

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."

KAUFMAN'S DEBT TO KANT: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE "STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD WHICH ENVIRONS US"

by J. Patrick Woolley

Abstract. Gordon Kaufman's "constructive theology" can easily be taken out of context and misunderstood or misrepresented as a denial of God. It is too easily overlooked that in his approach *everything* is an imaginary construct given no immediate ontological status—the *self*, the *world*, and *God* are "products of the imagination." This reflects an influence, not only of theories on linguistic and cultural relativism, but also of Kant's "ideas of pure reason." Kaufman is explicit about this debt to Kant. But I argue there are other aspects of Kant's legacy implicit in his method. These center around Kaufman's engagement with "observed patterns" in nature. With Paul Tillich's aid, I bring this neglected issue to the fore and argue that addressing it allows one to more readily capitalize upon the Kantian influence in Kaufman's method. This, in turn, encourages one to tap more deeply into the epistemic underpinnings of Kaufman's approach to the science–religion dialogue.

Keywords: epistemology; Immanuel Kant; Gordon Kaufman; mystery; ontology; religious dialogue; science-religion dialogue; space; Paul Tillich; time

While it is important not to understate the heterodox nature of Gordon Kaufman's heuristic approach to theological discourse, his "constructive theology" should not be construed as simply circumventing philosophical

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scrutiny to make room for unbridled imagination and inclusiveness. As the steady references to Immanuel Kant throughout his career attest, there is more underpinning Kaufman's thinking than his emphasis on relativism, his language of constructivism, or his use of the term *imagination* might initially suggest.¹ Especially in his later work, there is epistemological structure present that may not be generally recognized. My goal here is to bring this structure to the surface and to identify areas that can be further developed in ways that advance Kaufman's objectives.

Below, I begin by presenting my reading of Kaufman's approach to theology and how it informs his method of religious dialogue. I then make the philosophical structure more plain, first by highlighting Kaufman's explicit debt to Kant, and second by arguing that Kaufman's engagement with, as he puts it, "regularities" and "observed patterns" of the "objects and structure of the world which environs us . . ." (1993, 255), entails an implicit but significant connection to Kant's legacy that reaches as far back as Kant's "transcendental aesthetic" ([1781A|1787B] 1998, 19f.|33f). While I do not suggest that Kant's arguments for the *a priori* status of space and time should be resuscitated, I do maintain that this Kantian link, tacitly but unavoidably, brings Kaufman's method of dialogue well into the sphere of the debates on the foundations, limits, and applicability of concepts of space and time undertaken by philosophers of religion and philosophers of science since Kant. This sphere, I argue, is rich with potential for dialogue to take place in an epistemically nuanced way. To make clear the manner in which I believe this connection might be exploited, I enlist the aid of Paul Tillich and the distinction he draws between "ontological" and "technical" forms of reason and their respective uses in theology. Maintaining this distinction allows one to utilize Kaufman's method of dialogue in a way that avoids focusing solely upon linguistic constructivism and to more readily tap into wider traditions of theological and philosophical discourse. Finally, I highlight some ways in which attention to this distinction in Kaufman's method can broaden religious dialogue while also helping science-religion dialogue advance along more clearly articulated epistemological avenues.

KAUFMAN'S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY AND METHOD OF RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Kaufman's methodology evolved over the course of his lifetime. It is marked by a series of stages. Here, I engage primarily with the ideas put forth in one of his latest works, *In Face of Mystery* (Kaufman 1993), further clarified in *In the Beginning . . . Creativity* (Kaufman 2004), but I also revisit the roots of some of those ideas in earlier stages, from the 1960s on. For Kaufman, the symbol *God* performs two crucial functions. First, within the entirety of the semiotic complex that is knowledge, the symbol *God* acts as an ultimate point of reference which transcends all those ways by which the

immediate, immanent, mundane world around us is ostensibly known. *God* symbolizes the nonobjectifiable nature of the transcendent, and it is through the recognition of these *limits* to our cognitive abilities that the mystery of existence becomes known. Second, the symbol *God* orients one within this mystery in such a way as to imbue one's own existence with purpose and meaning that founds ethical action. These are the two central themes that Kaufman devoted his life to bringing into alignment (2004, 107). While in this article I will focus only on the first function of the *God* symbol and the ways in which it is relevant to dialogue with the natural sciences, it is important to bear in mind that the latter function is ultimately inseparable from the former in Kaufman's thinking.

God's Transcendent "Mystery." Maintaining an awareness of mystery is the cornerstone of Kaufman's approach to theology. When awareness of mystery is not maintained, theology falters. While it is commonly acknowledged that the overall context in which theology is done is one of mystery, Kaufman holds the radical implications of this are rarely taken seriously enough (Kaufman 1993, 60). Mystery performs *the* theological function; it is upon mystery that the whole of theology should center.

One must not use *God's mystery* as a rhetorical trope to gloss over poorly developed thinking. When properly understood, the term *God's mystery* should engage the intellect to its fullest. Kaufman stresses that stringent philosophical analysis is, or ought to be, an essential aspect of theological reflection. "When we introduce the concept of mystery into our theological work, there is no suggestion whatsoever that we may now let down the bars of thoroughly critical employment of our faculties; on the contrary, we are alerting ourselves to the necessity here to employ our critical capacities to their utmost" (1993, 61–62). He explains that the awareness of *God's* mystery does not indicate a failure in understanding but rather a proper understanding of the role of the intellect when thinking about *God*, "[*God* is] ultimately beyond our ken . . . [I]t is precisely through exercising our intellectual and other powers to the utmost that we come to discover our true limits—and thus gain some glimmer of what is meant by the symbol '*God*,' with its reference beyond those limits" (Kaufman 1993, 17).

Here, we see what appear to be apophatic elements in play: *God* cannot be positively defined. If we do not understand why we cannot positively conceive of *God*, we do not really understand what the term *God* itself is meant to symbolize. The meaning of *God* is understood only once it is seen why positive definitions must fall away, must be transcended. Ultimately, that which theology is intended to address is recognized only when one comes to rationally understand the inherent limits to the intellect in depicting *God*. In this way, the meaning and significance of *God's transcendence* becomes clear.

God Symbols. God transcends description. *God* therefore should never be used to refer to an objectifiable referent which can be pictured as an object among other objects the way in which, say, another person can be pictured as an entity in the world. While many *God* symbols do in fact imply this, when understood correctly, they ought to function so as to lead one to an understanding in which the philosophical significance of *God's transcendence* is apprehended. If they fail to do so, the symbols have failed to perform their true theological function; the understanding of *God* must transcend the symbolism surrounding that understanding.

In keeping with this emphasis on transcendence, Kaufman holds that *symbols* for *God* have always been products of the human imagination. Over the centuries, they have been constantly adapted and augmented in order to maintain their relevance to ever-changing intellectual contexts and worldviews. As he puts it, “[T]hese notions are (and always have been) human creations, human imaginative constructions; they are our ideas, not *God's*” (Kaufman 1993, 31). He argues that traditional *God* symbols have ceased to function effectively today because they have not adapted to our rapidly emerging scientific worldview, “The reality of *God* [has] become widely questioned because of our increasing conviction that the modern scientifically described world has no place for such a being . . .” (Kaufman 1993, 3). He holds that the anthropomorphic image of *God* handed down through the generations, with its mythic overtones as an all powerful king-like creator being, has become unacceptable in an age when the scientifically described world holds sway, and warns, “An interpretation of *God* for the contemporary world can easily make moves that are naively idolatrous if it does not avail itself of the most subtle and sophisticated insights of the human sciences” (Kaufman 1993, 12). The tendency of modern theological reflection to almost completely ignore this duty has contributed to an increasing implausibility of the symbol *God* in the modern world and this neglect has “made it possible for dangerously idolatrous uses of ‘*God*’ to persist into modern times” (Kaufman 1993, 12).

To reestablish the proper function of *God* symbols in our present age, Kaufman argues that “theology should become an activity of *deliberate* imaginative construction” (1993, ix). It should be treated as a fluid enterprise, effectively independent of the theological constructs of the past. He refers to his own work as addressing widespread “skepticism about the *God*-symbol” (Kaufman 1993, x), describing the approach as “radical theological criticism and reconstruction” (Kaufman 1993, xii) and as a “full scale reconception of Christian theology” (Kaufman 1993, ix). In his most recent work, Kaufman argues that reconceiving the Christian *God* symbol as creativity itself can be a way to come to “the paradoxical consciousness and knowledge of the profound mystery within which we humans live” (Kaufman 2004, 76). He directs this vision for theology toward the ethical challenges of the environmental crisis we currently face.

Religious Dialogue. So we see that one of Kaufman's main objectives is to bring God symbols back into alignment with mainstream culture. Toward this end, his aim is to initiate religious dialogue with anyone who is willing—anyone from any faith, agnostics, atheists. But this dialogue is to take place in a very specific way. He proposes a method for dialoguing wherein each party in the conversation develops her or his own individual model upon which to establish a basis for the interchange of ideas. A generally monotheistic model consists of three elements—the self, the world, and God. A specifically Christian model has the additional element of Christ.

Each defining the respective elements in the models in her or his own way, the participant is to construct conceptions of self, world, and God “appropriate for the orientation of contemporary human life” (Kaufman 1993, 31). However *God* be defined, it must connote an ultimate point of reference for human meaning, and it must not be defined in such a way that can be construed as, or reducible to, an element of the self or of the world. If it is, then one is in danger of corrupting the symbol in such a way that destroys the meaning of *God's transcendence*, and thus slipping into gross or subtle forms of idolatry which divert theology from its purpose.

The definitions of the three terms are to be dialectically interrelated, “each determining the others in certain crucial respects as well as being determined by them” (Kaufman 1993, 97). Hence, it is impossible to undertake analysis or construction of any one category in isolation, and yet it is equally impossible to do so everywhere at once. As Kaufman puts it, one “must begin . . . constructive theological work at one or another point and gradually move through all the categories, always keeping in mind their dialectical interconnection and interdependence” (1993, 97).

On its surface, this method may appear to be little more than an imaginative exercise aimed at supporting an inclusive approach to religious dialogue. This is in fact how Kaufman often characterizes it. However, Kaufman can easily be misconstrued here as claiming that God is *just* a product of the human imagination, a fiction. Kaufman's method of constructive theology can therefore easily be taken out of context and either misunderstood or misrepresented as a denial of the reality of God. Yet he corrects those who would interpret him this way:

[The symbol *God*] must be understood as a product of the human imagination. This does not mean that God has no reality, is “merely imaginary”; symbols such as “tree” and “I” and “world” and “light-year” have also been created by the human imagination, and that certainly does not imply either their falsity or emptiness. What it does mean is that this symbol (like all others) will need to regularly be subjected to criticism and testing, as we seek to see whether it continues to do the work for which it was created, whether it can continue to function significantly in human life. (Kaufman 1993, 39–40)

It is too easily overlooked that, in this method of religious dialogue, *everything* is an imaginary construct given no immediate ontological status. Everything—the self and the world, as well as God—is a “product of the imagination.” Kaufman’s point is not to question the reality of God, the world, or the self. Those are the only aspects of his model which are in fact essential to his method. Together, they constitute the foundations of his dialectical approach; to hold any one as more or less legitimate than the others would destroy the entire system. Rather, he is questioning the ability of derivative conceptual constructs to adequately capture and represent those aspects of knowledge.

Philosophical Structure. Recognizing the philosophical structure beneath Kaufman’s models is crucial to appreciating the influence of Kant in this method of dialogue. Let us therefore examine how the method is intended to work in a higher degree of detail. As discussed, Kaufman advocates constructing individual models as platforms for religious dialogue that are founded upon initial definitions of *God*, *self*, and *world*. While no ontological status is attributed to the elements initially, once established, those three elements are endowed with whatever ontological or metaphysical standing the model builder deems fit. One’s perspective on the role of the natural sciences is necessarily incorporated into the model as an aspect of the world, whatever the belief as to its relevance to knowledge of God or self.

Kaufman offers a helpful visualization of his method in which the three elements form the apices of a triangle. Relations between them are indicated by its sides. Elements are understood to be dialectical in nature: the definition of any one depends upon the definitions of the other two, but none is reducible to another. In principle, the resultant three-term model envelops an organic, holistic totality of semiotic interrelations through which we orient ourselves in day-to-day living and to life as a whole, much in the way the apices of a triangle enclose its space. The model is thus, in principle, inclusive of all knowledge.

Dialogue is to develop around these models. Since none of the three elements can be defined in isolation, if the dialectical interrelations work as Kaufman intends, as one continually clarifies how the *self* and *world* relate to God within this semiotic system, the limits to cognition that the symbol *God* ultimately represents ought to gradually become clearer. As the God symbol is scrutinized, altered, or replaced, various reasons for its inadequacies become more and more apparent so that, finally, the process itself discloses the philosophical significance of God’s mystery. As the God symbol’s relations to other aspects of the model are also scrutinized. The significance of God’s mystery presumably then extends throughout the semiotic complex of knowledge back through to its relevance to oneself and one’s worldview. Kaufman’s claim that mystery is

the foundation of all meaningful theological discourse thereby becomes clearer.

The whole time, the immense value of the God symbol is retained. Even as it draws the mind to the cognitive limits that allow one to apprehend God's mystery, it continues to symbolize that which forms part of the essential structure of knowledge of the self and the world. The meaning of *transcendence*—along with its relevance to *self* and *world*—now fully integrated, the proper functioning of the God symbol is thereby restored. One is now free to utilize God symbols in theological, philosophical, and ethical discourse in a way that does not also unconsciously incorporate their intrinsic inadequacies as well. This process, Kaufman explains, is part and parcel of addressing idolatrous tendencies which fail to adequately distinguish how the understanding of a transcendent God differs fundamentally from the understanding of ordinary objects of experience:

We may well question whether any reality corresponds to this idea [of God], but before that question can be taken up, we must get clear what we mean by "God," with what sort of idea we are here working. It is evidently not the notion of some ordinary object of experience: all such objects are finite, limited, and relative in many ways. Indeed, idolatry . . . is precisely the confusion of such this-worldly objects with God. (Kaufman 1993, 27)

These potentially idolatrous obstructions removed, religious dialogue now can more readily progress in a manner that is appropriately responsive to our understandings of self and world in our current scientific age.

ASSESSING KAUFMAN'S DEBT TO KANT

That is the essence of Kaufman's method of dialogue, as I read it. It neither validates nor invalidates belief in God's existence. Rather, the objective is to get as clear as one can about what one means by *God* before attempting to determine God's relevance or irrelevance to oneself and the world. For one with only a cursory knowledge of Kaufman's work, with its emphasis on "mystery," "imagination," "relativism," and "constructivism," there may appear to be a surprising amount of fixed structure here. While the range of ideas and beliefs accommodated in the dialogue process is completely open and in principle endless, the manner in which that dialogue is to take place is quite specific. As we saw, this structure derives from two presumed principles: first, that all language and symbolism is in fact dialectically interdefined or interdefinable; second, that these dialectical relations resolve into the mutually supporting poles of *God*, *self*, and *world*.² These two principles we also find in Kant, most meticulously put forth in his first critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kaufman is explicit about this debt to Kant. In interpreting his method, it thus helps to view Kaufman's thinking within this broader philosophical

context. As we will see below, it is not difficult to recognize the influence of Kant's architectonic theory of knowledge and the emphasis on the limits to this knowledge with respect to Kant's three ideas of pure reason: God, the world, and the self. But we will also take note of important ways in which Kaufman differs from Kant. For instance, Kaufman's emphasis on language differs significantly from Kant's account of *a priori* knowledge. Yet, issues related to the *a priori* reveal aspects of Kaufman's thinking that enter the sphere of Kant's legacy *implicitly*. With some help from Tillich, we will consider how these implicit aspects might best be directed to further develop Kaufman's approach to dialogue with the natural sciences.

The Explicit Part. In *In the Beginning . . . Creativity*, Kaufman recounts his youthful engagement with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Repeated readings of it and Kant's other works affected deeply his overall thinking, particularly with respect to the bearing of the symbol God on the moral dimensions of human existence (Kaufman 2004, 109). He highlights Kant's categorical imperative for imparting meaning to human actions as a major early influence (Kaufman 1993, 196–99). And when, following Richard Niebuhr, he says *God* can be understood in ethical terms as “the principle focusing symbol in the Christian way of understanding life and the world,” Kaufman calls this a “strongly Kantian move” (2004, 113).

Kaufman in fact makes several Kantian moves. As we follow the development of his thinking, we see ways in which Kant's influence broadens beyond just the moral dimension and into the cognitive difficulties encountered in thinking about God philosophically. In the account of Kaufman's approach to theology above, we saw that the recognition of rational limits is an integral part of coming to understand the meaning of God's transcendence. Yet, at the same time, God symbols remain a necessary part of theological discourse. Similarly, in his postcritique lectures on religion, Kant stresses both the need for concepts and the need to transcend conceptual limits when contemplating God's eternal nature, “(I)t is very difficult for us to think of eternity without any limitations; but we must nevertheless have it in our concept of God, because it is a reality. So we ascribe it to God and admit the inability of our reason to think it in an entirely pure way” ([1783–1786] 1996, 361). Much like Kaufman, Kant holds that to do theology properly, to avoid subtle anthropomorphisms that creep into thinking, one must take great care to prevent “faults” entailed by cognition itself from undermining the understandings of God:

For it is better not to be able to represent something at all than only to be able to think of it confused with errors. This is the reason that the transcendental theology we have been treating is of such great utility: it puts us in a position to remove from our cognition of God everything sensible inhering in our concepts, or at least by its means we become conscious that if we predicate something of God which cannot be thought apart from the conditions of

sensibility then we must give a proper definition of these predicates, even if we are not always in a position to represent them in a manner wholly free from faults. It would be easiest to deal successfully with all the consequences of anthropomorphism if only our reason voluntarily relinquished its claim to have cognition of the nature of God and his attributes. ([1783–1786] 1996, 385)

Kant's transcendental philosophy—its *a priori* architectonic structure within the regulative ideas of pure reason—is intended, in part, to address errors that arise when cognitive claims about God are *not* voluntarily relinquished. To fully appreciate Kant's influence on Kaufman's method, it helps to first recall how parts of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* interrelate. The bulk of the critique is devoted to the Second Part, the "Transcendental Logic," wherein arguments for *a priori* categories and principles are put forth in the division on "Transcendental Analytic," and wherein the functioning of the ideas of pure reason is explicated in the Division on "Transcendental Dialectic" where long-standing "errors" of rationalistic theology caused by attempts to directly cognize God, world, and self are ostensibly corrected. The three ideas of pure reason, it is argued, can never be objects of knowledge. Rather, they make knowledge possible as inferential regulative ideas that together govern all aspects of cognition. That entire Second Part is founded upon the more succinct First Part, the "Transcendental Aesthetic," wherein it is argued that space and time are the *a priori* intuitions which allow for the possibility of sensorial experiences. Perception of phenomenal objects of experience is made possible by means of the combination of all three of these mutually supporting levels of cognition—the dialectic, the analytic, and the aesthetic. In this manner, though the three ideas of pure reason are not themselves directly cognizable in terms of space or time, they are nonetheless epistemologically anchored in and inextricably linked to the intuitions of space and time through the *a priori* categories of the understanding (Kant 1781A|1787B] 1998).

Now let us examine how Kaufman draws inspiration from this approach in his method of dialogue. We have seen that Kaufman holds that the concept *God* cannot exist in isolation, and yet neither can it be reduced to either of the two other elements of the model, the *self* or the *world*, nor can it simply be removed from the model if the understandings of *self* and *world* are to remain coherent. This dialectic view on the role of *God* in the intellectual order is analogous to Kant's regulative idea of God wherein it is epistemologically impossible for the understanding of *God* to correspond to a sensory or conceptual object while, at the same time, it still supports the architectonic totality of knowledge formed between the ideas of *God*, *self*, and *world* ([1781A|1787B] 1998, 310–11|367–58).

This approach to *God* is most fully presented in *In Face of Mystery*, one of Kaufman's latest works. However, we see the importance of Kant's account of the dialectical nature of knowledge throughout the phases of his career.³

Indeed, Kaufman draws on Kant's regulative ideas much earlier. In *The Theological Imagination*, putting aside Kant's specific arguments, Kaufman writes, "For our purpose, the importance of Kant was his discovery that such central metaphysical concepts as God, self, and world are imaginative constructs, created by the mind for certain intramental functions, and thus of quite different logical order from the concepts and images which we have of the objects of experience" (1981, 244). And Kaufman draws upon Kant earlier still. As early as his 1960 *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith*, the seed of much of his later thinking (2004, 115), Kaufman writes:

[T]he total system of meanings carried in language has a kind of relationship to the individual not unlike the Kantian *a priori* categories. It is a vast network of categories which exists prior to the individual . . . and which . . . the individual uses as the primary set of distinctions and definitions in terms of which he apprehends and understands all of his experience. In many important respects, therefore, the language structures and defines the world which the individual comes to know. (1960, 51)

It is clear that Kant acts as an inspiration for Kaufman, not as a forum in which to deliberate over technicalities of epistemological structure. That said, one notices Kaufman does take certain liberties as he appropriates Kantian themes. Now, so that we may better distinguish Kaufman's philosophical commitments from Kant's own, let us consider the ways his reading diverges from more conventional readings of Kant. I will underscore four points of tension between Kaufman and Kant; the final point will bring us to the discussion of the implicit aspects of Kaufman's debt to Kant.

First, there is the way in which Kaufman adapts Kant's transcendental idea of *God* to suit his objectives of dialogue. Kaufman counts apophatic meanings as one of the three "complexes of meaning" for *God*, along with entwined Biblical and Hellenistic meanings, and linguistic meanings that entail subjectivity and "awareness of infinity" (Kaufman 2004, 9–10). He reads Kant's work through this apophatic lens (see, for example, Kaufman 2004, 23–24).⁴ In this reading, the cognitive limit associated with *God* takes precedence over its functional role as a regulative idea within the complex of knowledge so that the *mystery of God* becomes the takeaway point. However, it is not sufficiently obvious that all readings of Kant should support the close connection drawn here between apophatic mystery and the transcendental idea of God. While Kaufman's stance on mystery, as I read it, is well supported by Kant's account of God's transcendence above (see also Kant [1781A|1787B] 1998, 295–97|351–54), this does not necessarily follow through to Kant's transcendental idea of God. Though it is easy to read Kant as if a connection between them is implied, to my knowledge, Kant makes no clear and direct epistemological connection between the two.⁵ For a connection of this type, one might find

more support in a post-Kantian work like Schleiermacher's *Dialectic, or, The Art of Doing Philosophy* ([1881] 1996), where a transcendent "infinite" God is an incorporated part of the transcendental dialectical system. And that part of the system is adapted from Spinoza, not Kant (Lamm 1996, 26).

This issue relates to a second, broader discrepancy in Kaufman's treatment of the ideas of pure reason in general. Above we saw that Kaufman says, "the importance of Kant was his discovery that such central metaphysical concepts as God, self, and world are imaginative constructs." Kant actually does *not* say that God, world, and self are imaginary constructs; they are imageless *a priori* regulative ideas that make knowledge possible. However, *if we were* to think that we could definitively conceptualize either God, world, or self, we would be confusing conceptual constructs with aspects of knowledge that cannot be conceptualized. *Those* would then be products of our imaginations. This presumably is Kaufman's point. But the emphasis on utility of imaginative constructs is Kaufman's, not Kant's. Kant's goal is to *expunge* such constructs from theological discourse.

The utility of imaginative constructs is the central theme in Kaufman's method for dialogue. While this may on the surface appear to go against the spirit of Kant, this is not the case. Though their methodologies differ, their ultimate objectives remain the same. As discussed, in both Kant and Kaufman, when *God*, *world*, and *self* are properly understood and allowed to function correctly, they can never represent definitive objects of knowledge; they are not depictable as conceptual constructs in and of themselves. Instead, together, they are that which organizes and provides the *possibility for* conceptual construction, the possibility for knowledge. Kaufman rightly recognizes, however, that not everyone—in fact, virtually no one—will be satisfied with Kant's imageless idea of God. He thus, departing from Kant's example, allows for *all* images and symbols for God and the other two elements to be part of the dialogue process—each equally imperfect and relative—trusting that the dialogue process will in due course reveal the limits to those symbols so that they can be transcended and genuine theological communication can incrementally progress.

Kaufman's emphasis on imaginative construction, and his method of dialogue which follows, stems from a constructivist approach to language and meaning. Kant, of course, does not stress language in the way that Kaufman does. And here Kaufman deviates substantially from Kant in a third way. Even in his latest works, Kaufman asserts that, unlike the Kantian categories, these structures of meaning are not *a priori* necessary but are imparted to the individual through psychological, social, and cultural means, and are thereby relative. He says, "[I]t is in and through social interaction that we acquire language. This is no superficial matter, since it is in the terms provided by the language we learn that all our conscious experience is formed" (1993, 33).

Whereas Kant's architectonic structure of knowledge is buttressed internally by the *a priori* categories of understanding ([1781A|1787B] 1998, 77f.|102f.) and by the *a priori* intuitions of space and time ([1781A|1787B] 1998, 19f.|33f.), Kaufman holds a relativist theory of knowledge wherein knowledge is attributable to language and other fluidly evolving forms of symbolic meaning. It is for this reason that Kaufman feels free to treat any conceptual constructs which come to represent *God*, *world*, and *self* to a given individual, for all intents and purposes, as arbitrary constructs that have developed as the historicist consequences of her or his cultural context and worldview. Minus the purportedly fixed structure imparted by *a priori* knowledge discovered through Kant's transcendental method, no one conceptual construct can be asserted to be more certain than any other. They are all linguistic and cultural artifacts, not fixed and determinable facts of knowledge or of knowing.

However, this parallel Kaufman draws between language and Kant's *a priori* structures of knowledge can be taken only so far. While it may be possible to retrospectively interpret Kant's categories of the understanding in contemporary linguistic rather than traditional Kantian *a priori* terms, it is difficult to apply this interpretation to Kant's transcendental aesthetic without raising long-standing questions regarding the empirical (viz., sensorial) content of experience. This final fourth point brings us to Kaufman's implicit connection to Kant, to the role of "observed patterns" in nature, and thus to the epistemological foundations of the natural sciences.

The Implicit Part. Thus far, I have discussed some of the philosophical structure underpinning Kaufman's method of dialogue that is brought to the surface by paying due attention to his many explicit references to Kant. We have seen that, though there are epistemological discrepancies, clear parallels with Kantian themes are maintained in Kaufman's thought nonetheless.

Now, I want to focus more fully on that final point above concerning Kant's transcendental aesthetic and suggest that here there is an important component of Kantian thought which is implicit in Kaufman's method, but which Kaufman does not capitalize upon. I suggest that as soon as Kaufman asks us to draw our models of the world from "regularities" and "observed patterns" of "objects and structure of the world which environs us," epistemological questions surrounding Kant's treatment of space and time are unavoidably entailed. I will argue that, if this implicit entailment is made explicit and developed, it will in fact advance Kaufman's objective of bringing scientific and religious fields of thought into closer dialogue. To help make this point clear, I will enlist the aid of Tillich, specifically his lesson on the uses and misuses of "technical reason" in theological discourse.

The influence of Kant on Kaufman is strong. But is it strong enough? Considering that his method of dialogue is specifically intended to

encourage its participants to recognize ways for the God symbol to operate correctly in this scientific age, I believe Kaufman has overlooked some important aspects of his own model that are highly relatable to the Kantian epistemology which inspires it. He overlooks these, most likely, due to his emphasis on language over and above the *a priori* categories and intuitions that Kant himself emphasizes. It is true, in the centuries since his *Critique of Pure Reason*, debates over the Kantian categories and their *a priori* status have not fared well for Kant. Yet, while Kaufman may be justified in not concerning himself with those questionable and often discredited categories of understanding, I am not convinced that Kant's emphasis on the epistemological significance of the *intuitions* of space and time can be as easily ignored.

This is because Kant's questions concerning the status of space and time in concept formation do in fact enter Kaufman's thinking. In order to engage substantively with the natural sciences, Kaufman emphasizes the "regularities" and "observed patterns" in nature. In his own model for dialogue, where creativity is God, he follows these patterns all the way through to contemporary evolutionary and cosmological dimensions of time. However, while he discusses certain intricacies of biology and physics at length, rather than advising us to consider the technical aspects on *how* these constructs emerge from observed patterns and regularities, here he attempts to turn our attention to his much more expansive theme of "imagination." When discussing contemporary scientific findings he claims:

Doubtless our knowledge, experience, and reflection on these matters are all "objective" in the sense that they are intended to be not merely about ourselves but about the objects and structure of the world which environs us; but what we take all this to be and to mean is inevitably the result of our own imaginative construction, and it should not claim to be anything more. (Kaufman 1993, 255)

The technical aspects on how these constructs emerge from observed patterns is not addressed at all. Presumably, that is not relevant. At one point, he says simply, "Our idea of the universe is not, in fact, a fundamentally *empirical* one at all; it is a creation of the human imagination" (Kaufman 1993, 254).

My intent is not to take issue with the spirit of this claim. Kaufman's point is taken: Even as we incorporate scientific constructs into our world-views, we must remain agnostic as to their ultimate metaphysical and ontological significance, as well as ever wary of their accuracy and constancy. Nonetheless, I believe in painting the scientific picture in such wide strokes, epistemologically speaking, Kaufman has brushed over areas of inquiry that would serve to advance his objectives. In hastily placing the empirical sciences under the very broad purview of "imagination," he stops short of inquiring into the epistemic underpinnings of these

empirical patterns, short of considering the technicalities involved in successfully correlating sensory patterns to the spatiotemporal distinctions that form the conceptual structures underlying physical theory, short of asking exactly *how* these ideas came to form part of our scientific worldview and thus part of his own model. In essence, Kaufman stops short of truly engaging with the *scientific* imagination on its own terms.

Considering the very close connection between these issues and Kant, this seems a missed opportunity for Kaufman to take full advantage of his own method. By not addressing them, Kaufman also skirts over, not only some of the foundational questions by which David Hume originally awoke Kant from his “dogmatic slumber,” but over all of the epistemological considerations that have gone into these and related issues since Kant. If epistemological issues like these were to become part of the dialogue process, Kaufman’s attempts to engage with the natural sciences would be aligned with and reinforced by the Kantian themes in his method.

(Let me here reemphasize that I am not suggesting a resuscitation of Kantian arguments for the *a priori* status of space and time, let alone of the *a priori* categories of understanding. I am speaking simply of the role of spatiotemporal distinctions in constructing representations of the the objects that constitute the physical world, however they be construed, whatever their epistemological justification, regardless of the ontological or epistemological status attributed to them—topics still hotly debated by philosophers and scientists today.)

If we make the above issues a deliberate part of the dialogue process, they lead to more refined questions on the role of language. We saw that Kaufman claims “the individual uses [language] as the primary set of distinctions and definitions in terms of which he apprehends and understands all of his experience.” While I do not contest this claim in itself, are we to simply assume that the set of distinctions that language provides is *exhaustive*? Or does the emphasis on “regularities” and “observed patterns” of the “objects and structure of the world which environs us” impose meaningful constraints beyond solely linguistic ones? Are not *observed* patterns and regularities in themselves forms of nonlinguistic constraints on the ways in which the world can be depicted and related to the other two elements of the model? To attempt to answer these questions is to delve deeply into the interrelations among sensory phenomena, language, and the cognition of spatiotemporal distinctions, and to bring them to the very heart of our scientific understanding of the world.

As so much twentieth-century philosophy attests, questions like these have become immensely important in scientific as well as religious thought. Kaufman is of course aware of this. His constructivist approach to theology evolved within the milieu of just this type of inquiry as he sought “to come to terms with the issues posed for Christian faith by

modernity/postmodernity . . .” and rethink “many of the philosophical and other assumptions that theologians (as well as most philosophers) in the West have taken for granted for centuries” (Kaufman 1999, 404).

In the past century alone, a variety of views on the epistemological foundations of spatiotemporal distinction have emerged.⁶ Those views impact how one thinks and speaks about *God*, *world*, and *self* and the relations among the three. Laying bare as clearly as possible one’s epistemological assumptions surrounding these matters should be made a deliberate part of Kaufman’s dialogue process. That said, the lines one draws between sensory phenomena, language, and the cognition of spatiotemporal distinctions can become exceedingly fine. How might Kaufman have proceeded to bring his dialogue process to such a refined focal point? Tillich can assist here.

A Lesson from Tillich. As indicated at the beginning of this article, Kaufman’s tendency is to focus theological discourse on ethical action where “[w]hat is *morally required* in human living, not some supposedly autonomous epistemological norms, is the pertinent issue” (2004, 113). While this claim may be justifiable when speaking of a transcendent God that resists all description, I suggest it is no longer supportable when one wants to at the same time speak in any detail of the scientific account of things. Questions of “autonomous epistemology” become unavoidable when engaging with the scientifically observed patterns of the immanent world. In Kaufman’s method of dialogue, they therefore become as inextricable as the God-world relation in his models. Kaufman does not sufficiently address this point. However, a lesson from Tillich on “technical reason” allows us to actively engage with the “autonomous epistemologies” of the natural sciences while still maintaining Kaufman’s theological objectives.

Tillich and Kaufman did not see eye to eye on many topics, and there are obvious differences in methodologies and in thematic emphases. In fact, Kaufman holds that neo-orthodoxy in general, which he had at one time accepted, “simply dodged the major issue of how God’s reality was to be understood” (2004, 108). Nonetheless, the two do share much in common: the immense importance of Kant; the fundamental role of mystery in theological understanding; the use of symbol; affinities with Richard Niebuhr’s thought, and so forth. Here, I want to capitalize on their shared interests while underscoring differences with respect to epistemology of concept formation. Whereas Kaufman stresses relativism and deliberate imaginative construction, Tillich takes another route. His approach encourages one to penetrate more deeply into the epistemological underpinnings of the different ways in which the patterns and regularities of phenomenal experience shape thought and language. First, I will present Tillich’s approach to technical reason, and then discuss how it can help to advance Kaufman’s objectives.

Tillich makes a primary distinction between the role of epistemology in science and in religion. He notes that, for scientists, epistemology is typically seen to precede ontology: scientists tend to rely on knowledge gained by the senses and ordered by technical conceptual constructs, such as measurement, math, and logic, before they feel they can begin to claim what exists. But, within Tillich's approach to religion, it is the reverse; ontology is primary. He posits that there can be nothing known unless there is first a knower, and one's own existence, one's own being, is therefore presupposed in any epistemological claim to knowledge: "Epistemology, the 'knowledge' of knowing, is a part of ontology, the knowledge of being, for knowing is an event within the totality of events. Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological. Therefore, it is more adequate to begin an analysis of existence with the question of being rather than with the problem of knowledge" (Tillich [1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 79). Tillich claims that, if there is to be an accurate understanding of God, there must first be an accurate understanding of being in the world. This emphasis on the knower suggests a subjectivist approach to theology. But here it is important to appreciate Tillich's phenomenologist epistemology, wherein the foundation for the subject-object divide itself is subjected to scrutiny. As its underlying epistemological and ontological dynamics are examined, the role of *logos* in Tillich's ontology comes to the fore. Not quite the relativist that Kaufman is, Tillich stresses the philosophical significance of the correlation between internal conceptual structure and the perceived external structure of the world. Not drifting too far from the Kantian emphasis on the *a priori*, he defines ontological reason as the internal manifestation of that *logos* which orders experience: "Ontological reason can be defined as the structure of the mind which enables it to grasp and to shape reality" (Tillich [1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 83).

This correlation between mind and reality is integral in Tillich's interpretation of the history of religious thought when he writes, "From the time of Parmenides it has been a common assumption of all philosophers that the *logos*, the word which grasps and shapes reality, can do so only because reality itself has a *logos* character" ([1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 83). The relationship between this *logos* structure and a transcendent God is of a special sort. Tillich is aware that to speak of God, one must form a concept. Yet, he warns of the idolatrous pitfalls that this concept could create since it must be treated as a logical object within the structure of language and can therefore easily be mistakenly treated in the same manner as immanent objects of the world. How to speak about *God* without destroying its transcendent meaning is thus an essential challenge for Tillich.

It is here, following from these points on ontology, that we come upon the crucial distinction that Tillich makes between "ontological reason" and "technical reason." Citing Max Horkheimer, he says, "We can distinguish between an ontological and a technical concept of reason. The former is

predominant in the classical tradition from Parmenides to Hegel; the latter, though always present in prephilosophical and philosophical thought, has become predominant since the breakdown of German classical idealism and in the wake of English empiricism” (Tillich [1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 80). He acknowledges the valuable uses of technical reason, even in theology. It can clarify theological reflection and its relation to other forms of thought. But he rejects the idea that it in itself can yield an understanding of God and says, “Technical reason, however refined in logical and methodological respects, dehumanizes man if it is separated from ontological reason” ([1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 81).

For Tillich, this distinction is a foundational issue for how one should and should not approach theological discourse. Technical reason must remain subordinate to ontological reason as theologians utilize both in order to achieve theological depth as well as clarity (Tillich [1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 82). He holds that, as long as this distinction between ontological and technical forms of reason is kept in view, religious knowledge and scientific knowledge cannot be seen to be in conflict because they address different, if related, kinds of questions; they cannot be collapsed into one another because they stem from completely different epistemic origins.

The recognition of the difference between ontological and technical reason and the respective spheres of their uses is what prevents theological understanding from falling prey to corruptive “superstitious” tendencies. In much the way that Kaufman writes of the need to scrutinize God symbols that appear incongruous with scientific knowledge, Tillich writes of the virtues of technical reason in scouring those same symbols of superstitious interpretations which bring them into apparent conflict with the natural causal order:

Theology is (or should be) grateful for the critical function of the type of technical reason which shows that there is no such “thing” as a god within the context of means-ends relationships. Religious objects, seen in terms of the universe of discourse constituted by technical reason, are objects of superstition subject to destructive criticism. Wherever technical reason dominates, religion is superstition and is either supported by reason or rightly removed by it. ([1951–1963] 1968, v. 1, 82)

How can this lesson from Tillich help advance Kaufman’s objectives? We need not accept as an unexamined given the way in which Tillich draws his distinction between technical and ontological reason. But, whether or not one agrees with Tillich’s phenomenologist approach to theology overall, his point on the distinction between scientific and religious modes of reasoning is a salient point for dialogue. Determining if, where, and why the line between different types of reason is drawn ought to become part of Kaufman’s dialogue process.

This would do three things which can advance his objectives: First, it allows one to delve deeply into the technical underpinnings of scientific epistemologies on their own terms, without first dictating that all knowledge is culturally and linguistically relative. Second, as Tillich suggests above, it can be utilized to scrutinize God symbols in a way which scours them clean of idolatrous connotations, and yet it does so in a way that makes clear the technical aspects under scrutiny are not the sum total of the meaning of *God*. This, combined with the epistemological structure of the models themselves, sustains the intellectual space needed for religious understandings associated with those symbols so that talk of God as a “construct of the imagination” is not too off-putting to theologians of a different ilk than Kaufman. Third, and most importantly for this article, if the distinction between technical and ontological reason were to be applied specifically to the role of spatiotemporal concepts in model construction, it would provide a new and penetrating focal point which brings dialogue into the fold of the Kantian legacy that inspired Kaufman’s method of dialogue to begin with. Below, starting with this last point, I briefly explain how dialogue can naturally expand to address the other two.

TECHNICAL REASON, MODEL CONSTRUCTION, AND KANT’S LEGACY

In this final part of the article, I sketch one possible way that avenues for dialogue might be opened if the explicit and implicit parts of Kaufman’s debt to Kant were brought into alignment with the aid of Tillich’s lesson on technical reason. The issues at hand are the technical aspects of space and time in the epistemology of concept formation and the means by which we define and structure interrelations between concepts of *God*, the *world*, and the *self*, Kaufman’s three elements. Precisely because space and time are foundational concepts, deliberately bringing them into dialogue on these key concepts leads to the unfolding of foundational issues in religion.

Given its explicit Kantian framework, Kaufman’s program is in prime position to engage more fully with seminal historical figures who inform the way many theologians think today. Considerations as to the epistemic origins, nature, and significance of spatiotemporal concepts goes very deeply into the Kantian, post-Kantian, and neo-Kantian traditions, as well as the debates which surround each of them. Tapping this vein thus provides a ready means for dialogue to penetrate into many forms and traditions of philosophy that span far beyond Kaufman’s own linguistic emphasis, but in a way that is still in close keeping with his Kant-inspired method of model construction as the platform for that dialogue.

Take for example roles that spatiotemporal distinction play as one considers Friedrich Schleiermacher’s dialectic philosophy and how it relates to

his theology, or Arthur Schopenhauer's emphasis on the role of the *principium individuationis* and its significance for his metaethics. Each of these issues is bound up with views on the appropriate role and scope of scientific knowledge in theological discourse. Focusing discussion on the uses and misuses of technical reason helps to delineate where along these lines the different interpretations of these figures fall. This, in turn, allows for more methodical communication on distinctions between scientific and religious ways of thinking, helping us to better discern between constructive and obstructive avenues for science-religion dialogue today.

An important point of discussion which arises here is the temporality or atemporality of God. In the modern period, since Kant turned Hume inside out by arguing that space and time are *a priori* aspects of knowledge, it has been argued that God does not fall under the conditions of time in the same way that the totality of scientific knowledge does. Even as others attempted to variously refine, reformulate, or refute Kant—from Schleiermacher, to Schopenhauer, to Hermann Cohen, to Martin Buber, to Tillich—God's atemporality has remained a constant theme. In his earlier works, Kaufman himself follows through on this very same theme when he writes, “[God] is in no way subject to [space and time]; they are his creation, not he theirs . . . All the world is bound up in space and time, but God is Lord of the world, even Lord of its basic spatiotemporal structure” (1968, 160).

Questioning the temporality or atemporality of God then leads to broader questions beyond Kant's immediate legacy. Kant's work has marked a sea change for theological discourse since the modern era. Whether Kant is heralded or reviled, the lines of division in theology and the philosophy of religion today are drawn in such a way that, one way or another, usually lead back to his seminal works. Precisely because considerations of time are elementary and deep-seated, how one falls on issues of atemporality allows us to structure dialogue across the lines by which the many traditions of theology are now divided. Dialogue across these lines, I suggest, brings to the fore a whole host of long-standing theological concerns which are addressed and debated quite differently across different (and increasingly insular) intellectual traditions, including: the meaning of *eternity*, *transcendence*, the transcendent-immanent relationship, debates related to pantheism and panentheism, and other topics that have dominated twentieth-century religious thought which entail the natural sciences and how they are relatable (or not) to religious thought. How one approaches any one of these topics fundamentally determines the ways in which the elements of Kaufman's model are defined, utilized, and related to one another, and thus the way in which theological discourse unfolds between dialogue partners from different traditions.

Here, addressing questions as to the epistemological significance of “regularities” and “observed patterns” of the “objects and structure of the world

which environs us” can impose helpful constraints for science–religion dialogue across fields of religious thought. Drawing attention specifically to the role of spatiotemporal constructs in describing these patterns makes the overlap between scientific and theological conceptual content clear and precise. But, at the same time, recognizing the importance of Tillich’s distinction between different types of reasoning allows one to ensure that this overlap does not lead to unconscious conflation of issues which are not necessarily reducible to one another.

The distinction thus allows one to ask if and how key concepts are employed differently in religion and in science, and to inquire with precision what the epistemological reasons for those differences are. If the focus is kept on the epistemological differences *underlying* scientific and religious ontologies, rather than on the different (and often conflicting) ontologies themselves, one can better avoid the “trap of the gap.” That is, one can better avoid the tendency to attempt to bridge scientific and religious ways of knowing by “supernaturalizing” the natural sciences, or by reducing religious understanding down to the ontological constraints often associated with scientific reductionism.

Final Thoughts. Due to its Kantian influence, Kaufman’s method of dialogue is already structured in such a way that allows one to focus in a penetrating manner on issues surrounding space and time in theological discourse. With the added benefit of Tillich’s lesson on technical reason, we can further hone focal points for dialogue in such a way that allows discussion to delve very deeply into quite subtle epistemological points on the differences among theological traditions, as well as their respective relations to scientific thought. Further, dialogue on the proper and improper uses of technical reason assuages Kaufman’s language of “imaginative construction” so as not to appear to abandon religious insights of past ages by reducing theological discourse *entirely* to the language of “relativism,” and thereby marginalizing valuable dialogue partners who might otherwise be willing to employ his method.

From within this approach to religious dialogue, theologians and philosophers of religion would be in position to reengage with some of the great debates of the twentieth century in a fresh way that carries them into the twenty-first. Technical reason would here have a reinvigorating effect as it infuses traditional questions with the epistemological nuance appropriate for our present era. It could be applied as a way to test theologies which stray into what Kaufman considers to be outdated theological imagery that stems from outmoded theological methods. But it could also be applied to critique and test the limits and ultimate value of Kaufman’s own approach, as we consider what sorts of God symbols his method can support when we consider all that those more traditional understandings have to offer. If Kaufman’s method does work as intended, an emphasis

on epistemological precision ought to assist *God's mystery* regain firm and meaningful philosophical footing in our scientific age. Then, perhaps, God symbols can be brought into alignment with the evolving contemporary worldview in a way that makes more clear their relevance to the ethical dimension of human existence and culture, as was Kaufman's hope.

NOTES

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1. For the evolution of Kaufman's views on relativism, historicity, and the influence of neo-orthodoxy from Karl Barth to Tillich, see his epilogue to *In the Beginning... Creativity* (2004).

2. Though, presumably, one could attempt to demonstrate how this is *not* the case through the models as well.

3. For more examples of Kant's influence see: *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith* (1960), 28–29, 35, 40, 45, 51, and especially 78–79 and 83–84, wherein Kaufman follows Kant quite closely; *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (1968), 117; *God the Problem* (1972), 59n, 109n, 122, 130; *The Theological Imagination* (1981), 22, 216, 242–45; *In the Beginning... Creativity* (2004), 23–25.

4. For more on apophatic meanings (i.e., negative theology), see Kaufman (2004, 9–10, 22–26, 57).

5. This point is further complicated by the fact that Kaufman's emphasis often switches indiscriminately from Kant's usage of *God* in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to its usages in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where *God* is employed differently in tandem with postulates for pragmatic ethical action (see, e.g., Kaufman 2004, 24).

6. For instance, the debates between Albert Einstein, Hans Reichenbach, and Henri Poincaré on conventions of simultaneity, the significance of Einstein's separation principle to Neils Bohr's interpretation of quantum theory, issues of locality and nonlocality addressed in Bell's Theorem, indeterminacy, and so forth. Also, the philosophical contexts within which these debates developed, including, the arguments put forth by Hermann Cohen and his neo-Kantian disciples on the *a priori* nature of continuum, their debates with the logical positivists, the reasons for linguistic turn in analytic philosophy, and so forth.

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