

Gordon Kaufman's Legacy to Theology and Science

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THE LEGACY OF GORDON KAUFMAN: THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND ITS PRAGMATIC NORMS

by Jerome P. Soneson

Abstract. I argue that the most significant contribution and legacy of Gordon Kaufman's work rests in his theological method. I limit my discussion to his methodological starting point, his concept of human nature, as he develops it in his book, *In Face of Mystery*. I show the relevance of this starting point for cultural and theological criticism by arguing two points: first, that this starting point embraces religious and cultural pluralism at its center, providing a framework for intercultural and interreligious discussion and cooperation, and second, that Kaufman's interpretation of religion that emerges out of this starting point embodies pragmatic criteria for evaluating and reconstructing alternative cultural and religious worldviews, so that they may function more adequately within the changing contexts of life.

Keywords: anthropology; culture; historicism; Gordon Kaufman; pragmatism; relativism; theological method

Gordon Kaufman is clearly one of the leading liberal Christian theologians of the second half of the twentieth century. While many aspects of his later theology are likely to have a lasting impact on theologians in the future, his most significant contribution and legacy, I will argue, rests in his theological method. Singlehandedly, he introduced a new methodology for theology, one allowing theologians to embrace and directly address the unique problems of modernity that have been so challenging to Christian

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faith over the past several centuries, especially the problems of historical relativism, religious pluralism, new knowledge in the social and natural sciences, and the growing awareness that our religious symbols and ideals have provoked and justified profound evil and injustice.

One of the astonishing things about Kaufman's approach to theology is his own willingness to admit and offer his program as tentative, pointing out in multiple ways that his method is uncompromisingly self-critical, demanding we recognize its historical and theological relativity. Moreover, he recognizes that his approach to theology will not speak to everyone. But he believes, and I think quite rightly, that there are many, like him, who are deeply ambivalent about the Christian faith—those who take the Christian story and its key symbols to have a compelling and powerful message, on the one hand, but who also find faith in that story exceeding difficult in light of the problems of modernity. These are the persons whom Kaufman addresses and for whom his work is likely to have a lasting effect.

In this paper, then, I will discuss what I take to be Kaufman's most important contribution to theology, his theological method. There is a great deal that could be said about this, but for the purposes of clarity I would like to limit my discussion to his methodological starting point, his concept of human nature, as he develops it in his book, *In Face of Mystery*. I will attempt to show the relevance of this starting point for cultural and theological criticism by arguing two points: first, that this starting point embraces religious and cultural pluralism at its center, providing a framework for intercultural and interreligious discussion and cooperation, and second, that Kaufman's interpretation of religion that emerges out of this starting point embodies pragmatic criteria for evaluating and reconstructing alternative cultural and religious worldviews, so that they may function more adequately within the changing contexts of life.

I. THE PURPOSE OF THEOLOGY: ORIENTATION FOR RESPONSIBLE LIVING

Before we look at his picture of the human, I think it helpful to say something about Kaufman's overall motivation for doing theology at all, since this clarifies why he approaches his work the way he does. Kaufman is not primarily interested in developing speculative knowledge about God or the world, even though he engages in speculative metaphysical thought on these matters. But like John Dewey, Kaufman believes critical reflection to be a practical matter having to do with guiding how people live. Kaufman clearly deals with multiple intellectual problems, such as the problems of conceiving God in the world today, but these are all problems because they inhibit and frustrate adequate and meaningful living. What matters to him is responsible and fulfilling action. In the opening pages of his text, he makes this clear: "if we are truly to help bring about a more humane

and just order in human affairs,” he writes, then we must “think through carefully, in the light of modern knowledges, the questions of who or what we humans are, what sort of world this is in which we find ourselves, which God must be served.” Such work, he goes on, is “demanded today because of the dangerously increasing destructiveness of powerful evils in our human world . . . which . . . can lead all too easily to the complete obliteration of human existence” (1993, xi–xii).

Probably the most concise and compelling example of this practical orientation can be found in Kaufman’s short text, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985). Here he makes clear that the business of theology is primarily critical reflection on theological claims in light of the profound dangers and evil they enable or inhibit. What astounded him in 1983 and 1984, above all, was that virtually no Christian theologians other than Henry Nelson Weiman had addressed the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, in spite of increasing nuclear weapons proliferation and the fact that the United States was threatening to move the Cold War into outer space with Reagan’s “Star Wars” program. In addressing this problem, he argued that the Christian idea of the “sovereignty of God” assumes that the ultimate responsibility for a nuclear disaster is God’s, since it has to do with the end of the human project; hence, the idea blinds persons to the fact that this is a problem humans alone have created, and so it obscures their responsibility for what they are doing, or failing to do, with respect to our national nuclear weapons strategy (see Kaufman 1985, 7–9). And in light of this, he then engages in a critical reconstruction of the theological ideas of “God” and “Christ,” so that these ideas might illuminate our responsibilities regarding the nuclear and other dangers we face as a culture.

Like other liberal theologians since Schleiermacher, of course, Kaufman is also worried about the intelligibility of God talk in light of scientific and historical methods, assumptions, and results. In fact, his first book, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (1960), was on the problem of historical relativism and its implications for knowledge about God. And one of his concerns, from the beginning to the end of his career, was to find a way to talk about God that makes sense within the context of whatever else we know about the world as that has come to be understood in the natural and social sciences. However, finding coherence in an overarching worldview was not the central theological issue but only part of the larger problem, as he saw it, of working out a theological picture which provides practical orientation in a world that confronts us as mystery.

This emphasis on practical orientation eventually led Kaufman, some time in the early 1970s, to face the fact that theology that worked only out of the Western Protestant tradition was no longer sustainable, since one of the central practical problems of living meaningfully in the world at that time was how to live fruitfully with those who did not share that tradition. This problem had never been far from Kaufman’s consciousness,

having been raised as a Mennonite and having very early recognized that his ethical positions, especially on war, were in the American minority. Yet even though he accepted the historical relativity of religious claims and values, his early theological work, right through the publication of this *Systematic Theology* in 1968, nevertheless seemed content to remain confessional, a kind of insider's interpretation of traditional Christian doctrines for Christian companions. Eventually, however, his commitment to historical relativism led him to see the normative work of theology as severely limited—losing its ability to guide action—unless he could ground that work in the larger cultural context in which he and others actually lived, one, in particular, permeated and riven with cultural and religious pluralism.

It is in this very practical context, then, that Kaufman developed his method of theology as a construction of fundamental religious concepts, based upon the idea of humans as cultural, or biohistorical, creatures. He wants to work out, above all, a picture of the whole which not only makes sense in light of what we know today, but one that will above all guide human actions so that we might be better able to live together—in adequate and fulfilling ways—in spite of our cultural and religious differences. So the first thing to say is that Kaufman's method is for those who look at the religious life in general and at theology in particular and ask, "so what?" Kaufman's answer is that theology matters—it matters because it deals with those fundamental cultural assumptions about ourselves and the world that orient us in understanding and practice, either blinding us to, or illuminating, our deepest problems in the world today, and either frustrating or enabling us to deal with them in responsible and meaningful ways.

II. THE STARTING POINT FOR THEOLOGY: THE HUMAN AS BIOHISTORICAL

Kaufman focuses upon the concept of human nature largely to understand the "anthropological assumptions," as he says, of his idea of theology as "imaginative construction" (1993, 32). When he turns to look at the concept of human nature, however, the first thing he discovers is an astounding plurality of established pictures of the human that have emerged in the many cultures of history. Each one, moreover, when examined, has shaped human understanding of what is normal, of how human life ought to be lived. Of course, when men and women live out of these norms they tend to confirm the validity of those very pictures that guide their behavior. At the very least, this suggests, for Kaufman, that human nature, whatever else it might be, is not a fixed object but is highly plastic, open to development in many different directions; and second, that one of the great dangers in life may very well be rooted in the failure to see this fact. As Kaufman points out, failure to see the diversity and plasticity of humanity

“has led to the assumption . . . that *our* mode of life, our institutions and practices, our attitudes and beliefs, are the normal and normative ones for [all] human beings . . . and [so] whatever deviates significantly from this standard . . . may justifiably be discriminated against, suppressed, even obliterated” (1993, 101). A great deal, therefore, is at stake in how and where one begins to think about the human. So what would seem to be needed, in light of this danger, is a picture that itself embraces—at its core—human plasticity and plurality in the hope that it would provide a framework enabling and encouraging mutual understanding and cooperation among persons who have been shaped by quite different cultural and religious traditions.

For Kaufman, modern knowledge in the social sciences provides important resources for developing his own pluralistic proposal of the human as biohistorical. This concept, “biohistorical,” indicates, on the one hand, that humans, like other animals, are biological beings with bodies that have evolved over millennia and are deeply embedded in the intricate ecological web of nature. On the other hand, humans have created various increasingly complex cultures of meanings and purposes over history, and their bodies and their possible actions have been understood and decisively shaped by those very cultures that they have themselves created. Clifford Geertz (1973), a preeminent cultural anthropologist to whom Kaufman appeals, explains this, pointing out that the onset of culture and the final stages of human evolution overlap. Beginning as early as three or four million years ago, the increasing use of culture developed in interdependence with subsequent biological changes, the most important of which is the gradual mushrooming of the forebrain, that area of the brain that develops and processes meanings and symbols. The result is that *Homo sapiens* are born as unfinished animals, requiring culture to give directions in order for persons to respond meaningfully to events round about them (Kaufman 1993, 116).

While other complex animals have limited forms of culture, humans, in contrast, rely so fully on culture that they could not exist without it. They need the meanings and purposes created by others to help them understand (1) what is happening in the current circumstances and (2) what their options are for responding. The creation of these meanings and purposes, moreover, give evidence to the remarkable power of human creativity, suggesting that humans in a significant respect create themselves when they create a culture that shapes who and what they and their companions become. This process is often exceedingly complicated and painful, occurring only over generations, through much trial and error. But it is a decisively and distinctively human process—an ongoing and developing “process of grasping and understanding, of shaping and creating, through which a culture gradually defines and develops itself in the course of its own history” (1993, 103). This self-shaping, in fact, is

what Kaufman means by “historicity.” The cultural developments of one generation shape the next generation in an ongoing history, and that next generation in certain ways transforms and refines the cultural meanings they have inherited, and these transformed meanings are then passed on to the subsequent generation, and so on. In this way, according to Kaufman, humans are highly flexible and even creatively self-transformative through time.

The claim that humans are biohistorical in the way described above is to assume that human meanings are historical as well. This has significant implications for religious ideas, such as “God,” and so it is worth pausing for just a moment to consider what this might mean. For one thing, it means that meanings are created by us in our histories for our understanding and purposes. We find we can act on purpose with certain objects of the world, such as sounds and sticks and other persons. Even as infants, for example, we gradually learn that certain of our spontaneous cries have meaning in the household, since they consistently bring adults to our side with food. We can be said to understand this connection (between the cries and the food) when we are able to use it, crying on purpose when we are hungry. As infants, we pick that particular connection out of the blooming, buzzing chaos of our infant experience because it has significance or meaning for us—fitting into a purpose we find important because it can be used to satisfy a fundamental need. Of course, this early developed meaning is grounded in connections among events in the actual world—mom and dad take baby’s cry to indicate baby is hungry, and so they come running with food. But *getting* this connection (understanding its meaning), and most particularly *using it on purpose*, requires an act or leap of the imagination which constitutes the creation of a meaning in the emerging mind of the infant. And as meanings naturally accumulate in the growing mind of a young person, of course, the possibilities of creating increasingly novel meanings and purposes—creating something new—also emerge. That’s to say, once we’re aware of multiple meanings that can be used for one purpose, we find we can manipulate our store of meanings in our imagination and create new purposes out of those same patterns, and so alter, or better yet, diversify the original meanings. Imagine, for example, an eight-year-old boy, sitting down for a Thanksgiving meal, after an older sibling has just pinched him out of spite. He might well ask for the potatoes, not to eat them, but to load them on a spoon which he might use to fling the potatoes at the sibling. Here the words, “please pass the potatoes,” take on a new and quite altered meaning—not just “in order to satisfy hunger” but now also “to get back at my sibling.” When looked at historically, the amazing nature of connected patterns that take on meaning is that they are capable of growing in their meaning when they intermingle in our imagination with other meanings in our search for more adequate purposes. In this sense, they are quite historical, not

only emerging in history but capable of growing in history in all sorts of directions.

We can note two things about this interpretation of meanings as historical. First, it suggests that meanings, all meanings—including “human” and “world” and “God”—have a history, emerging at particular times and places, being built on established meanings but also being shaped by the current living context of human interest and inquiry. As the contexts of history change, as new problems and challenges emerge, it is natural then for human meanings, including religious meanings, to become more complex and to diversify. Second, the historical character of such meanings also underscores their practical nature. While interesting to some, perhaps, as an object of study in themselves, they would not exist without their ability (1) to alert us to various aspects of the world and societies in which we live, and (2) to open up possibilities for us to respond in creative, meaningful and fulfilling ways.

One conclusion to draw is that this idea of humans as biohistorical accounts for human flexibility and diversity, and so functions as an important starting point for theology in the religiously and culturally diverse world today in which diversity itself is often fuel for hatreds and violence. Because they are unfinished at birth, humans are capable of developing in any one of a number of directions, depending upon the culture into which they are born. And because of their self-transformative creativity, it should be no surprise to see so many different cultures and religious traditions throughout history and in the world today. But equally important, this means that this idea of the human is thus fundamentally *inclusive* in its conception, accounting for all the many ways that humans have been conceived in history. It is a picture of the human that fundamentally embraces human cultural and religious pluralism, allowing us to take seriously each and every idea of the human developed in history. While all ideas of the human embody norms of what it means to be human and humane, the idea of the human as biohistorical, unlike most others, does not, at the outset, exclude other ideas of the human in principle but, because of its inclusivity, is open to the possibility that each and every picture of the human may have something important to contribute to the normative development of this particular concept. As a result, this starting point, for Kaufman’s theology, establishes a framework for genuine conversation and cooperation among those with alternative cultural and religious perspectives.

III. RELIGION, HISTORICISM, AND THEOLOGY’S PRAGMATIC NORMS

In order to see more clearly the theological significance of this historical character of humans, it is helpful to consider the roles that religion plays in culture. According to Kaufman, religion emerges naturally in the

historical development of cultures as ways to provide overall unity, order, meaningfulness and direction. There seem to be at least two reasons why religion emerges. First, in the distant past, human life became increasingly complex within various historical strands, and so it was natural that the multiple meanings, purposes, roles, and institutions that emerged would begin to suggest confusion and chaos, eventually creating the need for overall understanding and orientation, some comprehensive picture of how all matters within culture hang together, including the proper role humans play within that whole. Second, it turns out that no culturally constructed vision of the whole is completely adequate. As Kaufman points out, persons and communities will, from time to time, find themselves up against crises and tragedies that are inexplicable and overwhelming, resulting in the breakdown of established religious orientation and giving rise to the need for new or transformed or more adequate understanding and direction (see especially 1993, 47).

Kaufman identifies the religious effort, then, as the attempt in the human imagination to construct “worldviews” or “conceptual schemes” in light of these fundamental needs for unity and orientation. At their heart is the concept of “world,” by which he means “the structured whole of all that is” (1993, 113). Their overall purpose or function, according to Kaufman, is to provide comprehensive orientation and meaning in the face of mystery. As the title of his book makes clear, “mystery” constitutes the ultimate context for religion. According to Kaufman, this mystery of life can be seen in at least two ways. First, in spite of the fact that humans create pictures of the world to bring unity and direction to life, they are always living within a context that is beyond their complete understanding and control, a point poignantly brought home every time tragedy strikes. If religious traditions are functioning properly, Kaufman says, they will “provide sufficient meaningfulness and motivating power to enable them to continue to struggle even against serious adversities and troubles, even catastrophes” (1993, 47). But Kaufman also notes, “no such human construction . . . is inclusive enough or detailed enough or profound enough to comprehend and interpret every feature or dimension of life, to anticipate every novelty that might appear. It is, after all, the ultimate mystery of things we are up against here, the ultimate limits of our understanding” (1993, 47), and tragedy often reminds us of this fact. Second, we see ultimate mystery in the plurality of religious and cultural worldviews created across cultures and over history. This extraordinary diversity, Kaufman argues, “suggests that, although it is necessary for humans to have some concept of the world, in order to attain a degree of orientation in life, there is no way to establish that the particular notion which any of us holds corresponds closely to what is the case” (1993, 114).

Yet if the concept of mystery reminds us that we do not have direct access to the way things really are, and that our worldviews may fail us

at the very moment we need them most, the significance and meaning of religious worldviews would seem to stand in question. In light of this, we could, as Kaufman notes, become nihilistic, like Nietzsche or Camus. But many still feel the power of their own religious tradition to provide some overall meaning and wholeness in their lives in spite of these and other problems—caught as a result, perhaps, between despair and hope. For such persons, their choice is really between (1) simply affirming their tradition as it has been established and hope that it will hold up in the present context, or (2) reconstructing that tradition to increase its ability to function more adequately in light of the problems facing us today.

In Kaufman's mind, the latter is the most responsible stand to take, once again providing an urgent practical drive for doing theology as he understands it. Our established religious worldviews, of course, were constructed in quite different historical contexts, helping persons to meet the problems faced in those past contexts. If they are to function adequately in the quite different contexts of our world today, it would seem necessary to reconstruct them. In fact, the world today has deepened our awareness of mystery in at least two ways, intensifying the need for reconstruction. First, our technological development of nuclear and chemical weapons, and our exploitation of the environment have brought to our awareness the fact that we now have the power to destroy human life, perhaps all life on the earth. Second, in light of the holocaust and other evils perpetrated during the last century, we can now see in a new way that our established religious symbols, including the concept of God, have been used for horribly evil purposes while convincing those who used them this way that they were doing good. That humans should act in these ways is simply inscrutable, beyond our grasp. Yet these problems ought to give us all the more reason neither to give up the quest for religious orientation nor simply to accept our religious traditions as they have been inherited—but rather to reconstruct them in the hope that they will help us to deal more adequately with even these problems.

Kaufman argues, of course, that it is the theological task to engage in the imaginative reconstruction of the Christian worldview for the purposes noted above. While this historical picture of religion relativizes the Christian tradition, reducing it to one of many religious traditions of the world, it also provides pragmatic criteria for evaluating the worthiness of all worldviews, as well as their proposed reconstruction. If their purpose is to provide both overall understanding of the world and overall orientation in the way people live so that they may find meaning and fulfillment amid the unexpected chaos and tragedies of life, then we can use these functions to inquire whether the worldviews are doing their job. These functions, then, are the key pragmatic criteria for evaluating (1) all religious worldviews in general, and (2) the theological task of imaginative construction in particular.

Kaufman's justification of this task lies in his theories of human nature and religion. We have seen that the religious traditions, according to Kaufman, have always been in change over the course of history. Creative religious thinkers, of course, have not always been aware that they were reconstructing their tradition. Most have thought that they were uncovering the truth about reality as such. Kaufman argues that truth about the whole in that sense, as correspondence to reality, is not directly available. The purpose of theology, in fact, is not to discover and publish the truth about reality, whatever that might be, but rather to construct a picture of the whole, in the imagination, that provides at least two things: first, unity of understanding—an inclusive and coherent picture of all we know about the world and ourselves; and second, unity of orientation—a compelling interpretation of the roles humans play within this whole in order to achieve responsible, meaningful and fulfilling lives. And precisely because these are the functions of theology, we can measure the success of theological work by the extent to which it in fact performs those functions it is meant to do.

Theology in general, and Christian theology in particular, of course, have additional tasks to perform beyond merely working out a picture of the world that we might find coherent with our current knowledge of the world and helpful in guiding us in light of current problems. Talk about "God" in general, and talk about "Christ" in particular, introduce two additional concepts that qualify a religious worldview as a distinctively Christian worldview, and each of these brings additional functions and pragmatic criteria to the table. Discussion of these important concepts—"God" and "Christ"—will have to wait for another occasion. But the point to note is that these concepts belong to a religious worldview, the overall nature and functions of which we have been discussing, and so theological reflection upon those concepts will be subject, like everything else said about the world in theology, to the pragmatic criteria which we have identified in this paper. The worth of reflection upon these concepts, in short, in so far as they are to be found worthy, will lie in the extent to which the reflection brings even better understanding and orientation to human culture and human life.

Kaufman's legacy, I have been arguing, lies in his theological method, particularly in his theological starting point, his theory of human nature and the theory of religion that follows. Both of these theories make clear that the work of religious and theological reflection has a practical foundation. For Kaufman, it is the living that matters in theology, and living meaningfully and responsibly in this world, with all we know about it, and with all our current problems. This is the real purpose behind theology. Kaufman was not entirely convinced that the Christian tradition inevitably has the resources, even when reconstructed, to enable this life today, but the effort to work on this task, to see what it might offer to him and to

others, was his way of struggling with the mystery of life; and he has left us, among other things, greater clarity about this task and the criteria we might use to engage in this struggle more fully ourselves.

NOTE

A version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, held November 19–20, 2012 in Chicago, IL.

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