

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."

GORDON KAUFMAN'S HUMANIZING CONCEPT OF GOD

by Myriam Renaud

Abstract. Why should Gordon Kaufman's mid-career theological method be of renewed interest to contemporary theists? Two distinguishing characteristics of the West today are its increasing religious pluralism and the growing numbers of theists who rely on hybrid approaches to construct concepts of God. Kaufman's method is well suited to this current state of affairs because it is open to diverse religious and theological perspectives and to perspectives from science and secular humanism. It also militates against the weaknesses inherent to hybrid approaches—*ad hoc* constructs of God unable to motivate their holders to overcome human self-centeredness and so to contribute to the well-being and fulfillment of others. It achieves this by providing checks to reduce the risk of producing human-writ-large God-constructs. Lastly, Kaufman's method provides *criteria* to help theists identify humane and humanizing experiences, relationships, concepts, images, and texts (i.e., the basic material from which God-constructs are fashioned) from the plethora of options available, whether religious, cultural, or secular.

Keywords: constructive theology; God; humanization; hybrid theology; Immanuel Kant; Gordon Kaufman; "lived" religion; theological method

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The American philosophical theologian, Gordon Kaufman (1925–2012), understood that, for some, “God-talk” has grown increasingly suspect due to science’s growing ability to explain the world. He concluded, nonetheless, that despite the difficulties remaining with the notion of God, and “despite widespread claims that ‘God is dead,’” God remains Western culture’s most profound symbol. Believing in God, he argued, means practically to order all of life and experience in personalistic, purposive, moral terms.” Indeed, many contemporary Westerners have not abandoned God. For a great number of people, science-friendly and otherwise, the image/concept of God continues to play a central, practical role in ordering and guiding their lives. For them, the image/concept of God has lost none of its power or importance for *moral* guidance—guidance that they do not find in science (Kaufman 1972, 14, 106).

Kaufman acknowledged that although many different concept/images of God have been worshipped, only a few have redounded to the good. Still, he wrote that it was not time to be done with God. Why not? Because, he argued certain concepts of God portray a reality of “such supreme goodness and beauty” that human beings are drawn to commit themselves to this image/concept without reservation (Kaufman [1975]1995, 27). God, if properly conceived, has an unmatched potential for inspiring and sustaining a moral life. God, *if* properly conceived, can induce us to reach beyond our self-interests and act for the good. The image/concept of a loving and forgiving God, Kaufman held, can evoke the kind “of gratitude and devotion that breaks the circle of self-centeredness.” It can open “the self to wider moral and humane demands upon it, directing it toward a life” imbued with the same love and self-giving that we ascribe to God. It can make us capable of contributing to the creation of humane and loving communities (Kaufman 1981, 106).

Aware of the profound impact on Westerners of this symbol, Kaufman focused on God during the entirety of his academic career. Some of Kaufman’s views changed significantly over the course of that long career. His shift toward naturalism in his 1993 *In Face of Mystery* is a prime example. Since the publication of *In Face of Mystery*, most scholarly engagement with Kaufman’s theology has focused on this last phase of his work. With its abstract, impersonal concept of God as serendipitous creativity, Kaufman’s naturalist phase has much to recommend it. For the sake of clarity, I label this phase Phase III. In this paper, however, I focus on Kaufman’s writings during approximately 1972–1993, a period that, traced in monographs, begins with the publication of *God the Problem* in 1972 and ends with *In Face of Mystery* in 1993. I label this phase Phase II. Table 1 provides a breakdown of Kaufman’s phases.

I argue here that Kaufman’s Phase II theological method deserves fresh consideration as a viable resource for theists who wish to construct or, more likely, reconstruct *humanizing* concepts of God. Kaufman draws

Table 1. Phases of Gordon Kaufman's theology (based solely on published monographs)

Phase I	1972 and earlier	(God-known-through-Christ-event)
1960	<i>Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith</i> . Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.	
1961	<i>Context of Decision: A Theological Analysis</i> . Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.	
1968	<i>Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective</i> . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.	
Phase II	1972 to 1993	(Imaginatively-constructed-agent-God)
1972	<i>God the Problem</i> . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.	
1975	<i>An Essay on Theological Method</i> . Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 3rd ed, 1995.	
1979	<i>Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Mennonite Essays</i> . Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press.	
1981	<i>Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God</i> . Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.	
1985	<i>Theology for a Nuclear Age</i> . Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press.	
Phase III	1993 and later	(Steps-of-faith-process-God)
1993	<i>In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology</i> . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.	
1996	<i>God—Mystery—Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World</i> . Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.	
2000	<i>In the Beginning. . . Creativity</i> . Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.	
2006	<i>Jesus and Creativity</i> . Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.	

on the traditionally nontechnical terms *humanize*, *humanizing*, and *humanization*, and applies a technical meaning to them. He uses the word *humanizing* to denote *that which brings moral orientation, well-being, and genuine fulfillment to each human being, and enables humans to create and maintain loving and humane communities*. This is a vague definition, but Kaufman seeks broad applicability. For him, a properly conceived concept of God contributes to our *humanization* by guiding us toward a loving and self-giving life that can build a new humanity. A God who *humanizes* is a *humanizing* God.

Why would one decide to reconstruct one's concept of God? In Kaufman's opinion, to conceive of God as a *humanizing* God—"an appropriate object of devotion for our time, one who truly mediates to us salvation (humanization)"—requires us to critique and reconstruct our concepts and images of God (Kaufman 1981, 188). No doubt, many religionists accept the understanding of God their religions traditions proffer; they may eschew analysis of those image and concepts. Others have developed personal understandings of God and, comfortable with those understandings, feel no compunction to assess them. Atheists, by definition, reject God. None of these seek a theological method. Kaufman finds their choices problematic. He argues that uncritical acceptance (1) of the teachings of one's tradition about God or (2) of one's personal concept of God may lead to uncritical acceptance of the violence, oppression, and other evils that some

of these images/concepts underwrite. In addition, individuals with personalized God-constructs are wont to produce concepts that fail to motivate them to look past their own needs and desires. Atheists set moral goals for themselves and are unlikely to aspire to objectives above and beyond their narrow self-interests (Kaufman 1981, 187).

In this paper, I explore Kaufman's Phase II views about which concepts of God count as *humanizing* and how to secure such concepts.

More specifically, I analyze the two moral motifs that Kaufman, during this phase, insists must both be integrated into any concept of God constructed using his method. These motifs are:

- (1) God's relativizing motif,
- (2) God's humanizing motif.

I also analyze the universal, moral-pragmatic criteria that Kaufman develops to test concepts of God (whether produced by his method or not) to determine whether they are morally adequate, or appropriately *humanizing*.

Based on my research on the relativizing and humanizing motifs integrated into his Phase II theological method, and of his transreligious criterion of humanization, I argue that, for Kaufman, in order to be humanizing, God-constructs

- (1) ideally include a relativizing motif and a humanizing motif;
- (2) in all cases, meet the moral standards of Kaufman's universal, moral-pragmatic criteria.

To make this argument, I describe and assess the strengths and weaknesses of Kaufman's universalistic and pragmatic moral criteria designed to assess God-constructs and gauge whether they promote human fulfillment and loving communities. In addition, I evaluate the paired, dialectical motifs that Kaufman insists must be integrated into God-concepts constructed using his method to promote lives of love and self-giving that can "build a new humanity" and to defeat our human tendency to generate human-writ-large God-constructs (Kaufman 1981, 186).

THE ALL-PURPOSE CRITERION OF HUMANIZATION

In Phase II of his theology, Kaufman develops a set of moral criteria that he calls, as a group, the *criterion of humanization*. This criterion is intended to serve as a general test to assess dimensions of individual and communal life, including concepts of God. It interrogates alternatives to identify which options promote human fulfillment and the well-being of human communities. The criterion of humanization ascertains whether a feature of human existence furthers moral orientation, well-being, genuine fulfillment of humans, and sustains loving and humane communities. If

so, the feature is “justifiable and good.” By contrast, any feature deemed “dehumanizing” because it undermines the struggle to build humane and loving communities is “judged negatively” (Kaufman 1981, 184).

Kaufman encourages encounters with other religious traditions because such encounters promote discriminating and informed judgments about what is humanly significant. However, Kaufman, attentive to threats to humanization, also holds that if encounters with other traditions are to be fruitful, participants in these encounters must be prepared to identify what counts as authentically humanizing in the world’s religions, including their own. While Kaufman implores contemporary persons to be “open to all, in conversation with all,” he inveighs against thoroughgoing relativism: “we dare not be uncritically receptive” to the claims that others and we advance. No claim is exempt “whether by perspectives strange to us or by the traditions we ourselves hold dear.” Every claim must be examined in light of the criterion of humanization (Kaufman 1996, 38–41).

Kaufman acknowledges that two criticisms have been directed at his criterion. First, some have argued, its purview is limited to human needs and human welfare and it doesn’t take animals or the planet into account. Second, others have claimed, it simply represents one ideology among competing ideologies. Against the first critique, Kaufman observes that every religious tradition justifies its existence and superiority by making claims about its ability to secure *human* fulfillment. In other words, every religious tradition focuses on the human desire for humanization—“salvation in some form or other”—and promises to deliver it more effectively than its competitors (Kaufman 1981, 199). The second critique is simply misplaced—the criterion of humanization tests other ideologies against its norms to ascertain whether they meet its standards.

Because humanization, or rebuilding the human world into a genuinely humane order, constitutes for Kaufman the “central problem facing the present generation,” he argues that “a relativistic position is really no longer appropriate.” He goes so far as to assert that clarity and steadfastness about what counts as true human fulfillment is crucial “to the survival of our species and of our planet” (Kaufman 1981, 184, 196). By Kaufman’s reckoning, however, the self-generated, *ad hoc* concepts of God produced by the hybrid theologies of many Western believers often fail to satisfy the criterion of humanization. Scholar of religion Charles Taylor, in his 2002 *Varieties of Religion Today*, describes the contemporary age as one of “widespread ‘expressive’ individualism.” In the religious sphere, expressive individualism means that more and more people are adopting “what would earlier have been seen as untenable positions, for example, they consider themselves Catholic while not accepting many crucial dogmas, or they combine Christianity with Buddhism” (Taylor 2002, 107). Though Taylor traces this kind of expressiveness back to Europe’s Romantic period, what

is *new*, he argues, is that it “seems to have become a mass phenomenon” (Taylor 2002, 80).

More recently, professor of communication Heidi Campbell reports that “mixing multiple sources of spiritual expression” is growing “more visible to the wider culture.” In their autonomy, she writes, Westerners practice what she dubs “lived religion.” By this, she means that they pluck religious symbols and narratives out of traditional structures and dogmas and recombine them into new theologies. Like Taylor, Campbell finds that “pic-n-mix” (her expression) religiosity, once rare and private, has become public and mainstream (Campbell 2012, 79).

Thus, Kaufman’s Phase II theology is timely. It provides a moral gauge, in the form of the criterion of humanization, to help theists ascertain whether concepts of God, theirs included, are humanizing. We must, Kaufman holds, resist the relativism inherent to “lived” religion that rates God-constructs as equal. Kaufman’s criterion of humanization can evaluate any concept of God, identify features that fail to humanize, and suggest adjustments that may promote humanization. Service to a God whose demands meet the norms of the criterion of humanization, Kaufman insists, “could serve well our further humanization in today’s troubled world” (Kaufman 1981, 148).

Kaufman believes that his criterion of humanization reflects moral criteria with global buy-in. For example, he writes that in contemporary Christian thought, “the criticism of traditional Christian institutions, beliefs, and practices by liberation theologians (whether black, female, or ‘third world’) is based largely” on criteria akin to those of the criterion of humanization. Advancing a theory to explain why the criterion of humanization inheres in traditions and societies across the world, Kaufman speculates that “human disaster or failure and human well-being and fulfillment seem to be the points of reference in terms of which the configurations surrounding ‘evil’ and ‘salvation’ first get generated.” Since disasters and failures have affected and continue to affect peoples throughout the world, all human communities have notions of evil. In contrast to disaster and failure, what counts as well-being and fulfillment is considered salvation. Thus, the categories of evil (dehumanization) and salvation (humanization) have, throughout human history, reflected what fulfills and what frustrates our existence and our projects (Kaufman 1981, 159).

Kaufman acknowledges, however, that his criterion arises out of a particular religious tradition—namely, Christianity. It corresponds, in his view, to a “secularization and universalization of certain fundamental Judeo-Christian themes.” Still, he is convinced that its principles are embraced universally because they reflect the desires of every human being. He observes that “interest in this criterion is in no way limited to Christians: the worldwide demand for more humane social institutions, for greater economic justice and equality, for liberation from every sort of oppression,

is evidence of an emerging consciousness of the criterion of humanization in many different settings” (Kaufman 1981, 168–69). Despite its widespread, though tacit, acceptance, Kaufman explains that this criterion has rarely been stated *explicitly* and *clearly*. Because his pragmatic criterion is already *implicit* in the traditions and institutions of much of the modern non-Western world, it follows, according to him, that this criterion is not imposed on those traditions and institutions. Even non-Western traditions and institutions are tasked with promoting humanization. Therefore, Kaufman holds, he has articulated preexisting and prevalent normative guidelines and so these guidelines can be applied with relative seamlessness to all of the world’s religious practices. In all cases, he warns, the criterion, when applied to contemporary problems, must be accorded “precedence over the claims of tradition” (Kaufman 1981, 191–97).

Though one may appreciate Kaufman’s intended aim of defeating anything-goes relativism and of ensuring that concepts of God promote humane and loving communities, the criterion of humanization is unusable. One may grant Kaufman’s claims regarding the universality of the criterion of humanization yet deem that its vagueness renders it of limited practical value. It cannot accomplish the aims Kaufman has in mind. It is incapable of resolving conflicts between—say, competing plans which both purport to humanize; for example, a plan to construct on open land a development which will create jobs and affordable housing versus a plan to set aside the land in question for recreational and natural water-filtering effects. Nor can the criterion of humanization resolve most debates over what counts as a “good” or humanized existence.

THEOLOGY AS IMAGINATIVE CONSTRUCTION

In broad strokes, the “methodologically sound work” prescribed by Kaufman’s Phase II theology consists of three “moments.”

Moment #1: Construction of the concept “World”

By “World,” Kaufman means a description of reality. “World” is a metaphysical concept used “for ordering and organizing” our experience and knowledge of objects into a “unified totality” (Kaufman 1981, 242–43).

Moment #2: Construction of the concept “God”

Moment #3: Adjustment of the concept “World”

The concept “World” may require adjustment to ensure that the reality it unifies is properly aligned with the concept “God”

In Moment #2, the moment dedicated to the construction or reconstruction of the concept, God, Kaufman assumes that the “actual” existence of

God can neither be proven nor disproven. Kaufman accepts Kant's claim that we can have no empirical knowledge of the "actual" God since God is not a "thing" like other "things." Though an actual God *may* exist, acquiring demonstrable information about this God is beyond the capacity of our intellects—claims about God are not undergirded by empirical data. Lacking such data, we develop "available" concepts for ourselves. For this reason, Kaufman argues, "theology is (and always has been) essentially an activity of imaginative construction" (Kaufman 1972, 73). Though imaginatively constructed, our "available" concepts of God can and do play a central role in our lives. Indeed, Kaufman argues, our *subjectively real* concepts of God have force; for us, they become *objectively real* motivators capable of helping us order our lives in a practical sense (Kaufman 1972, 107).

For Kaufman, as for Kant, theological construction "involves a frank acknowledgment that religious beliefs and theological analysis and reflection are *human* activities, engaged in for human reasons to achieve certain human ends" (Kaufman 1981, 182). Since images/concepts of God enable us to orient ourselves in the world, rendering our lives meaningful and moral, the relevant question when assessing God-concepts, Kaufman asserts, is whether they support "the understanding and flourishing of life." Since human beings lack the ability to determine whether a particular, imaginatively constructed, subjectively real God correlates in any way with an actual, objectively real God, "[u]ltimately the only justification for speaking of God is the one that Kant endorsed, the hope of a moral world" (Dorrien 2006, 313).

A strength of Kaufman's Phase II theology is its embrace of the *creativity* of the "pic-n-mix" approach to religion and of the increasingly pluralistic nature of Western society. Kaufman's Phase II advocates that theology is a *human* endeavor through and through and calls for theists to remain open to the world's varied religious and theological perspectives as well as to perspectives from science and non-theistic humanism. However, characteristically, Kaufman also insists that no one individual or single religious tradition has a proprietary right to the concept of God or to its proper content. To identify humanizing concepts of God, he provides the criterion of humanization.

Another strength is that, in Phase II, Kaufman does not rely solely on the criterion of humanization to secure the moral dimension of God-constructs produced by *his* theological method. He further secures this dimension by insisting that users of his method incorporate two key moral motifs in their constructed concepts of God: (1) the relativizing motif, and (2) the humanizing motif. For Kaufman, in order to count as humanizing, concepts of God constructed using his theological method

- (1) ideally include a relativizing motif and a humanizing motif that are balanced, and

- (2) necessarily meet the moral standards set out in the criterion of humanization.

Risking confusion, Kaufman relies on similar words in his technical terms, “humanizing motif,” and “criterion of humanization.” These terms are *not* equivalent; they designate independent, though related, ideas. The first, “humanizing motif,” is specific to his theological method—namely, the “humanizing motif” that must be integrated into the concept of God constructed using his method. The “criterion of humanization,” by contrast, is a universal, pragmatic moral test applied to concepts of God.

No doubt, picking and choosing from various religious and cultural sources to construct a concept of God can lead to concepts that respond to human needs and desires. While Kaufman’s Phase II is open to *anthropomorphic* concepts of God, it is designed to combat *anthropocentrism* in two significant ways:

- (1) any God-construct constructed using his method must include a humanizing motif and a relativizing motif, and
- (2) all God-constructs (constructed using his method or not) must meet the standards set by the criterion of humanization.

GOD’S HUMANIZING MOTIF

An additional strength of Kaufman’s Phase II method with respect to today’s religious landscape is that Kaufman accommodates, even encourages, the person-like God that contemporary Westerners continue to prefer. Though open to sparse concepts of God, Kaufman emphasizes that to be “*God* to us” and orient our lives, God is most often construed as sharing some of our human attributes and as capable of understanding our concerns, whether these are physical, moral, social, or cultural. Theologian Thomas James, whose dissertation focused on Kaufman’s work, wrote: “orientation in the actual world requires reference to its experienced realities, not to abstractions. God’s relation to the world, therefore, must be specified in terms of some tangible model drawn from human experience” (James 2011, 142). Aware of this human drive, Kaufman understands that an existentially meaningful and comforting concept of God will likely be conceived as person-like, since “the human person is the only reality we know” for which our “concerns are of significance” (Kaufman [1975] 1995, 64–65). During Phase II, Kaufman assumes that it is easier, more comforting, and more meaningful to enter into relationship with a God who resembles, in certain ways, “a tangible model drawn from human experience”—that is, a human being.

Also convinced of the importance of person-like concepts of God, several interpreters of Kaufman criticized his decision, in Phase III, to favor strictly

impersonal concepts. For example, theologian Kenneth Nordgren writes: “The later [Phase III] Kaufman thinks an anthropomorphic conception of God is both defective and disastrous in many respects, but . . . it is inaccurate to reject all personal God-talk . . . since a case can be made that [it] leaves space for other complementary ways of speaking about God” (Nordgren 2003, 225, 228).

The scholar of American religion Sheila Davaney, who was a doctoral student of Kaufman’s, wonders whether his Phase III impersonal God can achieve his aim of humanizing the world since “it jettisons most of the material images and metaphors that have shaped Western theism. Such emptying of a concept of its concrete meaning undoubtedly raises questions concerning its pragmatic efficacy” (Davaney 1994, 174).

During Phase II of his theology, Kaufman argues that it is permissible, and even desirable for concepts of God to include person-like attributes to secure their relevance to our lives. And since our God-constructs will be, at least to a certain extent, person-like, these constructs can and do provide an image/concept of the ideal human—this is Kaufman’s *humanizing motif*. A well-conceived humanizing motif “grasps and articulates human possibilities” in ways that are relevant to our practical concerns. To *humanize* us, God serves as a concrete model on which to pattern our lives (Kaufman 1993, 316).

Drawing on his Christian heritage, Kaufman offers the following example of a humanizing motif: God conceived as “creator, sustainer, and perfecter of our humanity through love and forgiveness.” This God provides, for Kaufman, “a very powerful and significant object” of devotion (Kaufman 1993, 314–15). The creator/sustainer/perfecter God makes us more humane, Kaufman holds, because true devotion to such a God “requires breaking down the walls that separate and segregate selves and communities, and opening ourselves to that universal community that encompasses all and provides for the fulfillment of all.” Thus understood, the humanizing motif helps us overcome “our self-centeredness and our ethno-centeredness and our anthropo-centeredness.” For Kaufman, a concept of God, with a *properly constructed* humanizing motif, can, as nothing else, offer us “a center of devotion outside the self, a center powerful enough to draw the self out of its own narcissism” (Kaufman 1981, 187).

A concept of God, if it “is to be able actually to provide a focus for orientation in life,” Kaufman argues, will draw on human relationships, experiences, and images. As a result, most God-concepts will include anthropomorphic characteristics. Many theologians eschew anthropomorphism because they equate it with anthropocentrism. Kaufman does not share this fear. In his view, person-like characteristics render God anthropomorphic, but not necessarily anthropocentric (Kaufman 1981, 155). An example of an anthropomorphic but nonanthropocentric

God is a person-like God Who takes an abiding interest in nonhuman animals and in the health of the planet's ecosystems.

Kaufman insists that the *humanizing* motif of God-constructs, if rightly construed, can help us transform ourselves into "genuinely humane beings" and enable us to fulfill "our human potential." His resolve, in Phase II, to leave open the possibility of a person-like God means that the concept of God *can* serve as an idealized human being to which we can strive to conform. In other words, God, rightly construed, can inspire us to be better than we are. The criterion of humanization, however, yields no helpful information about the ideal human being. And Kaufman repeatedly emphasizes that the humanizing motif cannot, under any circumstances, be understood apart from a conception of that ideal human. The powerful anthropomorphic images introduced into the concept of God by the humanizing motif, Kaufman insists, are to *personify* our highest and most important "ideals and values" (Kaufman 1981, 32, 41). These images, Kaufman writes, can emphasize "the goodness of creation as a whole and specifically of human existence . . . the importance of human communal existence and [of] just social institutions, a high valuation of morally responsible selfhood and such virtues as mercy, forgiveness, love, faithfulness, and the like" (Kaufman 1996, 94).

If God, to properly orient our lives, must be conceived as person-like and as an ideal person, a *personification* of our highest and most important ideals and values, we must ask what kind of person counts as an ideal person (Kaufman 1981, 155). Kaufman recognizes that all religious and cultural traditions identify certain human capacities as normative. Based on their particular understanding of normative human capacities—an understanding that's often only implicit—these traditions train and educate their children in ways intended to "inculcate and heighten" certain capacities "while at the same time devaluing and diminishing others." In addition, Kaufman notes that while the various religious and cultural traditions foster as normative a set of human capacities, the philosophical, biological, and social sciences also offer a variety of views about the human that should be taken into consideration.

Kaufman strives to identify what counts as the ideal human because, he argues, the images, concepts, ends, and motivations contained in this ideal have the power to pull us forward as a species. A profusion of images and conceptions of the human confront us. Kaufman insists these be triaged to determine which "are to be preferred, which are to be discouraged, and which (if any) are to be forbidden" (Kaufman 1981, 129). To accomplish this, he analyzes the image/concept of God as it developed over human history. He does this in a generically theistic manner to increase universal applicability, avoiding incorporating religion-specific content such as that attached to his own Christianity. As a result, the American theologian Hans

Frei describes Kaufman's theology as "a philosophical discipline" that takes priority over "Christian self-description" (Frei 1992, 28).

Kaufman, studying the evolution of the theistic religious traditions (mostly of the West), discovers that the common thread is God's "humane-ness." Indeed, God's humaneness is most often, Kaufman finds, expressed as "concern for and active promotion of human well-being and fulfillment (Kaufman 1981, 39–40).

God's humaneness, he discovers, is manifest in the empirical tendencies and forces at work in the "movement of cosmic history." These tendencies and forces are evident (1) in the evolutionary trajectory in nature that led to the "creation" of our species and, (2) in the development of values and institutions that impact the personal and social spheres of our lives, sustaining us and moving us ever closer to achieving genuinely just, loving communities. Because they are creative and sustaining, we characterize these tendencies and forces as *humane*. Kaufman defines God as "the symbol [that] holds together [these creative and sustaining tendencies and forces] in a unified personifying image/concept suitable for devotion, meditation, and the orientation of life" (Kaufman 1981, 40–41).

In addition to the generic, movement-of-cosmic-history God described above, Kaufman seeks humanizing motifs for concepts of God grounded in the particularities of his own religious tradition. Kaufman's description of Jesus constitutes his most substantive treatment of the humanizing motif. The theologian Yang Sun Choi, in his dissertation on Kaufman, writes: "[L]ike Kant, Kaufman views the Jesus of the Bible as one who exemplifies what is 'truly or authentically human'" (Choi 1995, 279). For Kaufman, the humanizing motif is most compellingly displayed by the suffering Jesus. In his view, the suffering Jesus is the only God that Christians "can afford" to worship because that Jesus can "further our humanization" by making possible "the creation of a universal and humane community." This God does not react with violence when opposed, but rather "lovingly and patiently suffers the evil men and women inflict." Indeed, God chooses to suffer "in the hope of thus winning a free and loving response" from human beings and then, having elicited love, endures crucifixion to secure, among "truly free and autonomous spirits," a new community "of love and forgiveness" (Kaufman 1981, 190).

Kaufman's basic assumptions with regard to the ideal human have been contested. The theologian Pui-Lan Kwok analyzes Kaufman's theology from a racial and ethnic minority perspective. She finds that Kaufman's theology falls short in several ways:

The theological subject in Kaufman's thought is a unified self and largely undifferentiated. He has paid little attention to fragmented subjectivities and fractured consciousness, discussed in critical race theory and postcolonial criticism. . . . The racialized and/or postcolonial subject has to negotiate cultural and social worlds that are much more complex than that of a White,

middle-class, liberal subject. By positing a self that is free to imagine and a world that human beings have much freedom to act upon, Kaufman has simplified the role of imagination and the multiple levels of discourse that go on in theologies by racial and ethnic minorities. (Kwok 2011, 220–22)

In Kaufman's defense, he anticipates that any claims about the ideal human being, including his own, will require modification to reflect the insights of other religious traditions and secular worldviews. For this reason, the work of critiquing and updating is vitally important, he insists, because the effectiveness (or not) of God to humanize us is dependent on the image of the idealized human encapsulated by the humanizing motif. An acceptable contemporary conception of the human, he argues, "must build into itself an openness to unfamiliar experiences and conceptions and be willing to be self-critical at any and every point." Hence, Kaufman welcomes proposals for alternative understandings from other worldviews—religious and secular—because these can "only help to advance the effort to work out a truly universal conception of the human, an effort that is gradually emerging today as the several great cultures and civilizations converge toward one interconnected worldwide humanity." Pending a consensus, however, he holds that it is important to press forward with such "provisional concepts and hypotheses as are available to us" in developing a humanizing motif, while remaining "open to criticism and correction by advocates of other positions" (Kaufman 1981, 164–65).

Kaufman's Phase II theology accommodates, even encourages, the person-like God that Westerners continue to worship. By the same token, he is aware that accepting or creating any concept without the aid of moral criteria can lead to concepts fashioned in the image of their human makers. To defeat this possibility, Kaufman not only relies on the criterion of humanization to test the concepts of God produced by his method, but Kaufman also insists that the user of his method include a humanizing motif in his or her concept. If the humanizing motif meets Kaufman's specifications, the resulting concept of God can comfort and guide us, orient our moral lives, and serve as a role model by personifying our highest and most important ideals and values (Kaufman 1981, 32, 41).

GOD'S RELATIVIZING MOTIF

Irrespective of the normative content of the concept of the ideal human, Kaufman insists that God, to be God, must be more than a mere extension of the human (Kaufman 1981, 163). If we construct images of God solely based on our opinions of the perfect human, then those images will fail to "move us significantly beyond our present insights and ideals" since they are built from those insights and ideals. Indeed, for Kaufman, bowing before gods we have fashioned with our own hands is idolatrous. Though

we may find them appealing, relativistic and parochial idols such as these “could hardly help move us toward a more universal community inclusive of all women and men” (Kaufman 1996, 28).

In the West, Kaufman writes, though the image/concept of God is often taken to mean “that reality which is ultimately salvific of the human,” there is also, when using the word God, an attempt “to gain a point of reference entirely objective to the human, a point of reference in terms of which all else (including the human) can be assessed and judged.” To refer to God as the ultimate point of reference, Kaufman coins the technical term, *relativizing motif* (Kaufman 1981, 159). God’s relativizing motif, Kaufman explains, appears in the Bible in the form of “profoundly *abstract* metaphors that give the biblical image/concept of God its sense of utter difference from the human, its sense of overwhelming authority and power.” These abstract metaphors enable the concept of God to function as *deity*. The humanizing motif with its person-like characteristics cannot, by virtue of being person-like, establish God as a deity. Rather, it is the relativizing motif that serves this purpose. For example, Biblical passages portray God as saying, “I am the first and I am the last,” as being the reality “in [which] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), as the “Most High,” and as “the ultimate source of all that is” (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998, 138–39).

The abstract content of the relativizing motif, then, directs “the feelings, thoughts and activities” of theists toward the deity, God, Whom they “regard as ultimate reality, power, and meaning” (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998, 139). The relativizing motif provides the ultimate point of reference against which all human “action, consciousness, and reflection” can be compared. It confers a unique standing to God by calling into question all of our life goals, projects, relationships, and values (Kaufman 1981, 80–81).

In addition, Kaufman holds, God’s relativizing motif serves as a constant reminder of our limits that is key to securing and maintaining, in us, an attitude of humility and open-mindedness. By contrast to our creatureliness, God symbolizes “the *absolute limit*, the limit of all limits.” The gap between our lives, actions, devotions, reflections, and the radically “other” God cannot be eliminated. However, the gap may grow smaller if we respond to a God Who, if properly constructed, enjoins us to examine and revise our lives, actions, devotion, and reflections.

The relativizing motif of the concept of God also serves as a limiting idea. In contrast to the way we conceptualize ordinary objects of experience, “which can be readily observed and can be examined in various ways,” God functions as an asymptote—as “something which can only be approached but never actually reached, certainly not surpassed.” To serve as an ultimate reference point, God must be thought of as beyond everything we know—in other words, not restricted or limited by our experiences, relationships, aims, or values, “but relativizing them

all.” To function as an ultimate reference point, God must, in logical terms, be *conceived as* transcending “everything else [so] that it cannot gain its meaning or being by reference to anything else.” Kaufman suggests that God be understood as that beyond which nothing greater can be thought (Kaufman 1981, 81–83).

Kaufman’s Phase II method thus includes a movement toward transcendence. While the humanizing motif is inherently immanent by virtue of being grounded in ordinary human life, the relativizing motif is inherently transcendent by virtue of being beyond that which can be thought.

Expressive of God’s relativizing motif are images that speak to our existential needs as persons but that are only vaguely related to our everyday relationships, experiences, and images. In this case, God is spoken of as “our Father in heaven”; as our ‘Lord’ or ‘King’ to whom all devotion is due; as the ‘Creator of the heavens and the earth,’ ‘the Maker of all things visible and invisible’: as the ‘Judge of all the earth’ who will effect a final separation of the good from the bad” (Kaufman 1981, 81–83). We have an understanding of father from our relationships and we have human examples of lord or king or creator. We have no direct experience, however, of a Father *in heaven*, or of a Lord to whom *all devotion* is due, or of a Maker of *things invisible*.

Though Kaufman notes the ways in which these supra-ordinary images signal the relativizing function of the God concept, Kaufman categorizes them as “traditional Augustinian/Calvinistic/Puritan images and symbolism.” He does not approve of them because, in his opinion, “traditional theological symbolism has become suspect today—inside the Christian churches as well as outside.” This symbolism is “archaic, or unintelligible, or unfashionable.” Worse, Kaufman argues, it is “oppressive and destructive.” Linked to this symbolism, in his view, is the traditional God-construct’s “paternalism, its sexism, its authoritarianism, its Christian triumphalism and tendencies toward imperialism, [and] its easy subversion by racists and nationalists . . .” (Kaufman 1991, 31). Pui-Lan Kwok shares Kaufman’s aversion; she argues that “traditional anthropomorphic and personalistic metaphors for God—such as creator, lord, king, father—are no longer adequate” for a new world picture (Kwok 2011, 223).

Urging believers to abandon these harmful metaphors, Kaufman recommends that theists identify and integrate into their vocabulary metaphors, images, and concepts in keeping with “ecological, evolutionary and social” dimensions that reflect contemporary understandings (Kaufman 1991, 31). Though the traditional image/concept of the creator/lord/father does not match our current thinking about evolution and history, we nonetheless need to preserve the orienting function of God’s relativizing motif (Kaufman 1996, 317). Better metaphors, images, and concepts must replace those of tradition with their “tendencies toward arbitrary

authoritarianism and despotism . . . sexism . . . [and] openness to both pietistic and political abuses” (Kaufman 1981, 274–75).

The humanizing and relativizing motifs are connected. If a God-concept is properly constructed, the motifs operate as a powerful dialectic internal to its structure. The tension between them, Kaufman asserts, gives “the symbol much of its power and effectiveness as a focus for devotion and orientation in human life.” As long as its highly dialectical character is maintained and “its demand for continuous self-criticism” is honored, the God-construct cannot be “converted into an idol sustaining and supporting our own projects, but is apprehended as truly God,” forcing the self “into a posture of humbleness in its claims” (Kaufman 1981, 41, 87).

Whatever metaphors, images, and concepts we choose, no part of human existence, Kaufman insists, is exempt from scrutiny. If God is to function as the ultimate point of reference this concept’s relativizing motif must call into question all “contemporary forms of experience and life—personal, social, moral, aesthetic, [and] scientific” (Kaufman 1981, 277). Areas of our lives that we hold apart from evaluation with respect to the ultimate reference point will eventually come under the purview of other constructed points of reference that cannot be ultimate. Only one reference point can be ultimate. Because we seek always to gauge the finite elements of our existence against an absolute, Kaufman argues, we create new reference points either because no reference point exists or because we are unwilling to extend those we already have. Such predilection undermines the orienting function of the relativizing motif and alters the dialectic balance between it and the humanizing motif.

However, Kaufman also worries about the reverse scenario—that the relativization motif, if “developed one-sidedly in terms” of “overwhelming power” may become destructive (Kaufman 1993, 314). One response to worries about an overemphasis on God’s absoluteness has been to highlight God’s transcendence. However, just as a focus on God’s absoluteness can be taken too far, a focus on God’s transcendence or “wholly-otherness” can place “an extreme emphasis on . . . mysteriousness and unknowability.” Such an outcome compromises the effect of the relativizing motif—the concept of God’s function of calling into question all of our goals, projects, and values. As a result of emptying all content and meaning from God, God becomes a “completely unknown ‘X.’” While God may remain “the ultimate Mystery which [binds] all our experience and knowledge,” God becomes so abstract that we can no longer discern this concept’s relevance to our day-to-day concerns. Having become, for all practical purposes, irrelevant, God can be safely “ignored or neglected.”

The concept of God, the product of the theological “task of creative construction, both glorious and very fragile,” is to remain, Kaufman insists, ever subject to reassessment. In essence, he integrates into the relativizing motif of the God-construct a “modernist” attitude of critique that asks probing

questions of every part of our existence as individuals and members of various communities, calls us into accountability, into awareness of “a tremendous demand upon us to humanize the inhuman structures of our world,” and into awareness that we are called “to free those who are in bondage to degrading and depersonalizing institutions and practices.” If properly constructed, God serves, according to Kaufman, as a constant reminder to take into account “the idolatries and the inhumanities that are degrading and destroying contemporary human beings” (Kaufman 1981, 275–77).

Theists who construct or reconstruct their concepts of God using Kaufman’s Phase II method generate concepts with balanced relativization and humanizing motifs. The method specifies that the final God-construct include a humanizing motif or a humane, person-like concept of God Whom believers can emulate and Who provides them with comfort and a sense of meaning. It also specifies that the God-construct include a relativizing motif or an absolute concept of God beyond the limits of thought Who calls the experiences, relationships, and values of believers into question, including the God-concept itself.

CONCLUSION

Kaufman’s Phase II theological method bears revisiting by contemporary theists. While he may not have anticipated today’s increasingly pluralistic religious landscape, or the growth of hybrid and “pic-n-mix” approaches to theological work, his method is helpful for theists who seek to construct a *humanizing* image/concept of God relevant to the current cultural context. The Phase II method supports and encourages exchange between different religious, theological, and secular worldviews that are inherent to life in the West. This phase’s theological method offers the possibility of constructing a wide range of God-concepts while it is also designed to defeat human-writ-large God-concepts.

Kaufman’s humanizing motif introduces anthropomorphism into concepts of God. The person-like characteristics of God-concepts are idealized human traits. These are important, Kaufman holds, if God is to personify our highest and most important ideals and values (Kaufman 1981, 32, 41). Images and concepts included in the humanizing motif should be familiar ones to facilitate our entering into relationship with our concept of God, to enable God to comfort us when we suffer, to provide us with a sense of meaning, and to motivate us to imitate the ideal human God represents. The humanizing motif, if properly constructed, captures God’s “connection with our humanness and our struggle for humaneness.” The humanizing motif must provide us with clarity about the sort of human being we could aspire to be, offering us a concrete image and concept of the ideal human and helping us orient our lives toward “humanity [not] as it is, but as it might and should be” (Kaufman 1981, 32, 41, 317–18).

In contrast to God's person-like, immanent humanizing motif, the abstract, transcendent, relativizing motif establishes God as *deity*. The relativizing motif's principal function is to call for a stance of continuous and consistent critical inquiry into our aims, projects, and values, and of the God-construct itself. This motif is reflected in terms like "creator, sustainer, and perfecter of our humanity through love and forgiveness." Conceived in this way, the relativizing motif of the God-construct provides a "powerful and significant" object of devotion. Conceived in this way, the relativizing motif moves beyond the traditional metaphors of God as creator, lord, king, and father, that Kaufman (and Kwok) argue are no longer appropriate. Conceived in this way, God would make us more humane because devotion to such a God "requires breaking down the walls that separate and segregate selves and communities" (Kaufman 1981, 187).

If theists choose not to rely on Kaufman's theological method, they have another tool at their disposal to ensure that their particular concept of God is humanizing. They can turn to the set of universal, moral-pragmatic criteria that Kaufman develops to test concepts of God (whether produced by his method or not) to determine whether these concepts are morally adequate, or appropriately *humanizing*. Though Kaufman's criterion of humanization is vague and impractical, it invites reflection on which criteria could replace it to accomplish the end that Kaufman has in mind. Developing a set of such criteria is the focus of my current research.

Whether Western theists are willing to rely on a theological method such as Kaufman's Phase II method is debatable. What is *not* debatable is that many continue to seek a moral concept of God by which to orient their lives. It is also not debatable that growing numbers are cobbling together personal concepts of God that are (1) subjected to no greater scrutiny than those of religionists who accept their traditions' image/concepts of God on faith, and (2) likely to replicate and justify personal or communal moral codes instead of producing loving, humane, and humanizing image/concepts of God that lead us beyond our private and communal desires and aims. Though constructed, these image/concepts of God have force and impact the lives of those who construct them. The power of Kaufman's method is that it secures balanced humanization and relativization motifs in the God-constructs that it produces. Because its humanization motif lifts up the ideal human person as an ideal to emulate and because its relativization motif calls, by virtue of its absoluteness, all of our plans, projects, and aims into question, the God-construct is, in every instance, greater than ourselves.

NOTE

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