

NOTE

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