

## JESUS AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE WORK OF GORDON D. KAUFMAN

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On the seventh day man created God in his own image. Blasphemous? Yes, but nevertheless true. The genius of liberal theology is that it can and does say those things at which we evangelicals can only hint. Like it or not, we do project our personal wishes, fears and judgments, as well as our communal and cultural hopes and prejudices, upon God. Perhaps more than we care to admit, we treat the Deity as a nose of wax. We invest God with those attributes that we find desirable but lacking in ourselves and those that legitimate the states and arrangements that we seek to implement. And we do the very same thing with Christ. Liberals, no doubt, do this more overtly and unashamedly than we do. Because they do, they provide useful examples for case study. In particular, Gordon D. Kaufman offers us an especially cogent example of phenomenological Christology in his notion of God as imaginative construction. This essay will introduce and then critique Kaufman's views, gleaned from them what is insightful and useful and exposing the flaws in what is not.

### I. THE SHAPE OF KAUFMAN'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Kaufman put forth his typically immanentist liberal Christology in his *Systematic Theology*, first published in 1968. He constructed his Christology "from below," beginning with the earthly Jesus, because that process and position seemed to him to replicate the Christological discovery of the first disciples of Jesus. Those disciples knew Jesus first of all as a man, a man to whom they were greatly attracted. Only later, as they grew to know him better and to witness his works, were they able to conclude that God was present in him in some special way. This Jesus, an historical man, became "the Son of God," "the Christ," in their eyes. The presupposition that Jesus was first of all an earthly man, however, was never questioned by them, even as they began to think of him as something far more than a mere man. In fact, according to Kaufman, it formed the very ground of all primitive Christological reflection. Jesus was no figure parachuted in from heaven. He was a man, albeit a most unusual and "unique" man.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner's, 1968, 1978) 167-173. Kaufman thinks that the humanity of Jesus is sufficiently problematic for

Despite a thoroughly this-worldly starting point, Kaufman felt it incumbent upon him to conclude that God's power to reconcile the world to himself became known and was made effective in Jesus. Thus God unveils himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Although beginning his Christological reflection "from below," Kaufman did not trash the incarnation. On the contrary, the incarnation is God's personal entrance into the world to reveal himself as Redeemer and Savior. While Kaufman certainly was more concerned with the articulation of a religious epistemology than he was in making metaphysical and ontological assertions about the person of Jesus, the latter is not absent from the *Systematic Theology*. Jesus was no heavenly being who merely pretended to be a human being. He was fully and truly human, yet God manifested himself through Jesus. "God himself has come to man in the very person of a man." God-in-himself is somehow identical with the man Jesus.<sup>3</sup> While such Biblical notions as the incarnation and the preexistence of Christ are mythological, Kaufman reasons, both notions entail relevant theological and metaphysical claims regarding the person of Jesus: The incarnation expressed the proximity of God to man, and the idea of Christ's preexistence means that it is God with whom we have to do in Christ. Kaufman could even speak of Jesus as constituting the second person of the divine Trinity, albeit in a Barthian-modalist fashion. The Trinity represents three moments in God's self-revelation, or three dimensions of the divine being. Thus Jesus Christ is divine, the second Person of the Trinity, as God "having a particular and definite character and being, as seen in the historical person-event Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Kaufman found it necessary to attach a new preface to this *Systematic Theology* when it was republished some ten years later. He added it in order to take stock of how his mind had changed regarding the nature of the theological enterprise during the intervening decade. Somewhere in the interim Kaufman came to the view that theology cannot be bound to any authority but the theologian's own imaginative reflection. Authority, whether Biblical, traditional or ecclesiastical, represents only a "slavish submission to the past." The theologian cannot proceed on the basis of what earlier authorities have declared. Such an authority structure simply perpetuates a notion of theology that protects it from critical scrutiny. And this is exactly what Kaufman believes theology is about: the criticism and reconstruction of religious images and conceptions.

This rethinking of the importance of authority is related to Kaufman's new understanding of revelation. He now believes that the notion that revelation is "from above," that it is vouchsafed to us through Scripture and tradition, is flawed because it assumes revelation to be an objectively

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theology that he appends a lengthy apologetic note defending the humanity of Jesus in the NT to the text (pp. 172-173 n. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 94-97.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 98, 168, 174.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 99; cf. p. 167.

given reality, a reality to which the theologian must subject himself. To Kaufman, that belief is simply a "fallacy." Revelation is never accessible to us as an objective reality.<sup>5</sup> It is only present to us in the form of human constructions, in the activity of "constructing toward God" from below. Revelation is the "Aha!" It is the phenomenon of human theological intuition. Revelation consists primarily in the theologian's imaginative construction, not in Scripture, tradition, Church, or Christ. Our notions about God are always our own imaginative, theological construct. They are never given to us.

Kaufman had already begun to work out his idea of theology as imaginative construction in *God the Problem* (1972) and *An Essay on Theological Method* (1975). Given that God is qualitatively different from our temporal horizon, Kaufman thinks that it is problematic that God can be included within our epistemic horizon.<sup>6</sup> If God is not accessible through empirical reality, how can we say that our speaking and thinking of him has any meaning? The answer to this question depends upon which God one is asking about, the real God or the "available God." Kaufman presents us with a blatant *non sequitur* by claiming that because God is not identical with any finite reality we can have no experience of him. He is a "profound Mystery" who utterly eludes all our attempts to comprehend him. The real God "must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content."<sup>7</sup> We must hold to a certain agnosticism, then, regarding the real referent of the word "God." God is not to be thought of as existing independently of the perceiver or imaginer, nor does he have a definite character that in some measure can be described. Thus God is not to be thought of as an existing Other but as an orienting symbol, a personification of our most important ideas and values. This God, this concept of God, constitutes the "available referent" of the word "God." When we say the word "God," the referent is not God but the concept of God.<sup>8</sup>

To Kaufman, then, the concept of God is merely a construct of the human imagination. It functions as a concept that orients man in the world and orders his existence and actions within the world. "World," along with "God," functions as a regulative idea by means of which we order the various dimensions of our existence. "World," however, is relativized by "God," the ultimate point of reference, thus destroying the world's absoluteness and finality "by holding that the world and all that is in it can be properly understood only by reference to something other than and beyond the world." The concept of God not only relativizes our

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. xiv-xvii.

<sup>6</sup> G. D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholar's, 1975, 1979) ix-x, 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> G. D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972) 86; cf. p. 96. See A. Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1980) 13-26, for a critique of Kaufman's notion of God as an unknown magnitude to whom no categories or predicates apply.

<sup>8</sup> Kaufman, *Essay* 25, 43, 65.

lives, thus cutting us off from the selfish tendency to absolutize our own private goals and desires, but also humanizes us. By means of the moral, intellectual and other mundane concerns that we ascribe to it, the concept of God opens up new possibilities of understanding the human.

If we construct God for ourselves, we in fact decide who God is. What does such a notion of the theological enterprise imply for Christology? In the 1978 preface to *Systematic Theology*, Kaufman admits that if he were to rewrite the book he would find it necessary to change its contents significantly. He feels that he would have to purge the work of what he now judges to be a blasphemous and presumptuous reliance upon objectivistic talk about God.<sup>9</sup> Such metaphysical notions as the preexistence of Christ and his present existence would then become less necessary or "would quite properly disappear" from his theological constructions.

Yet Kaufman is not ready to jettison the Biblical and historical Christ altogether. In fact Christian theology need not abandon its Christocentric orientation. Such an orientation, however, would no longer be simply presupposed as a given of faith but rather would be developed in terms of its human significance. Kaufman writes:

I am still prepared to argue that the image of the crucified one, spread from its obscure origins in first-century Palestine throughout the world, must remain a highly important normative influence in shaping any adequate modern understanding of what constitutes the genuinely human.<sup>10</sup>

He feels that such a Christology would take Christian theology beyond the ghetto of Christian faith for it would then be able to speak to anyone interested in fundamental human problems.

Kaufman applies his notion of theology as imaginative construction to Christological issues in *The Theological Imagination* (1981).

Christian faith is distinguished from other life orientations by the centrality it gives to Jesus. Even those traditions and theologies that do not express their Christological conceptions in mythical and metaphysical language retain Jesus as a point of reference for understanding the authentically human. Kaufman applies the same methodological strictures upon his Christology that he employs in his construction of the concept of God. The question of who Jesus is, or was, and what importance we should give him in our theology is entirely a matter of our own decision. This is not as novel as it might seem at first blush, according to Kaufman. Christians have always decided how they would interpret Jesus. We have ascribed titles to him and defined him in mythical and metaphysical terms according to our needs. The question for us, then, is not whether we will decide who Jesus is but what criteria we should use in deciding how to interpret him.

But why concern ourselves with Jesus at all in our theological construction? The answer here is that the contemporary theological imagina-

<sup>9</sup> Kaufman, *Systematic Theology* xviii. In lectures at Harvard Divinity School in 1981 Kaufman all but denounced this work as obsolete and useless.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. xvii.

tion is not as free from tradition as it formally appears in Kaufman's construction. The concepts of God and humanity have been shaped in large measure in the western tradition by means of Christology. "For much of Western history Jesus has been taken to be in some way normative for understanding both who God is and what we humans are, and this import has become constitutive for the very concepts with which we think about these matters."<sup>11</sup> Contemporary theological reflection, then, must unavoidably live out of tradition, at least in the west. Thus we see that Kaufman must still rely upon the historicism of his earlier theological career. It is our decision what importance we will give to Jesus, but—and this is significant—the question of whether he belongs within the Christian "categorical scheme" has been taken out of our hands.

Kaufman does not question the traditional notion that Jesus qualifies, defines and exemplifies the authentically human and the divine. A theistic worldview, as Kaufman sees it, is built up from the alignment of three primary terms: God, the world, and humanity. These terms constitute the Christian "categorical scheme." This scheme can be useful in the orientation of human beings within their reality only if it is qualified and given "concrete normative content" by a further term or terms. What is needed is a specific image or conception of the human as normative, or else there will be no way to judge which possibilities for the human are to be preferred, discouraged, or forbidden. This qualifying term must show itself, and the possibilities it encourages, as appropriate and fitting within the life of this world. Only then will the normative term of the human show itself able to perform an orienting function for humanity. It is here that the qualifying term conditions the term "world," for the latter must be seen as providing the sort of context in which a desirable form of human existence is possible. Likewise God, the ultimate ground, must be seen as grounding and sustaining humanity in the world. Each of the three terms of the Christian categorical scheme needs to be given material content. The question: Which material view of the human, which understanding of the world, and which concrete image of God do we develop in our theological construction?

One principal way in which a tradition, cultural or religious, expresses which of the human possibilities it regards as normative is through a story or depiction of a cultural or religious hero who exemplifies the desired actions, dispositions and values. But which "hero" best exemplifies the possibilities for humanity? This question is particularly acute in a pluralistic culture and world. A pool of candidates might include such diverse people as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Adolph Hitler, Mao Tse-tung, Socrates, Jesus, Mary, and the Buddha. Kaufman suggests that the selection of which model most appropriately exemplifies humanity is dependent upon its ability to claim (1) that it accurately

<sup>11</sup> G. D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 127.

expresses the possibilities and problems of humanity and (2) that it can be intelligibly understood in the context of, and in interrelationship with, the "real world." The Christian tradition has recognized these concerns and addressed them with its conception of Jesus as the Christ. Kaufman writes:

In the classical Chalcedonian formulation Jesus Christ is said to be "truly man" and "truly God." That is, Jesus is taken to be the perfect expression or representation of humanity—not in the abstract, but humanity in its proper relationship to its ultimate metaphysical foundations; and so Jesus is said to be the perfect expression or representation of God as well. It is because both the anthropological and the metaphysical are believed to come to a focus in Jesus that he can be the concrete image which provides orientation for human life in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Thus any model put forward as the proper focus for orientation in life and religious devotion must be able to justify itself both anthropologically and metaphysically. The traditional metaphysical Christological doctrines and titles are meant to do just that. The Christian tradition finds Jesus to be the normative paradigm for understanding who or what God is and what true humanity is. Jesus is thus believed to be the proper orientation for life.

If we are to give Jesus this kind of significance in our theology we must decipher who or what he is. We must, then, put together a portrait of him as a distinctive person. What possibilities of the human did Jesus actualize? What sort of person do we encounter in the life, teaching and destiny preserved for us in the NT? Such a portrait can help us work out a paradigm for authentic human existence and can "provide the major reference point for developing a conception of the metaphysical foundations, the grounding in Reality, which would be required to make intelligible the claim that it is precisely this particular exemplification of the human and its potentialities that is to be regarded as normative."<sup>13</sup>

The NT presents us with such a portrait of Jesus, but it is a portrait presented in an ontologist mode and is far too mythic and metaphysical for contemporary use. Thus Kaufman judges it most fortunate that modern historical studies have rescued theology from having simply to "take over the New Testament mythic portrait of Christ." We now can distinguish the historical elements of the picture from the mythical. We no longer are in a position of having to depict and explain the meaning and problems of human existence in terms of or in reference to a world other than our own. Of course, any fully-developed Christology will contain both mythical and historical elements if it wishes to employ Jesus as a paradigm of both humanity and God. The question, then, is how those elements are to be ordered to each other.

Kaufman here returns to the starting point of his Christology in his *Systematic Theology*. All mythical notions about Jesus developed after the fact of his humanity was already established. Thus the historical

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 137.

elements exercised a theological priority over the mythical elements in early Christian Christological reflection. Kaufman notes that the tradition eventually reversed that order. He suspects the resurrection story as the culprit here. The resurrection story allowed the myth of the dying and rising god who is the lord of history to come to the fore in Christian theological construction.

What we know of the historical facts of the life of Jesus amount to very little other than that he was a preacher of the "good news" of the kingdom of God. He characterized life in that kingdom as being a complete reversal of our present life, where power over others is thought of as establishing one's importance and serving others is regarded as demeaning. The gospel of the kingdom, then, meant an overturning of the normal human standards of judging greatness, according to Jesus. Here was a man whose life and destiny perfectly meshed with his teaching. Because the cross epitomized the attitudes of service and self-sacrifice that Jesus stood for, it is not surprising that it has become the central symbol of the Christian religion. The theological significance of Jesus lies in what his life and death say about the possibilities of human nature. When Jesus is understood as a paradigm for authentic humanity, human existence is seen to be life given in service to others. It is a "life of unqualified *agapē*."

Kaufman thinks that insofar as Jesus can be the proper paradigm for grasping the normatively human he also can serve us as a concrete model for our conception of God. Here explicitly metaphysical claims make their proper appearance. If Jesus can be used as a paradigm for our conception of God, then "there must be something in the foundation of things, in the ultimate grounding of all that exists, that drives toward expression in precisely this mode of (human) existence."<sup>14</sup> If Jesus truly exemplifies the authentically human, then his self-sacrificing love should not be thought of as merely an accident of history. Rather, it must be regarded as grounded in and expressive of an *agapē* "at the deepest levels of Reality." Jesus can be regarded not only as a paradigm of true humanity by means of which persons and communities measure and judge themselves but he can also serve as a paradigm for our conception of God, and thus he can be the focus of our religious affection and devotion. Jesus, then, is in some sense associated with the cosmic movement of reality (within an evolutionary, historical cosmology), which expresses itself in the historical process eventuating in the production of humanity and humaneness.<sup>15</sup>

## II. THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF KAUFMAN'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Kaufman's original Christological insight appears well grounded. Exegetically responsible Christology must be done "from below"—that is, Christology must begin with the historical Jesus who walked the hills

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 150; cf. pp. 54–57.

and dirt roads of Galilee almost two millennia ago. The overly metaphysical Christ of the classical tradition eclipses the carpenter who healed the sick, released the possessed and the oppressed, and spoke and acted in such a way that he demonstrated himself to be the Son of God. The earthly Jesus has become the forgotten man for much of classical theology. Jesus challenges us to judge who he is by what he does and says. It is not a matter of a functional Christology replacing an ontological Christology but of the functional leading to, testing and verifying the ontological. As Emil Brunner so aptly put it: "The way to the knowledge of Jesus leads from the human Jesus to the Son of God and to the Godhead."<sup>16</sup> The path marked out for a genuinely high Christology proceeds "from the historical foreground to the 'supra-historical' background,"<sup>17</sup> for it alone does justice to Jesus in his humanity and this-worldly ministry as well as to his metaphysical status as deity.

The sad thing here is that Kaufman judges the Jesus of the NT to be more mythical than historical. The NT can tell us little more than that Jesus lived in first-century Palestine, taught the doctrine of the kingdom of God and was executed for sedition. Jesus is without any content, according to Kaufman. Like a clean blackboard he awaits our chalk marks. The portrait that will emerge from our scribblings will look more like ourselves than the Jesus of Matthew, John, or Paul. Of course this does not bother Kaufman at all. While the writers of the NT constructed their Christological concepts in terms of their experience of the historical person of Jesus, they reasoned that this man must be more than merely human. To do the works of God one must in fact be God. Kaufman rejects the metaphysical conclusions of the NT as "mythic," opting instead for a Jesus without a face, at the mercy of the theological sculptor. The writers of the NT, however, rightly understood that as one acts so he is.

Kaufman's theology is of the sort that will make many people stop and ask whether he is not simply pretending that God is there. Though Kaufman may not appreciate the use of the word "pretend" used in the context of a discussion of his theology, it is a critique to which he can offer no substantive reply. If "God" is not the name of an object that is perceived and experienced but is only "the focal term of an overarching conceptual framework,"<sup>18</sup> then we can quite legitimately ask whether Kaufman is not in fact speaking of a theology without God and a religion without content. The religious impulse, then, has no real referent outside of man himself. He is simply finessing the word "God." Certainly Kaufman has emptied theology of any content whatever, at least in a metaphysical sense, and has put methodology in its place. The order of being is consumed or eclipsed by the order of knowing. Kaufman never actually

<sup>16</sup> E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London: Lutterworth, 1952) 322. For a discussion of Christology "from below" and a critique of Christology done "from above" see G. O'Collins, *What Are They Saying About Jesus?* (rev. ed.; New York: Paulist, 1983) 3-12. For an evangelical discussion see K. Runia, *The Present-Day Christological Debate* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Brunner, *Doctrine* 340-341.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 47.



does theology. He only talks about doing theology, or talks about talking about doing theology. Perhaps a more generous critique would be that theology has no proper content at all for Kaufman. Theology is nothing more than methodology. He claims that we must be able to believe that what we set up as God is real and not just the product of our own imagination (he uses the word "fancy" here) even though it is the product of our own "imagination." Either way the product is nothing more than man himself, not something that can be over against us. God is little more than a category by which we rearrange our notion of "world" and seek to situate ourselves within the world.

The same criticism can be leveled at Kaufman's Jesus. He is merely assigning Jesus the significance that he wishes Jesus to have. We cannot know that Jesus in some sense revealed God. We merely decide (pretend) to believe and behave as though he did. His own historicist notion of history suggests to Kaufman that Jesus is to be used paradigmatically as the normative image of theology. He then dresses the Savior up in an evolutionary cosmology (the impulse of Reality toward humaneness). But there is nothing compelling about this Jesus. There is no reason why Jesus rather than another person ought not to be selected as one's paradigm for authentic humanity. Kaufman admits this. Other paradigms may be selected. They may even seem much more plausible. Choosing one over another is simply a matter of "faith." And faith, for Kaufman, does not ask that an image be compelling, only intelligible. I would suggest that Kaufman's Jesus is intelligible only if one first accepts his philosophical understanding of historical process. To those who do not, a Buddhist, Hindu, Freudian or Marxist paradigm may be more attractive, and thus would be "true"—by Kaufman's understanding—for them. Does Jesus act as a paradigm for our conception of the absolute? Yes, relatively speaking. But was Jesus-in-himself more than a man who exemplified self-sacrificial love? No. He is nothing more than what we choose to make of him. In this, Christology imitates acoustics: The falling tree would not make a sound if we did not wish to hear one.

I see no compelling reason not to judge Kaufman's conception of God and his Jesus as mere mental idols. His criterion for distinguishing an idol from "the true God" is that whatever we claim to be God must both relativize and humanize us in order to be an adequate conception of God. But Kaufman's God and his Jesus are intramundane constructions; they are our constructions. Having only a shadowy awareness of the true God we erect idols in his name and worship them as him.

Kaufman is indeed correct when he suggests that we think of Jesus along the lines of our own needs. Historically the Church worked out its Christology with a certain soteriological problem in mind. The question of orthodox Christology is primarily this: What kind of redeemer do we need to save us? Kaufman's Christology asks the same question. All similarities end there, however, for Kaufman thinks of salvation in terms of the realization of human potential. He dislikes the word "salvation," preferring instead to speak of "fulfillment," which he conceives of as humanization and understands in terms of the historical process bringing

man to completion. Clearly there is nothing from which man must be "saved" in Kaufman's theology, unless it is his own past. Sin is constituted by acts of selfishness and inhumanity. Of course this is not wholly erroneous, but classical Christian orthodoxy recognizes dimensions both to sin and to salvation that Kaufman's constructions of the human problem cannot begin to accommodate. Such a thin soteriology well accords with Kaufman's equally thin Christology. Where sin is given such short shrift we ought not to be surprised when we find a theology devoid either of real grace or a real grace-giver.

I would ask whether Kaufman's categorial scheme actually produces and refines his worldview or if it is not actually the case that his preconceived worldview produces the categories and content that he puts forward as controlling conceptions. God is construed more as the principle of legitimation for Kaufman's worldview than he is that by which we judge all construction, and as such God is the victim of Kaufman's theology. Of course, Kaufman is not alone in this sin. Liberal theology long has assumed that one constructs a worldview from sources other than Scripture and then reads Scripture through it. I would contend, however, that the very purpose of revelation is to give the believer a way of seeing, a different light on things, a normative light. Revelation fits into our world, but it is never at the world's mercy. Rather, it is the spectacles through which we see the world.

Kaufman's notion of God as imaginative construct is most disturbing. Theology becomes dead, sterile, hopeless, and loses all its realities. The religious impulse of man is set adrift without any referent and thus must busy itself with this sad little bit of concept-constructing. Feuerbach's version of Hegel's unhappy consciousness looks into the mirror and sees only itself, but knowing the self to be inadequate it paints another likeness over the glass so that the face of God might smile back with every glance into the mirror.

Yet Kaufman's theology does exemplify a central truth about theologizing. Orthodoxy can, indeed must, agree with him when he says that we do decide who God is. Not that we ought to do so, simply that we do. We too often do create God in our own image. We cannot seem to stop it. We give God and Jesus the dispositions, ideals and characteristics that we would make normative for ourselves, our communities and our culture. If we are pacifists we make Jesus a pacifist. If we are involved with the movement for political liberation in the third world we emphasize a Jesus who turns over the tables of the money changers. There is a Marxist Jesus, a social reactionary Jesus, and a libertarian Jesus, and all within the orthodox camp. None of this, however, is to say that there is not a true Jesus. The task of a healthy, self-critical theology is to remember the relativity of the theological enterprise and continually to judge our notions by the Jesus who presents himself in the Word of God as transcending all our notions of him. We create our own Jesus. But we must not lose sight of the Biblically relevant truth that Jesus-in-himself is more than an exemplar of our most cherished ideals.