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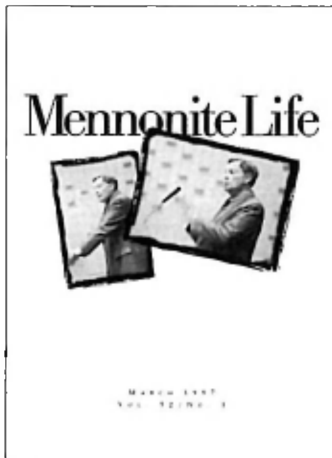
In *this* issue



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This special theme issue of Mennonite Life *highlights the theology of Gordon Kaufman, a Mennonite theologian who is also a leading figure in the academic discipline of theology in North America. All but one of the articles were presented at, or are responses to, the Symposium on "Gordon Kaufman's Theology as Imaginative Construction," held at Bethel College, Nov. 3-4, 1996. The Symposium was made possible by the Menno Simons Lectureship Endowment at Bethel College and by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council.*

Gordon Kaufman's sermon, based on the text of Job, was given at the Sunday morning worship service at the Bethel College Mennonite Church, Nov. 3, 1996. Kaufman's autobiographical essay on his intellectual pilgrimage is reprinted with permission from Religious Studies Review, *July 1994 (vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 177-181).*

Alain Epp Weaver, currently a graduate student in theology at the University of Chicago, uses the biblical story of the Good Samaritan and his own experience in a Mennonite Central Committee assignment in the Gaza Strip to discuss the issues involved in relating to people of other faiths. Ted Grimsrud, who currently is teaching at Eastern Mennonite University, reflects on Kaufman's theology in the light of his experience in pastoral ministry. Philip Stoltzfus, who teaches in the Bible and Religion Department at Bethel College and is a Ph. D. candidate at Harvard University, uses the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein to raise critical questions about Kaufman's theological method.

The short quotes and responses to the Symposium are by persons who attended the symposium or were in Duane Friesen's Great Plains Seminary Education Program fall semester class on Kaufman's theology. Elizabeth Schmidt, Case Management Coordinator at Northview Developmental Services, Newton, Kansas, wrote her article on the Symposium as a member of the Great Plains Seminary class.

Also included are two reviews of Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman, *edited by Alain Epp Weaver, vol. 9 in the Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series published by the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College.*

Readers of Mennonite Life *will also be interested to note that the next volume in the Cornelius H. Wedel Series will be forthcoming in July:* Menno Simons: His Image and Message *by the Dutch Mennonite scholar Sjouke Voolstra. The book is offered at a prepublication price of $12.50 from the Mennonite Library and Archives.*

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Selections from Job 38-42 (Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV)

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel
by words without knowledge?

"Where were you when I laid the
foundation of the earth?
Tell me if you have
understanding?
Who determined its measurements
—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
when the morning stars sang
together,
and all the children of God shouted
for joy?

"Have the gates of death been
revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep
darkness?

"Can you bind the chains of
Pleiades,
or loose the cord of Orion?

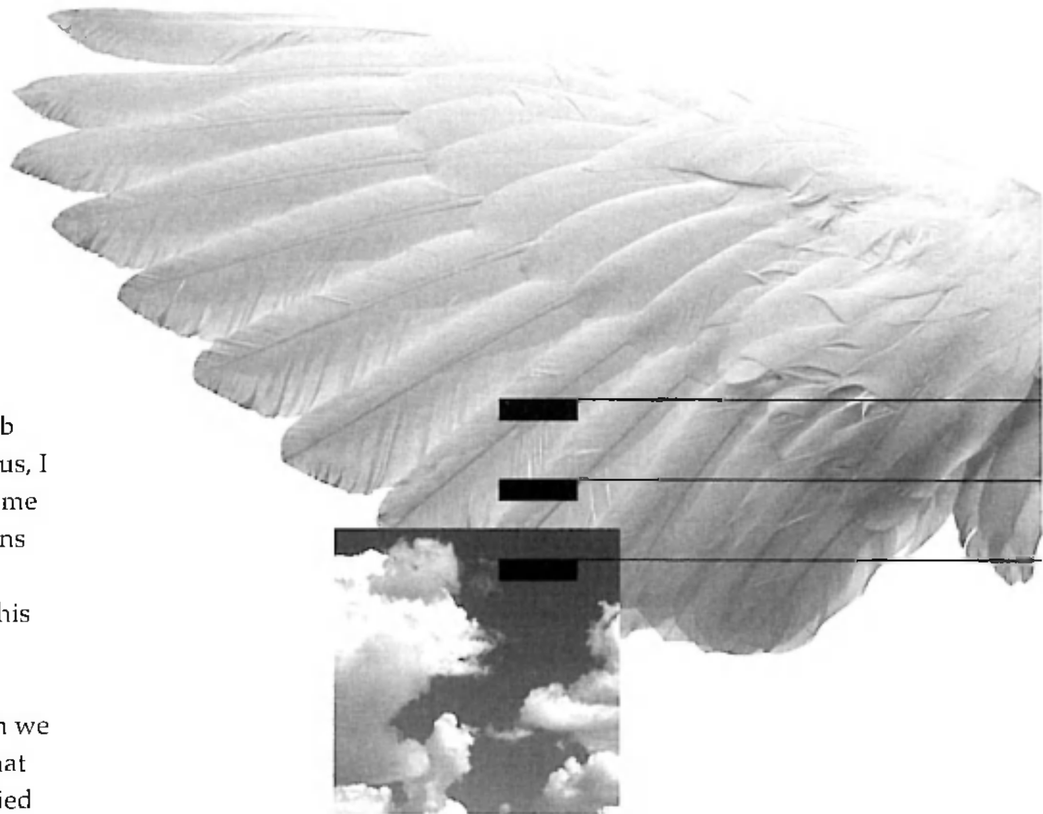
"Is it by your wisdom that the hawk
soars,
and spreads its wings toward the south?
Is it at your command that the eagle
mounts up
and makes his nest on high?

"Behold, Behemoth,
which I made as I made you;
he eats grass like an ox.
Behold his strength in his loins,
and his power in the muscles of
his belly.
He is the first of the works of God.

"Can you draw out Leviathan
with a fishhook,
or press down his tongue with a
cord?
Out of his mouth go flaming torches;
sparks of fire leap forth.
Out of his nostrils comes forth
smoke
as from a boiling pot and burning
rushes.
Upon earth there is not his like,
a creature without fear."

Then Job answered the Lord:

"I know that thou canst do all
things,
and that no purpose of thine can
be thwarted.
I have uttered what I did
not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which
I did not know."



Mystery and God

Gordon Kaufman

The reading from Job that we have just heard reminds us, I think, that we are all aware, at some level, that life confronts us humans as *mystery*. The Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, puts it this way:

Mystery is something with which we are always familiar, something that we love, even when we are terrified by it or perhaps even annoyed and angered, and want to be done with it . . . what is more self-evident than the silent question that goes beyond everything that has already been mastered and controlled . . . ? In the ultimate depths of [our] being [we know] nothing more surely than that [our] knowledge, that is what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled. It is a floating island, and it might be more familiar to us than the sea, but ultimately it is borne by the sea . . . Hence the [deepest] question for [us humans] is this. Which [do we] love more, the small island of [our] so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery?

This inscrutable mystery — or better, these many mysteries of life— provide the ultimate context of our existence. Paradoxically, thus, it is in terms of that which is beyond our knowing that we must, in the last analysis, understand ourselves.

A mystery (of the sort of which we are speaking here) is something which we find we cannot think about clearly, cannot get our minds around, cannot manage to grasp. If we say that "life is a mystery to us," or "whether life has any meaning is a mystery," or "why anything at all exists instead of nothing is a mystery," we are speaking about intellectual bafflements. We are indicating that what we are dealing

with here seems to be beyond what our minds can handle. Thus when we call attention to the mystery of human existence, the mysteries in which we live, we are reminding ourselves that life often confronts us with matters at the very limits of our mental capacities, we are involved with profound puzzles, conundrums that we will never solve and that we should probably not expect to solve; and we must be cautious at every point, therefore, about what we take ourselves to be accomplishing with our thoughts and our convictions.

In our American and European religious traditions the ultimate mystery, to which our limitations of understanding and knowledge call attention, has usually been given a name, *God*; and in affirmations that God is "infinite" or "absolute," "transcendent" or "ineffable," we believers have reminded ourselves that this one whom we worship must be understood, ultimately, to be mystery. On the one hand, the traditional image or concept of God has represented that — whatever it might be— which brings true human fulfillment; that is, in speaking of God women and men seek to attend to the mystery of reality in its aspect as source and ground of our very being and our salvation, as that on which, therefore, we can rely absolutely. But on the other hand, as genuinely *mystery*, God is taken to be beyond all human knowledge and understanding. There is a profound tension here which has not always been clearly recognized. This notion of God's ultimate mystery implies (and requires) an acknowledgment of our *unknowing* with respect to God. The ultimacy of the mystery ascribed to God means (paradoxically) that we acknowledge God as indeed *God* only to the extent that we recognize that all our human religious ideas, symbols, and methods must be understood to be our own human creations. The image or concept of God that we have in our books and our minds is a humanly constructed one by means of which we (in our religious and cultural traditions) attempt to focus our attention on that ultimate resource of human being and fulfillment to which we must relate ourselves if we are to become fully human, if we are to realize our potentialities in full. But it is *our* image, the creation of our human minds.

The difficult issues on which we are here meditating are not merely of intellectual interest: they demand a posture of repentance, an attitude central to religious faith. Repentance is certainly a human act (or attitude), but it has the peculiar character of being an act not of self-assertion but of giving up, an act of renouncing our own claims rather than insisting upon them. This giving up (repentance) must include, I am suggesting, our claims to *religious* knowledge and certainty. When we try to overcome and control the mystery within which we live — through, for example, absolute unquestioning commitment to our religious beliefs or practices — we are in fact sinning against God; for with this kind of stance we are making our own *knowledge* the object of our trust, and thus trying to make ourselves the actual disposers of our lives and destinies. We must, then, repent; we must turn around from this posture, which we all-too-easily take up, and move toward a recognition that our destiny is ultimately in God's hands not ours — that is, it remains a mystery to us.

To the extent that Christians have insisted that certain formulas and practices known in the churches are alone saving for us humans, we have expressed, unfortunately, a piety of law not gospel; faith in *God*, I am suggesting here, requires a kind of agnosticism, not a dogmatism, with regard to all our religious claims. Not a cynical agnosticism, of course, that is destructive of everything that humans believe in and need; but that agnosticism which indirectly opens us to what is beyond all our present knowledges, to that which we do not yet know but which can be creative of our future. Faith is the "letting go" (Kierkegaard) of all our compulsive attachments,

"Repentance...has the peculiar character of being an act not of self-assertion but of giving up, an act of renouncing our own claims rather than insisting upon them"

including specifically and especially our religious and theological attachments, because it is just these *idolatries* which all too often shield us from — and thus close us off from — that ultimate mystery in which both our being and our fulfillment are grounded. When we pronounce the word "God," we are underlining in a very profound way our awareness that in every respect we — our lives and our world — are ultimately grounded in and founded upon something beyond and other than ourselves and our activities: a creativity — a serendipitous creativity — which has brought us into being and which ultimately sets the terms within which we must live out our lives. We are reminding ourselves, thus, that our ideas — whether scientific or historical or philosophical or religious — our loftiest values, and our most profound insights must never be taken as ultimate or final; everything we know or believe, indeed everything about us, is called into question by the ultimate mystery — *God* — before which we seek to bow ourselves.

The word "God," as we use it in worship and reflection, should continuously call our attention to this ever-present danger of idolatry in our religious faith itself: the danger of devoting or committing ourselves without reservation to anything — any creed or confession, any cause or institution — which we humans have ourselves made, have thought, have believed. Devotion to God as ultimate reality, as the ultimate mystery of being and value, does not consist simply in devotion to what we now know or believe to be true and good and beautiful: it involves, rather, a posture of opening ourselves to being drawn out from where we now are to new levels of insight, and action, and being, levels which we cannot now even imagine.

I began my remarks by reminding us that when we wish to focus our attention on that which provides the ultimate context of our lives, it is to the ultimate *mystery* of things, not to what we happen to believe about God, that we must turn first: to be human is to exist in the midst of profound questions unanswered and unanswerable. The monotheistic traditions — those traditions that speak of a single ultimate point of reference, *God*, in terms of which all that is must finally be understood — acknowledge the ultimacy of this profound mystery in our lives. Indeed, according to the prophet Isaiah, God has directly spoken to this point: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55: 8-9). Nevertheless, in the symbol "God," as we receive it in our biblical traditions, the mystery of reality is not unqualified or absolute; it has become domesticated and humanized. And so Isaiah also is able to say:

> [God] gives vigour to the weary,
> new strength to the exhausted.
> Young men may grow weary and faint,
> even in their prime they may stumble and fall;
> but those who look to God will win new
> strength,
> they will grow wings like eagles;
> they will run and not be weary,
> they will march on and never grow faint (40:
> 29-31 NEB).

God is portrayed here as humanizing and humane; unqualified Mystery is no longer the last word.

How should we understand this paradoxical tension between Mystery and God? Should our confidence in God's loving disposition toward humanity effectively cancel out our sense of the mystery of life, enabling us to live supposing that we know what life is really all about? Christian faith has often been presented as giving this kind of absolute certitude about good and evil, right and wrong, what God requires of us and what God has authorized us to do and be. Such faith all too frequently, however, becomes fanatical, imperialistic, intolerant of other points of view, and thus utterly unloving and inhuman.

If we remember that our most fundamental relationship to God is ordinarily spoken of as *faith*

(in God) rather than knowledge (about God), we will be able to understand better the meaning of this tension between the ultimate mystery of things and the idea of God. We speak of "knowledge" of something when we take ourselves to have adequate ground for asserting it; in contrast, we speak of having "faith" in some cause or some person, when we wish to affirm that although we do not have the full certitude here that knowledge would provide, we have confidence in this person or cause, and we will commit ourselves to him or her or it, and will remain loyal, even though the going gets very rough.

faith in God,

...requires a kind of agnosticism, not a dogmatism, with regard to all our religious claims.

Only to the extent that our faith in God is so thoroughly pervaded by our sense of the ultimate mystery of things that it points us toward that which is utterly beyond us and all our ideas (even our idea of God), points us to that ultimate mystery which we neither comprehend nor control — only to that extent does our use of the word "God" actually allow God to be *God*, thus facilitating a more genuine piety toward God. But only because we find ourselves able to think of this ultimate mystery *as* God (and not simply a blank or void), as that in which we can quite properly place faith and trust and hope, that which, thus, will enable us to give our lives freely and creatively wherever the need is greatest — only with this conviction will our self-defensive and self-protective tendencies be sufficiently overcome to enable us to act with love and care and justice in the desperate situations of self-destructiveness, environmental destruction, and other massive evils into which human existence here on planet Earth has fallen.

Thus, when and as the double-sided tension between the symbol "God" and the ultimate mystery of things is properly maintained, a new possibility may begin to open up — the possibility that an unexpected grace from beyond us will burst in upon us with the gift of genuine faith, genuine hope, genuine love.

SILENT MEDITATION.

CLOSING PRAYER: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are God's judgements and how *inscrutable* God's ways.... For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11: 33, 36)

Since theology is principally concerned with what is ultimately mystery about which no one can be an authority, with true or certain answers to the major questions—I suggest that the proper model for conceiving it is not the lecture (monologue); nor is it the text (for example, a book); it is rather, conversation. We are all in this mystery together; and we need to question one another, criticize one another, make suggestions to one another, help one another. Each of us is in a unique position within the mystery, a position occupied by no one else; and each of us, therefore, may have some special contribution to make to our common task of coming to terms with life's mysteries. It is imperative that the theological conversation be kept open to and inclusive of all human voices. (Gordon Kaufman, IN FACE OF MYSTERY, *p. 64)*

After I heard Kaufman's Sunday morning sermon, I finally felt that the long struggle through IN FACE OF MYSTERY *had been worth it. I had wrestled in particular with this idea of mystery, even though I recognized early on that it was one concept by which I could probably connect with Kaufman. A breakthrough for me was when I realized, listening to that sermon, that God as mystery means that God is something beyond and other than ourselves, so that every idea or symbol we have of or for God is a human construction and not actually God—I think I finally understood what "a constructive theology" meant and what it had to do with mystery, at that moment! This also means than an "unquestioning, absolute commitment" to our Christian religious beliefs and practices constitutes idolatry and therefore sin because it is equal to reliance on human structures, not on God. For someone who is not very good at playing by the political rules within institutions, this seemed to make enormous sense and to help explain my wariness of institutions. In addition, I found this new understanding of God as mystery to be very freeing because it means that God most certainly cannot be limited by masculine language or imagery as we Westerners have tried to do for centuries, and also points with stark clarity to the fallacy of oppression "in the name of God" (e.g., of native peoples and of black Africans used as slaves, in North American history).*

MELANIE ZUERCHER

Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage

Gordon Kaufman

I have been asked to make a few autobiographical comments that might illuminate the theological position developed in my recent book, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. I am happy to do so. What I shall say here can be conveniently divided into three parts: some Mennonite roots of my theological thinking; my theological pilgrimage; and what I have sought to accomplish in this book.

I

I grew up in a Mennonite home on a Mennonite college campus, turning sixteen in 1941, the year in which the United States became thoroughly embroiled in World War II. It was a time of great patriotic fervor in Newton, Kansas, and in particular in the high school; this, however, served to reinforce my consciousness of, and strong commitment to, the Christian pacifism of my Mennonite upbringing. There are a number of ways in which my life-long understanding of Christian faith and its place in the larger sociocultural world has been influenced by this early experience of commitment to a version of Christianity rejected by most others in my hometown (including many of my closest friends); I shall take up two of these here.

First, a central Mennonite emphasis (from the Reformation period onward) has been that Christian faith is not so much a matter of the set of beliefs to which one subscribes formally as it is about *how life is to be lived:* "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17); "You will know them by their fruits"(Mt. 7:16). To Mennonites the transformed life—as presented in Jesus' teachings, ministry and death, and further exemplified in the early Christian communities—is the mark of true faith. My own theological stance has always been informed by this conviction about the priority of *life*—and of the standards or criteria in terms of which life is to be lived—over formulations of doctrine or belief. In my most recent book moral and ethical concerns are foundational, with religious (and other metaphysical) truth-claims regarded as gaining their deepest meaning through the ways in which they help provide orientation in life, thus facilitating living rightly. If this sort of viewpoint is worked through systematically, a basically pragmatic understanding of religious and theological truth results: such truth is significant principally not in virtue of its quasi-metaphysical meaning, its supposed "correspondence" with "how things really are"—a highly speculative matter with respect to which all human thinking is notoriously fallible—but rather in its implications concerning how life is to be lived, what constitutes true human well-being. In this perspective Christian theologizing, even in its most sweeping and seemingly speculative talk about the

world in which we live and about God, is understood as an essentially *practical* activity, ordered to questions about adequate and proper orientation for our living in the world. Taking for granted considerations of this sort, I have attempted in my recent book, *In Face of Mystery*, to sketch a theological portrait of human existence which takes into account (a) our best modern knowledges about the world and our human place in it, and (b) the urgency of the wide range of problems which today must be addressed if human life is to go on.

My Mennonite background has also been responsible in some respects for my long-standing interest in and attention to issues connected with historical and cultural relativism. The sectarian religious stance into which I was early initiated led me to be suspicious of certain practices and beliefs taken for granted by most Americans, as well as of some of the major claims made by mainstream Christianity (combined as these latter were, especially during the war, with what I took to be serious evasions of the moral demands of Christian discipleship). It was not until my years at Yale Divinity School (where a thoughtful and articulate critique of Christian pacifism was provided by Liston Pope and H. Richard Niebuhr) that I became significantly aware of some of the implications of this counter-cultural consciousness, forcing me to ask some hard epistemological questions of myself. Does not the fact that these others (whom I deeply respect) take such a different position from mine on these issues call into question my own convictions? Should I continue to stand fast with the small "cognitive minority" from which I come?

In due course I moved beyond my hitherto somewhat simplistic thinking on these matters. From college days on I had been attracted to sociological and anthropological studies of the enormous variations in truth- and value-judgments in different cultures around the world, and I had given special attention to these questions while working on a Master's degree in sociology (at Northwestern University) just before entering Yale Divinity School (in Fall 1948). At Yale I became aware (especially through the teaching and writing of Richard Niebuhr) of a way to interpret these issues theologically: an implication of the fact that we humans are finite beings, biased and perverse in our sinfulness, is that ultimately *truth* belongs to God alone; it can never become our human possession. To make absolutistic claims that we "like God, know...good and evil" (Gen. 3:5) is, thus, always to "fall" away from God; the most that humans can claim is some insight into those partial and relative truths that are available from the standpoints we occupy in the world. When, then, our fellow humans disagree with us, especially on profound moral and religious issues, we should not immediately reject their positions but should sympathetically attempt to understand and appreciate the insights with which their significantly different viewpoints have provided them.

Working out a theoretical statement about human being and human knowledge, which could sustain this kind of relativistic understanding of the human condition, became the project undertaken in my doctoral dissertation (1955) and later published in my first book, *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith* (1960). The theological/ philosophical position developed there—the central impetus towards which came directly out of my Mennonite formation as a member of a cognitive minority—not only gave significant value to such minority standpoints and the insights they make possible, but also implied the importance of affirming (not fighting against) the pluralism of human religious and cultural life as a whole. It was a position that has continued to nourish my religious and philosophical reflection and writing up to and including *In Face of Mystery*.

II

With these remarks in mind, let us turn to my theological pilgrimage proper: my struggles with the question of God. From high school days on I was interested in philosophical questions of all sorts, and among these were questions about the reality of God. My father introduced me to

writings of H. N. Wieman, Shailer Mathews, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and others, and I read widely in philosophical materials both in college and on my own (including such works as the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which I read for the first of a good many times at age 18 while a conscientious objector in World War II). But I found no satisfactory ways to deal with my problems.

During my eight months at Northwestern University some important things happened which would influence my eventual theological perspective. I was introduced to G. H. Mead's thoroughly social theory of mind and language (in *Mind, Self and Society*) and to his attempt to integrate the emergence and development of mind into biological evolutionary theory; these ideas have been foundational in my thinking ever since. In a cross-disciplinary seminar on cultural relativism, offered jointly by professors in anthropology, psychology and sociology, I discovered (somewhat to my surprise) that although everybody present appeared to be a thoroughly committed "relativist," I alone took our relativistic insights and understanding to apply not only to those whom we were studying but to us in the seminar as well—and to our seminar's rather uncritical acceptance of the social sciences' truth-claims. About this same time I discovered Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach's analysis profoundly influenced my thinking about the way in which religious ideas are generated, and this in turn helped prepare the way for my later development of a theological method emphasizing "imaginative construction."

I entered Yale Divinity School in order to give the Christian faith (as I put it to myself at that time) a "last chance" to persuade me to continue to take it seriously as I pursued my intention to earn a doctorate in philosophy; in the end, however, I stayed to complete a doctoral program in philosophical theology. H. Richard Niebuhr's Troeltschian/Barthian theological orientation (cf. especially *The Meaning of Revelation*) had helped me recognize the significance of the fact that human beings everywhere live and work out of concrete social, cultural and religious traditions of practice and reflection. Christianity, I now came to see, had resources encouraging us fully to acknowledge our historicity—indeed, to make it central to our understanding of human existence and its problems. And I thus began to come to terms with some aspects of the skeptical relativism and religious doubt with which I had been struggling for some years. In connection with this emerging

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understanding, I was also beginning to realize that despite my strong interests in philosophy (which I was pursuing in a number of graduate-level courses at Yale), it was really theological questions which, at the deepest level, were driving most of my intellectual inquiries. When I eventually discovered, then, that if I moved over to the philosophy department for doctoral studies there would be little or no opportunity to continue work in theology—whereas, in contrast, in the program in philosophical theology there were no such restrictions on work in philosophy—the question of which doctoral program to enter largely decided itself.

The years at Yale were fruitful. I continued working with people like Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Carl Hempel, T. H. Greene and others in the philosophy department, but of course most of my time was given over to studies with Robert Calhoun, Richard Niebuhr, and Julian Hartt. Paul Tillich was in residence one year, and I took both of the seminars he offered (largely previews of parts of his *Systematic Theology*, not yet in print); the systematic comprehensiveness of his theological approach, and his concern about methodological issues, I found impressive. An American brand of neo-orthodoxy—heavily informed by the writings of the Niebuhr brothers, Emil Brunner, and some existentialist thinkers, and with a profound emphasis on social ethics—was dominant in the School in those years. This menu was attractive to me, though I was skeptical about many of the

dogmatic Christian claims that (as it seemed to me) were accepted too uncritically. We were introduced to Karl Barth, but his highly dogmatic utterances seemed quite unpersuasive. In writing my doctoral dissertation on "The Problem of Relativism and the Possibility of Metaphysics," I studied carefully Wilhelm Dilthey, R. G. Collingwood, and Paul Tillich, along with many others, as I worked out a theological/philosophical position of my own on these issues with which I had long been struggling.

It was only after moving to Pomona College in 1953 (as an instructor in the religion department) that I began reading Karl Barth extensively and with increasing enthusiasm. Particularly in his *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth appeared to provide dialectical tools for addressing my continuing doubts and problems about God. Under Barth's radical *sola fide* tutelage (taken together with Tillich's notion of "justification by doubt") I began to think of these struggles as themselves somehow an expression of the grace of God who was beyond my or any other human knowing: the more I doubted and disbelieved—that is, the more I failed in my own efforts to establish a living relation with God—the more my life and my struggles with faith could be understood as sustained by God's grace alone. The dialectic of this sort of argument can be made to swallow up and thus overcome its own dubiousness; so the more one gets caught up in it, the more one is able to see oneself as really a person of faith-in-the-midst-of-all-one's-unbelief-and-unknowing. With questions of personal faith put on the back burner for a time, I began, when I moved to Vanderbilt Divinity School in 1958, to work on an overall interpretation of the Christian faith in my course on systematic theology. Van Harvey (a close friend since graduate-school days) and I had been discussing for some years a book on theological method. These discussions never eventuated in any joint publications, but the reflection on methodological questions which they stimulated in me, together with the theological/philosophical interpretation of relativistic issues in my dissertation and the version of neo-orthodoxy I had picked up at Yale, provided me with materials for developing what I called a "historicist perspective" on Christian faith. It was not until 1968, however (five years after moving to Harvard Divinity School), that my *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* appeared in print.

For some time before this book was published its mode of argument and basic structure was beginning to fall apart for me. At the center of all theological work (I had felt for

"...the more I doubted and disbelieved...the more my life and my struggles with faith could be understood as sustained by God's grace alone."

a long time) was the reality of *God*; but questions about the justification for continuing to speak of this reality in our secular age—and for making it central to all of life—had been largely bypassed by my Yale neo-orthodox theology. All such issues, it was claimed, were matters of "faith," something which, as a "gift of God," could not properly be questioned or examined by human reason. When the "God is dead" movement burst on the scene in the early 1960s, coincident with the growing persuasiveness (to me) of the critique by analytic philosophers of the meaning of theological language, the radical but flimsy Barthian dialectic on which I had been depending in both my theological work and my personal faith fell apart. Though I did not agree that it was time to give up completely on God-talk, it was clear to me that the question of how such talk was to be understood had now become the central theological issue; and I have been occupied with it ever since.

My historicist *Systematic Theology*, however, gave little evidence (beyond an acknowledgment in the Preface) that I was seriously engaged with this problem, partly because it was not published until three or four years after it had been substantially completed. By this time I had written a number of articles

on questions related to the intelligibility of God-talk; and it had become clear that though my book claimed to present an "interpretation of Christian faith within the limits of history alone" (xiii), many central issues connected with the question of God were being begged (xiv-xvi). My next major project, therefore—conceived as a sort of series of long footnotes to the *Systematic Theology*—was to bring together materials published and unpublished which I had been working on since the early 1960s, add some new pieces on further issues that demanded attention, and in this way attempt to take care of the major problems left undiscussed in that book. However, *God the Problem* (1972), which was the result, instead of accomplishing its intended purpose of "completing" the *Systematic Theology*, only opened wider breaches. For some time I had been thinking of theology as essentially a *constructive* activity, an exercise of "the theological imagination" (as I put it in the *Systematic Theology*, xv), without recognizing how radical were the implications of that insight. While writing the chapter on "God as Symbol" (for *God the Problem*), what was at stake in these matters became clearer, however, and I put together (very quickly) a draft of a piece tentatively entitle "Theology as Construction." This was ultimately to become the central chapter of my *Essay on Theological Method* (1975; rev. ed. 1979) in which I was able to sketch briefly the kind of "imaginative construction" I now took to be involved in all theological symbols, concepts, and perspectives, and in this connection to present a programmatic statement of how theological method should today be conceived.

This work turned upside down the basic pattern of thinking underlying the *Systematic Theology*. It became evident that theology is, and always has been, a work of the human imagination, creating and recreating overall perspectives on human life in the world; and that the symbol "God" needed to be seen as itself a product of that imaginative creativity and an integral part of the particular world-picture(s) within which it plays such a distinctive and important role. So the theologian's task was no longer to be understood as the essentially hermeneutical one of handing on with as little change as possible (though in updated form, of course) traditions "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It required, rather, (a) undertaking critical appraisals of those traditions and their historical development; (b) excising what no longer seemed—from our position in today's world with all its peculiar problems and needs—appropriate, important, or correct; and finally, (c) imaginatively (re)constructing a Christian world-picture which could effectively provide orientation for life today. This conception of theological method, like all previous ones, remains built upon a dialectic between tradition and the present, the forms of symbolization and orientation we have inherited from the past and the unanticipated new problems which every generation finds itself facing. But it gives the living religious community, and theologians working in it and for it, much greater freedom to critically assess and reconstruct practices and ideologies received from the past—indeed to move forward with the creation of radically new conceptions of faith and life, radically new understandings of the image/concepts of God and Christ and humanity and the world—if this is required in our search for orientation today. Doubtless the context of sharp and persistent *feminist* criticism of traditional theological procedures and points of view, by some of my own graduate students at Harvard Divinity School—as well as the emergence of Latin American and black liberation theologies—in part accounts for both my methodological concern here with practical problems of human living and my growing openness to radical change in theological ideas.

"It became evident that theology is, and always has been, a work of the human imagination, creating and recreating overall perspectives on human life in the world...."

The great weight of tradition under which I had labored in my earlier writing and thinking, all major dimensions of which were to be regarded as of value and therefore somehow to be preserved, was now

lifted. My imagination was freed to move in new ways, searching out new resources, in the attempt to address creatively the problems of today's faith and life. The principal books which have followed—first some experimental forays, *The Theological Imagination* (1981) and *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985), and now finally *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*—all represent stages in working out (with some revisions) the program first announced in the *Essay on Theological Method*.

III

Let us turn now, in this final section, to *In Face of Mystery*. We humans today live in a world which, though powerfully shaped by scientific modes of knowledge, and technologies employing these modes, has become greatly troubled by the failures of western civilization; it is a world in which the "wretched of the earth" seem to be increasing geometically even while irreversible ecological breakdown threatens all human survival, a world in which a new appreciation for other cultures and other religious outlooks is growing even though bitter, highly destructive ethnic conflicts seem to be spreading like wildfire, a world in which no one has clear answers to our momentous questions. In this time of great bewilderment and confusion about how we should order and conduct our lives, it is important that new interpretations of the meaning of Christian faith (as well as of other living faiths) become available for consideration and discussion, as men and women seek to gain a better sense of what our human place and responsibilities in the world might be. It would be a foolish mistake to suppose—in the heat of our debates about postmodernity and deconstruction—that somehow we present-day women and men no longer need holistic visions of the world, and our human place within it, to guide and orient our lives. What is required today, however, are not more dogmatic proclamations of the absolute truth to be found in this or that religious position or claim, but rather open and free critical discussions of the various alternative ways of dealing with the problems—indeed, the utter mystery—with which our common human existence confronts us.

In Face of Mystery is an attempt to present just such a careful reflective analysis and reconstruction of the symbolic and other resources which monotheistic traditions generally, and Christian forms of monotheism in particular, can offer to contemporary women and men as we seek to find fundamental orientation for our lives. In this work, after explaining the conception of theology as imaginative construction (in Part I), and presenting some anthropological and theological justifications for proceeding with this perspective, I attempt to construct (in the remainder of the book) a conception of human being in the world which is fully in touch with relevant contemporary scientific and philosophical understanding and which is open to appropriation and interpretation in terms of the central Christian symbols, "God" and "Christ"—provided these are carefully deconstructed and reconstructed.

We humans today live in a world which, though powerfully shaped by scientific modes of knowledge, and technologies employing these modes, has become greatly troubled by the failures of western civilization....

What I call a "biohistorical" conception of the human, in which our existence is seen to be grounded on both evolutionary-biological and historico-cultural processes, is constructed in Part II. This conception acknowledges, and provides a way to interpret theologically, both the thoroughly pluralistic character of the religious and cultural dimensions of human life, and the fundamental interconnectedness of our existence with the ecological web of life on planet Earth. Moreover, it has normative implications for the ordering of human affairs and thus provides a basis for interpreting the moral dimensions of human existence and for developing an ethics. Since according to this view human life cannot be properly understood, and the concrete meaning of its normative dimensions do not become clear, apart from some understanding of the cosmic context in which we have emerged, I next sketch briefly a conception of the world (in Part III), giving particular attention to those respects in which our view of the cosmos bears directly on questions of human life-orientation. In particular, I argue that current evolutionary and historical knowledges reveal that in the process of life's temporal development, certain "trajectories" or "directional movements"—not teleological ones, however!—have emerged, as various forms of life have appeared and unfolded; and that it is in connection with the evolutionary-historical trajectory(s) on which human existence emerged, and which continue to sustain it, that we today must understand ourselves and the norms for our ongoing orientation in life. Then (in Part IV) I take up the central Christian normative symbols, "God" and "Christ" (as well as the concept of trinity), and after carefully analyzing their traditional content and functions, propose a reconstruction of each that brings out their potential for orienting in significant ways our human biohistorical existence. Finally, I suggest (in Part V) what this overall conception of God, the world, and the human can mean for the practical stance in faith and life of church communities and individual women and men, as we seek to come to terms with the problems with which today's world confronts us.

How is the theme of God, and faith in God—which has been a thread running through my life's work—addressed in this book? I have not had the misgivings about the publication of *In Face of Mystery* that I did with my earlier *Systematic Theology*. There are, of course, many respects in which it is faulty and incomplete; but I think I have succeeded in setting out an interpretation of the meaning of Christian faith for today with which I myself (and I hope many others) can live. In this work I argue that we should no longer regard the symbol "God" as designating "one more particular being either in the world or 'out there' in some transcendental heaven" (418)—a view which involves a kind of metaphysical dualism that has rendered God-talk virtually unintelligible to many in today's world; rather (picking up on some suggestions of H. N. Wieman in *The Source of Human Good*), I propose that we understand it in terms of the "serendipitous creativity" (see especially ch. 19) which is "at work within the unfolding evolutionary ecosystem, giving reality and directional movement and interconnectedness to the great multiplicity of particular events and beings in the world but not itself a particular being" (418). What I call a "wider Christology" is then introduced, giving the reconception of God a christocentric focus and a basically trinitarian structure (chs. 25-27).

This interpretation may seem to many Christians to give up too much of what has been central to Christian faith and piety through most of its history. Other more "secular" readers will no doubt maintain that the notions of serendipitous creativity and directional movements, as I develop them—though eliminating completely all claims about an explicit teleology at work in the cosmos as a whole or in the movements of human history—are still too closely bound up with traditional christic images and metaphors, and the radicalness of the demands these lay upon us, to be plausible. Criticism of this kind, coming from these two sides, will neither surprise nor greatly

disconcert me. For although I have attempted to work within a basic symbolic pattern drawn from Christian faith, in my theological reconception I have not hesitated to employ important elements grounded in the modern "secular faith" (433) which underlies and informs much of the experience and activity and thinking of men and women in the West today. In my view there is

> a deep bifurcation in the faith that actually orients the lives of many moderns, a division between certain Christian values, meanings, and commitments that continue to remain important and those many features of actual day-to-day living and believing that are largely defined and informed by modern (secular) ideas and practices. I have not argued here for the rejection, or even the downplaying, of either of these two important strands of commitment and faith in the name of the other....[I have attempted, rather,] to adapt or fit these to one another in such a way that they can begin (in due course) to grow together, mutually fructifying and reinforcing one another, as they mature into a better integrated, more holistic faith (434).

My procedure has been to draw upon—but not simply re-present unchanged, or eclectically juxtapose—significant insights, understandings, and commitments from each of these (at present only partially adequate) perspectives on life and the world, in order to move toward a new holistic (Christian) faith-perspective. If this evokes strong objections and criticisms from both of these (supposedly opposite) faith-orientations, that will not be surprising.

The project undertaken in this book seems to me an important one—perhaps the central task with which theologians today should be concerning themselves. I hope, therefore, that inadequacies in my way of addressing it will not lead others to despair of the task, but will rather encourage them to move forward with their own proposals. Our human situation in the world confronts us, once again, as ultimately mystery. And for just this reason precisely the *diversity* of the religious and cultural traditions we humans have created, as we have sought to come to terms with life in many different times and places, has acquired a new and profound significance. We are all voices in a wide conversation on what life is about and how it ought to be lived. In this conversation it is important that the major alternative visions of human existence and its meaning come before us all, in as well articulated forms as possible. Each, with its own holistic picture of the world and the human place within the world, can then be thoughtfully considered and assessed, in this way assisting us, as we make our ultimate commitments, to move in more responsible, less arbitrary and uncritical, ways.

The increasing interest today in ecological visions of our world and the human place within it—despite the powerful relativisitic/pluralistic consciousness of modernity/postmodernity —suggests a growing openness to, indeed demand for, attempts to understand the human condition more holistically again. The conception of theology as imaginative construction can provide Christians (and others) with methodological justification and procedures for drawing more widely on the resources of the various religious and moral traditions of humankind, as we seek to envision in new, better informed ways the cosmos in which we live and within which we must find our place. In this larger and wider human conversation that is increasingly getting under way, *In Face of Mystery* represents but one voice, drawing principally from Christian monotheistic resources. I hope its publication will encourage other voices (non-Christian as well as Christian) to speak out, articulating holistic visions significantly different from mine. For only as we are enabled to envision clearly, and evaluate more carefully, the variety of ways available today for orienting ourselves, will we be able to move forward more self-consciously and responsibly in addressing the problems now confronting humanity.

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The issues and topics [of the symposium] are important for us to continue talking about. The relationship of science and theology, such as in how we deal with end-of-life issues, and the environmental crisis, press in on all of us. Contemporary theology [including Kaufman's] is speaking to these issues. We need an ongoing conversation, as pastors, to keep working at relating philosophical theology to people's everyday lives.

Keith Harder, pastor, First Mennonite Church, Hillsboro, Kansas (in THE MENNONITE)

We All Drink from the Same Stream

Alain Epp Weaver

Last year Mennonite Central Committee's News Service released a moving anecdote from Burma passed on by long-time MCC worker Max Ediger. The unpopular military regime in Burma has sought to gain support among rural Buddhists by sponsoring an armed Buddhist militia which antagonizes Christians in Burma's eastern Karen province. One day this militia arrived in a town where Buddhists and Christians have long co-existed peacefully and demanded that all the Buddhists and the Christians step forward to join their militia. When only a handful of villagers did so, the militia leader threatened to burn down the church and church school. When this threat failed to produce results, the soldiers went to the Buddhist temple and demanded that the monk give them gasoline for burning down the church. The monk didn't resist the order, but replied, "I will give you gasoline to go and burn the Christian church. But when you are finished, I ask you to come back here and burn our pagoda also. If you don't, I will. The Buddhists and the Christians have lived together peacefully in this village for many years. When we Buddhists have a celebration, the Christians come and join. When they have a celebration, we join them." He concluded, "We all drink from the same stream." The soldiers, Ediger relates, hung their heads and walked away.[1]

A dramatic, powerful story, one which exemplifies the type of neighbor and enemy-love that we Christians like to think we can show. But what about the monk's assertion that we all drink from the same stream? Was it true only in the most mundane sense, that the Christian and Buddhist inhabitants of the village drank the same water? Or does it hold true on a deeper level, that Buddhists and Christians drink from a common spiritual stream?

To ask that question is to ask about the significance of religious pluralism and the validity of non-Christian religious truth claims. In this paper, I will examine the parable of the Good Samaritan, looking at the "mode-of-being-in-the-world" it discloses and what vision it opens up of the religious Other. This vision, I will argue, can be integrated with an interpretation of Jesus' "Great Commission" to his disciples that takes Gordon Kaufman's call for a "wider Christology" seriously. I conclude by examining a Christian practice born out of the Middle Eastern crucible of pluralism which exemplifies the integration of the Good Samaritan parable and the Great Commission which I advocate.

I
Two Paradigms for Relations with the Religious Other

Mennonite attitudes towards persons of other faiths have been shaped by two paradigms. One might be called the Good Samaritan paradigm. Under this model, Mennonites identify themselves with

the Samaritan of the parable and seek to show God's love to others through material relief, and, in more recent years, development assistance. The Christian's call, according to this model, is to minister to the sick, the poor, the hungry, and the imprisoned, regardless of their faith-identification. Since "they shall know you by your love," evangelism becomes equated with good works. The other paradigm follows a traditional reading of the Great Commission, with an emphasis on converting persons of other faiths into a faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

In recent years, some have become concerned with what they see as an unwarranted bifurcation of the Gospel into conversion-oriented evangelism and love-manifested-through-works evangelism. For example, the programmatic emphasis of the Mennonite Central Committee on relief and sustainable development has led some to worry that the proclamation of the Gospel has been neglected by MCC. C.J. Dyck notes that "the Great Commission has never been part of MCC's vocabulary."[2] John H. Redekop worries that Dyck's assessment of MCC is on target; MCC volunteers, he believes, have focused almost exclusively on offering the Good Samaritan's cup of cold water, to the detriment of preaching the gospel, leading Bible studies, and planting churches. In response, Redekop calls for a reintegration of the Great Commission and Good Samaritan narratives.[3]

I don't want to examine at length the fairness of Dyck's and Redekop's claims, other than to note that during four years with MCC in the Middle East, I saw MCCers preaching the Word and leading Bible studies. And it would be unfair to those working with Mennonite mission boards to overlook their practical Christian service. But I think it's also true that many in MCC hold different views of other religions than some Mennonites concerned with the conversion and eternal destiny of the non-Christian. For example, Redekop correctly notes that whereas some of MCC's sponsoring conferences view Muslims as lost people who must be evangelized, some in MCC "talk about bridge-building, common agendas, and other similar emphases."[4]

Whereas Dyck and Redekop see in these different approaches an unfortunate separation of service from evangelism, of the Good Samaritan from the Great Commission, I would suggest that an approach to other religions which seeks to build bridges and identify common agendas is in fact compatible with *both* the Good Samaritan and Great Commission models. To see this compatibility, however, requires a fresh reading of both narratives.

II
The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Sharing in God's Blessing

I turn first to the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. I've chosen this story because for Mennonites, the Good Samaritan has been a paradigmatic figure for relations with the "Other." Because of the relief and development programs administered by the Mennonite Central Committee and the emergency operations mounted by Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonites somewhat pridefully identify themselves with the good Samaritan in the parable. MCC sees itself as a "Christian resource for meeting need," including the need of non-Christians, much like the good Samaritan offered care for the wounded Jew.

In short, the Mennonite approach to the Good Samaritan story has been to interpret it ethically. While not denying the validity of this interpretation, I would suggest that it is incomplete in so far as it fails to take the story seriously as a parable. As John Donahue has noted, a turning point in the interpretation of the Good Samaritan text came with the defeat of the view, associated with Dan O. Via, that the text was a *Beispielerzählung* (example story), and the triumph of John Dominic Crossan's view that the Good Samaritan story was a true parable. Crossan's argument was two-fold: first, the paradox and surprise present in the story is more typical of a parable than an example story; second, the narrative would be a true example story only if

the person who stops to care for the injured man by the side of the road were a Jewish lay person. The choice of the Samaritan as the main character of the narrative gives it the "shock value" characteristic of a parable.[5]

The primary function of a parable, biblical scholars note, isn't ethical, but rather is to disclose a "mode-of-being-in-the-world" through the use of exaggeration, intensification, and metaphor. Parables provide us with what David Tracy calls "limit-visions," visions of what God's reign is like.[6] So, while it isn't wrong to ask ethical questions of a parable, a more pertinent question would be, "What limit-vision does this parable disclose?" The key to answering this question lies in determining what metaphorical "limit-language" the parable employs to articulate its limit-vision.

Like all good parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan is constructed around a base metaphor, one that holds in tension two terms normally thought incompatible or at least incongruent.[7] The central metaphor to the parable, it seems clear, is the main character himself, the Good Samaritan, "good" and "Samaritan" being the incongruent terms held in creative, interactive tension.

Samaritans, the historical record is clear, were greatly hated by "orthodox" Jews of first century Palestine; it is less clear where this antipathy originated. Most scholars agree that Samaritan origins are in some way connected to the Assyrian exile, with the introduction of pagan captives into the north of the land of Israel after the exile of most, if not all, of the Jews of the area. The result was that post-exilic Jewry viewed Samaritans, who claimed the faith of Moses, as "syncretistic pagans" and foreigners.[8] The Jew-Samaritan split was certainly religious in character, with rival temples in Jerusalem and on Mt. Gerizim bitter points of contention, but economic and political competition between Jerusalem and Samaria also contributed to enmity.[9] The Jew-Samaritan relationship, thus, in first-century Palestine was perhaps not too different from the enmities between present-day religious communities generated by religious-theological differences as well as exacerbated by political and economic factors.[10]

If Samaritans would have been viewed as enemies by first-century Jews, then what does the metaphorical limit-language of "Good" and "Samaritan" conjoined disclose to us concerning God's kingdom? Recent New Testament scholarship strongly supports a reading of the parable as a metaphorical demonstration of the boundary-breaking nature of God's kingdom. Those who were considered enemies are to be seen as potential friends, those who were hated for syncretistic accommodations and repellent religious practices to be understood as potential embodiers of God's will for the world. John Dominic Crossan has persuasively argued that the story is a parable that illustrates the Kingdom of

"If we take this parable seriously, we should not be surprised to find,...that the non-Christians to whom we relate will have something to teach us about God and God's will for the world."

God: "The metaphorical point [of the Good Samaritan story] is that *just so* does the kingdom of God break abruptly into human consciousness and demand the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgments and established conclusions.... The hearer struggling with the contradictory dualism of Good/Samaritan is actually experiencing in and through this the inbreaking of the Kingdom."[11] John R. Donahue draws the conclusion from Crossan's analysis of the parable that in the Good Samaritan parable Jesus is challenging the "religious attitude that divides the world into outsiders and insiders."[12] Bernard Brandon Scott points out that the Samaritan of the parable is not converted into Orthodox Judaism, thus remaining a religious Other and an enemy. The parable thus does away with an "apocalyptic vision of ultimate triumph over one's enemies. The world with its sure arrangement of insiders and outsiders is no longer an adequate model for predicting the kingdom."[13] Dwellers in the Kingdom no longer view people of

other faiths as enemies, nor feel a need to vanquish them, physically or theologically; rather, they expect that commonalities will be found, that bridges can be built, as they know full well that the boundaries of the Kingdom extend beyond Christian churches and institutions.

In his parable, then, Jesus is revealing the divine pattern of love, a love which transverses boundaries of race and religion. The character he chooses to exhibit this love is a religious Other, a Samaritan. If we take this parable seriously, we should not be surprised to find, perhaps should even expect, that the non-Christians to whom we relate will have something to teach us about God and God's will for the world. Christians should be alert to discern the inbreaking of God's reign in the words and deeds of others. A clear example, at least to me, of God's reign being made manifest in the world is that of the Burmese Buddhist priest who intervened to prevent the persecution of his Christian neighbors. Through his words and deeds, the priest witnessed to profound religious truths: on the level of what Christians would call theological anthropology, his statement that "We all drink from the same stream" affirms that all people are children of God (or, in less theocentric terms, all people stand in face of mystery); furthermore, his actions obliterate the category of "enemy"—those Christians he was expected to hate, he loved and called neighbors.

I should stress at this point that when I talk of building bridges and finding common ground with people of other faiths, I'm not advocating a position which overlooks or seeks to overcome difference. Unlike inclusivists, who in neo-imperialist fashion seek to reduce all faiths to a common core of experience or belief, I recognize that we live in a world of irreducible plurality. In this situation of plurality and attendant ambiguity the Christian must exercise what David Tracy has called "the analogical imagination" to discover analogies between (not identity of) Christian experiences and beliefs and those of others.[14]

A reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan would also be a good corrective to our prideful, even arrogant Mennonite self-image as givers. MCC has learned painfully over the years how circumscribed its abilities are to redress the economic and political injustices its workers confront. At the same time, MCC workers have been blessed by the love and generosity of the poor and oppressed, Christian and non-Christian, whom we somewhat optimistically call our partners. For MCC in the Middle East, this has meant unexpectedly finding common ground and building bridges both with Eastern churches as well as Muslims.

Ted Koontz's suggestion that MCC's motto be changed from "A Christian resource for meeting need" to "A Christian resource for sharing God's blessing" would help move us beyond our self-image of active givers and towards a recognition that God has blessed us through religious Others.[15] While Koontz was thinking primarily of the blessings which MCC and its workers have received from the poor, his idea is equally applicable to, say, the blessing MCCers have received from partners and neighbors of other faiths. "Sharing God's blessing" across religious boundaries is an apt way to name the boundary-breaking kingdom reality disclosed in the Good Samaritan parable.

> "...the Good Samaritan story reminds us that the enemy, particularly the religious enemy, is in fact the neighbor, and that we should expect to find signs that God is at work in the 'enemy camp'"

The Good Samaritan narrative is useful for thinking about interfaith relations in another way. When one considers the extent of Jewish-Samaritan enmity in first-century Palestine, one is startled to see Jesus setting forth an enemy as the example of how God wants us to love each other. Throughout history, and unfortunately still today, religious divisions have been a cause for violence.[16] For example, foreign policy analysts, and even some missionaries, speak ominously of a great confrontation on the horizon between Islam and the West. The simplistic essentialism with which this discourse treats Islam and "Muslim"

states makes it misleading at best, pernicious at worst. But it is nevertheless true that many in the West see Islam as an enemy, and many Muslims see the "Christian" West as an enemy. In this climate of hate and vilification, the Good Samaritan story reminds us that the enemy, particularly the religious enemy, is in fact the neighbor, and that we should expect to find signs that God is at work in the "enemy camp."

Learning about another religion, making friends with people of other faiths and participating in their cultures can open one's heart to a healing word from an Other, one's mind to discern God's self-disclosure among people of other faiths. But these steps can just as easily be used to reinforce the conviction that the religious Other has nothing to share with us. One thinks, for example, of missionaries in the Middle East who study Arabic and Islamic theology with the sole purpose of finding gaps into which Christ might be inserted or contradictions which could be used against Muslim interlocutors.[17] Or our "knowledge" of what another religion is "really like" can "puff up" our pride. For example, some Mennonite missiologists recently argued that true development must be Christian, claiming that "Islam and Hinduism have failed to be major agents in development because they do not seek the welfare of people other than their own."[18] This blanket assertion is qualified with the admission that some Muslims and Hindus are involved in development programs, but then "mainly those who have been influenced by Christianity and its value on compassion for all humans, particularly the marginalized." Such an argument presupposes an essentialist view of religion and deals with other faiths in absolutes: Islam is incompatible with development because it is such and such a way. Lacking is an acknowledgment that religions change, or, to use more universally acceptable language, aspects of a faith which were once marginal can become central. And if indeed some Christians have been so fortunate as to influence non-Christians by drawing out values, such as compassion, which might have previously been marginal to their traditions, then surely this should be an occasion for rejoicing in the building-up power of love, not for prideful puffing in our knowledge of superiority (I Corinthians 8:1).[19]

III
The Great Commission and a "Wider Christology"

Can the Good Samaritan narrative, read as divine blessing through the religious Other, be integrated with the Great Commission, as called for by Dyck and Redekop? An acknowledgment that God is bigger than Christianity and can reveal Godself through the words and deeds of people of other faiths does not, in my estimation, void the evangelical responsibility to share the good news of God-made-present in the liberating events surrounding the person of Jesus. Missions in this sense would be dialogical, with the missionary embodying a nonresistant openness to her interlocutors.[20] While this missionary would come to any dialogue with the message of Christ's love to share, she would also be open to learning from her conversation partner. Through the dialogue she might discover common ground with her dialogue partner, or might herself think about the Christian story in a new way, or be drawn to aspects of the story she had previously neglected. In all these cases, her dialogue partner has provided her with a gift, be it through confirming her faith or through helping her to think in new ways. In a genuine dialogue, this process also holds true for the one with whom the missionary is in conversation.[21] Through the dialogical process, then, both Christian and non-Christian become better disciples of the God who transcends all religious boundaries.

I find Gordon Kaufman's conception of a "wider Christology" helpful in illuminating the mutually transforming dimension of interfaith conversation. In his recent writings, Kaufman has made the case that the category "Christ" extends beyond the man Jesus and encompasses "the whole web of saving and revelatory events within which early Christians found themselves."[22] Discipleship to the Christ of a "wider Christology" would thus

involve working towards making the world more humane. The specifics of what "humane" constitutes would, of course, be furnished by specific religious and secular traditions, with the Jesus of the Gospels serving as the starting-point for a Christian understanding of what is truly human and humane. At times there would be disagreement about what humaneness meant. But through the dialogical process, all parties, Christian and otherwise, would hone their understandings of humaneness, finding common ground in their conceptions of humaneness, and thus become better disciples of God.[23]

IV
Sharing God's Blessing and Conversational Theology

An approach towards people of other faiths which seeks to build bridges, looks for common ground, and expects to learn something about God's kingdom through interfaith dialogue, or, more appropriately, to have God's kingdom break into the midst of interfaith dialogue could properly be labeled conversational. In this regard, the approach I've outlined has strong affinities with Gordon Kaufman's conversational theology. For one, both positions reject what Kaufman calls the "property-model" of truth in which adherents to a particular faith tradition picture themselves as the exclusive bearers of truth. The property-model of truth ignores the relativizing function of the symbol "God" by assuming that divine truth can be captured completely by a certain set of texts, symbols, and practices. This is not to claim that God's manifestations in the world are ever anything other than particular, but to serve as a reminder that God as transcendent Mystery is not limited to our pictures and images of the divine reality.

Kaufman's dialogical understanding of truth also resonates with the Good Samaritan parable, as I have interpreted it. In recent years, Kaufman has developed a theological approach which envisions religious truth emerging through conversation with persons of other faiths. Through interfaith conversation differences are probed, similarities discovered, theological conceptions transformed; through it, new truth emerges. Kaufman's dialogue with Buddhists provides an example of how such conversation is fleshed out.

Two difficulties arise for me concerning Kaufman's understanding of religious truth. First, while I agree with Kaufman that truth can emerge through interfaith conversation, I am unwilling to go as far as I understand Kaufman to go, in saying that truth "in principle" is a "dialogical reality." Second, I am uncomfortable with Kaufman's privileging of the academy as the locus for interfaith conversation.

Kaufman recognizes that faith communities and the symbols, texts, and practices which undergird them, provide adherents with a way of viewing the world, with meaning constructed in the face of mystery. As tradition-dependent, the meaning and truth-claims which arise out of the lives of different faith traditions cannot be evaluated by outside, objective criteria, because no such universal criteria exist. Granted this, and granted furthermore that the transcendent God manifests Godself beyond the boundaries of the church, I see no reason why one cannot talk of having a "subjective certitude" that the claims of one's faith tradition are true.[24] Religious truth could thus be conceived as having two dimensions: one internal to the faith community, reflective of its subjective certainty in its beliefs, and another particular to those dialogical moments in which persons of different faiths find common ground with each other, come to think traditional theological categories in a new way. Kaufman is so worried about reifying particular symbols and faith-expressions, and the triumphalist violence he associates with such reification, that he shies away from the internal-to-the-faith-community side of truth, and emphasizes the dialogical side.

A different reservation about Kaufman's conversational theology relates to the almost exclusive priority which Kaufman gives to the academy as a locus for this conversation. This is evident when he writes that the academy may be "the only institutional context available in modern

society for such open and unfettered theological conversation."[25] Kaufman has good reasons for giving the university priority: extensive research resources, academic freedom which removes constraints that church, mosque, or synagogue might impose.[26] Predicated on the prior willingness of participants to open their beliefs to criticism and transformation by people of other faith orientations, this "critical" conversational theology excludes those with more "traditional" approaches to religion (revelation, inerrancy of scripture, be it the Bible, Torah, or Qur'an). This exclusion renders the academic conversation not only unrepresentative, but also of limited use, unless Kaufman envisions the academy coming up with "solutions" and then imposing them on society, which I'm sure he doesn't. Academic interfaith conversation certainly has its benefits, but its removal from the world of power and conflict, where some religious groups always wield more power than others, sometimes benevolently, sometimes oppressively, is not one of them.

This critique aims at what Kaufman admits is his "somewhat idealized" vision of interfaith conversation.[27] Tom Driver might have been thinking of Kaufman when he wrote: "It is fashionable to say that the world has become one, that our problems are global, and that we are going to survive or perish together. These ideas have much truth in them, but they are not the whole truth. It is less fashionable (especially in North America), though equally true, to say that the world is broken into many pieces, subject to unfathomable misunderstandings, engaged in unending warfare between nations, social classes, racial groups, genders."[28] Kaufman's prioritizing of the academy as a location where representatives of different faiths can converse on equal terms seems to hold out little prospect of genuine interfaith conversation taking place in situations where the interlocutors are from different social spheres with different levels of power. Yet, as two examples from the Middle East will illustrate, transforming conversation can occur even in the midst of oppressive circumstances.

V
Conversational Theology in Conflict Situations

For most of this paper, I've looked at being open to learning about God's will from people of other faiths, and have not touched much on what Christians have to share with others. This was to counter the simplistic view of other religions which condemns them as outright falsehoods as well as approaches more interested in preserving the purity of their own cultural-linguistic systems than in receiving a fresh word of good news from the Other. But Christians, who believe that God has manifested Godself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and in the salvific acts surrounding his life and that of the Christian community, have a gospel to share with others.[29]

Just what is this gospel, and what does it mean to share it? In my reading of the Good Samaritan parable, I asked that we leave behind temporarily our identification with the Samaritan and put ourselves in the position of the wounded by the side of the road. To envision how the church can best share the gospel, I'd like us to stop thinking about how we as privileged North American Christians can share God's love, and to consider how one part of the world's suffering church, that of the Middle East, witnesses to God's love.

The tendency of many Middle Eastern Christian communities to retreat in sectarian defensiveness as their numbers diminish, and the rise of Islamic revival movements which make authoritarian appeals to sacred text and sacred history (the Qur'an and the practice of the early Muslim community as described by the *hadith*, or traditions about Muhammad), make the prospects for a fruitful, mutually transforming interfaith dialogue seem dim. Nowhere is this truer than in Egypt, a country where indigenous Coptic Orthodox Christians have been subject to persecution and harassment by Islamic revivalists in recent years.

In this climate of hardship and suffering, some Coptic churches have adopted an interesting practice. During Ramadan, the Muslim month of

fasting, some Coptic Orthodox Christians have taken to hosting evening meals, or *iftars*, for their Muslim neighbors to mark the end of their day's fast.[30] For a religious minority to adopt the practice of majority is a potentially risky act. Christians might legitimately fear that by appropriating a Muslim practice such as hosting Ramadan breakfasts, they are contributing to the Muslim view of Christianity as a partial, incomplete version of the true religion, and thus relativizing their own claims to ultimacy. Copts, who as a persecuted minority are understandably concerned with strengthening their religious identity, might also worry that the adoption of an Islamic practice could blur their communal self-understanding.

"...transforming conversation can occur even in the midst of oppressive circumstances."

Despite these risks, Coptic Christians have continued the practice of hosting *iftars* for Muslim neighbors, for the good, to my mind. First, the practice demonstrates an ability on the part of the church to discern positive values at play in the camp of the oppressor. By hosting *iftars*, Christians at least implicitly recognize the value of Ramadan as a practice of consciously abstaining from evil and directing oneself to God.[31] Second, the act of a persecuted minority reaching out to its "enemies," ministering to their physical need (hunger) by extending its tables manifests the truth that the kingdom of God surpasses religious boundaries, as well as demonstrates the powerful example of love of enemy. One is also reminded of the most fundamental Christian act of sharing bread, the Eucharist, in which the suffering nature of the kingdom is made real. The Syrian Orthodox patriarch, in a communion service, once observed that bread smells sweeter and becomes nourishing only when it is broken. In the same way, he continued, the church can become nourishing, a bearer of the Kingdom, when it is broken as well.[32] Christian *iftars* for Muslim neighbors in the Middle East show God's love pouring forth from a broken church.[33]

Such love can transform the would-be enemy into a friend. Several years ago, one of the leaders of the Islamic revival movement in Egypt, Sheikh al-Sharawi, lay sick in a hospital in England. He had been hostile in his preaching towards Egyptian Christians. In the face of this hostility, the leader of the Coptic church, Pope Shenouda III, made a bold decision. He asked Coptic Christians living in Britain to visit al-Sharawi in the hospital and to wish him speedy recovery. When the sheikh left the hospital, he made a public statement that Egypt would see the good that came out of the Pope's gesture, and confessed that the Pope had taken a step towards reconciliation that he now wished he had taken much earlier.[34]

Of course, one should be wary of overdramatizing. The religio-political tensions between Copts and Muslim in Egypt still trouble the country, as do interreligious tensions throughout the Middle East and the world. Moments of reconciliation, of mutual transformation, as manifested in the act of Christian *iftars*, at times seem few and far between. Given traditional Anabaptist emphases on peace and peacemaking, it should be seen as a calling for Mennonite Christians to encourage and support the efforts of people of faith in conflict situations to find common ground, to experience moments when God's kingdom enters their midst, transgressing national, ethnic, and even religious boundaries. Through such efforts, may we truly come to share in God's blessings with others.

Endnotes

[1] Max Ediger, "Quenching Flames of Animosity in a Village in Burma," MCC News Release Service, January 26, 1996.
[2] C. J. Dyck, "Response to James C. Juhnke," in Robert Kreider and Ronald J.R. Mathies, eds., *Unity Amidst Diversity: Mennonite Central Committee at 75* (Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1996), 167-8.
[3] John H. Redekop, "The Meaning of it All," in Robert Kreider and Ronald J.R. Mathies, eds., *Unity Amidst Diversity: Mennonite Central Committee at 75* (Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1996), 151-157, especially pages 152 and 155.
[4] Redekop, 152.
[5] Crossan's argument is outlined in John Donahue, S.J., "Who is My Enemy? The Parable of the Good Samaritan and love of Enemies," in Willard Swartley, ed., *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 143.
[6] The following discussion of parables and their interpretation relies heavily on David Tracy's analysis in *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism inTheology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, revised edition 1996), 126-131.
[7] My understanding of parabolic metaphor draws on Tracy, 128-130.
[8] A key Biblical text in this regard is the healing of the ten lepers, in which the only leper to return to thank Jesus was a Samaritan (Luke 17:16). Referring to the healed Samaritan leper, Jesus states, "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner (allogenes)?" (Luke 17:18). For anextensive discussion of the role of Smaritans in Luke-Acts, see John Donahue, 137-156.
[9] Donahue, 142.
[10] Some might object to the depiction of Samaritans as religious "Others" to orthodox Jews, pointing to similarities between Jews and Samaritans (circumcision, strict Sabbath observance) and to the diversity within first-century Judaism, a diversity which "embraced groups as divergent as the Essenes and the Sadducees." Donahue suggests that Jew-Samaritan hatred grew as much out of their shared heritage as out of their differences (Donahue, 142-143). An answer to this objection might be to observe that with the processes of globalization bringing previously separated people closer together (at least in the realm of communications) and historical research into religion laying bare humanity's common religious history, it would be fair to speak of present-day tensions between faith communities as growing out of a "shared heritage." Particularly pertinent is Wilfred Cantwell Smith's talk of an emerging recognition of "the unitary religious history of humankind." *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 44. It should be stressed that Smith's understanding of a shared religious history common to all of humanity does not involve inclusivist assumptions about a share "core" to all religions.
[11] Quoted in Donahue, 143-144.
[12] Donahue, 144.
[13] Quoted in Donahue, 144.
[14] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
[15] Ted Koontz, "Commitments and Complications in Doing Good," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70 (January 1996): 59-80.
[16] See Roy Hange's broad account of interreligious conflict, soon to be published by MCC in its Occasional Papers series under the title "From the Iron Curtain to Curtains of Fire: Religious Identity and Emerging Conflicts."
[17] *Ishmael, My Brother: A Christian Introduction to Islam*, Anne Cooper, compiler (Tunbridge Wells: MARC Publications, 1985), typifies a missiological genre in which much information about the religion of the target group (in this case, Islam) is imparted in order to make evangelism more effective. The writings of Islamicist and missiologist Kenneth Cragg provide a more attractive approach. While Cragg wants to make the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith attractive to Muslims, and does not shy away from speaking prophetically to Muslims, he also is attentive to areas of overlap between Christianity and Islam, and is attuned to what Islam can teach Christians about transcendence, God's role as Creator, etc. See especially Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1985) and *Muhammad and the Chrisitan* (Mayknoll: Orbis, 1984). The bridge-building approach to interfiath relations is well-illustrated by a recent compilation of essays by Muslims and Christians on questions related to the church/mosque-state relationship edited by Tarek Mitri, *Religion, Law and Society: A Christian-Muslim Discussion* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994).
[18] Paul G. Hiebert and Barbara Hiebert-Crape, "The Role of Religion in International Development," *The Conrad Grebel review* 13 (fall 1995): 293n33
[19] Examples of "building-up" love in action would be MCC support of Islamic relief and development efforts, such as involvment with the Musa Sadr foundation in souther Lebanonand the Iranian Red Crescent.
[20] The words "mission" and "missionary" have become fraught with much negative baggage, thanks especially to past missionary collusion with colonialism. If the words are found irredeemable by conversation partners

of other faiths, then Christians should consider adopting a different vocabulary to designate the Christian activity of sharing the Jesus story. On this point, see John H. Yoder, "The Disavowal of Constantine," in Michael G. Cartwright, ed., *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

[21] Yoder, "Disavowal." See also gayle Gerber Koontz's description of Yoder's approach to interfaith relations in her articles, "Evangelical Peace Theology and Religious Pluralism," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 14 (Winter 1996): 57-85.

[22] Gordon Kaufman, *God-Mystery-Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 117. See especially the chapter on "A Wider Christology" in *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[23] While I've drawn on Kaufman's "wider Christology" to make sense of the bridge-building and humanizing work that takes place across religious boundaries, I wish he would draw more on the story of Jesus, particularly those events which highlight the social, plitical and economic dimension of Jesus' ministry and teaching, in developing his Christology. In my view, this is more an error of omission on Kaufman's part than a structural flaw in his approach. On this pint, see Ted Grimsrud, "Mennonite Theology and Historical Consciousness: A Pastoral Perspective," in Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* C.H. Wedel Historical Series Number 9 (North Newton, Ks.: Bethel Collegem 1996), 154-155. Much Biblical research exists to document that a return to the Jesus story uncovers a nonviolent Jesus who preached a social ethic of standing with the marginalized and the oppressed. See especially John Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised edition, 1994). It is this Jesus who must, as Yoder persuasively argues, be disentangled "from the Christ of Byzantium and of Torquemada" in the process of interfaith conversation. Yoder, "Disavowal," 261.

[24] The term "subjective certitude" is George Lindbeck's. See *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 63-69.

[25] Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 67.

[26] Kaufman, *God-Mystery-Diversity*, 210. Points out that Kaufman recognizes that his portrait of conversational theology is somewhat idealized, 226n13.

[27] Kaufman, *God-Mystery-Diversity, 226n13.*

[28] Tom Driver, "The Case for Pluralism," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 206.

[29] Kaufman would, I believe, agree with me on this point. As his dialogues with Buddhists make clear, Kaufman believes that the central Christian symbols, properly understood, have much to offer people of other faiths.

[30] *Iftars* hosted by Christians can be found throughout the Middle East. I have chosen to focus on Egypt because Christian-Muslim relations are particularly strained there.

[31] In the winter of 1995, the then Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Samir Qafity, penned an explicit statement recognizing the positive spiritual value of Ramadan in petic form. It appeared under the title "Ahlan bik ya Ramadan" in the main Palestinian daily newspaper, *Al-Quds* at the beginning of the month of fasting.

[32] Anecdote shared in a communion service in Aiya Napa, Cyprus for MCC Middle East workers by Ed Epp, MCC Middle East Area Secretary, March 1994.

[33] The political dimension of this practice, and its religious implications, should be noted. Ramadan has traditionally been a time in the Muslim community to focus on sharing resources with the disadvantaged, often in the form of communal *iftars* organized by local welfare committees for the poor and held at community mosques. The Christian act of sharing bread, epitomized by the Eucharist, also has a plitical dimension, explored in depth in John H. Yoder's *Body Politics* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992). What is significant about Christian *iftars* is that, unlike Muslim *iftars* or Communion, this bread-sharing takes place across religious boundaries. Middle Eastern Christians engaging in this practice are acting in accordance to Yoder's observation about interfaith relations that it is "one's solidarity (civil, social, economic) with [one's intelocutor] as neighbor [that] is what must)and can) be defined" before evaluating the "truth content or validity of the ideas or experiences of another religion as system or performance." The question of truth certainly has its place, but Christians should first of all be concerned with discerning how to manifest God's non-violent love by standing together with the marginalized and the oppressed, including those persons of other faiths. See Yoder, "Disavowal," 256.

[34] Related by Ed Epp, MCC Middle East Secretary, in a conversation on August 20, 1996.

The symposium felt worthwhile to me, but it raised the question of how you involve the congregation in the conversation, because it is in the congregation that theology becomes transformational for the church. Theological conversation can bring healing to a fractured church—we're almost divided into political camps, in a broad sense, not just Mennonite. In these kinds of theological discussions (as during the symposium) there is genuine dialogue between people who don't necessarily agree with each other. In the church today we're so afraid of each other and of change that we hang on tightly to 'our theology.' Somehow we have to be able to convey what this symposium was saying, that theology is constructed from your individual situation or vantage point and we can loosen our grip without giving up our identity.

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Constructing a Mennonite Theology in a Congregational Setting

Ted Grimsrud

In the summer of 1996, I marked my tenth year as a pastor by making a career change. I left parish ministry and accepted a position on the Bible and Religion faculty of Eastern Mennonite University. I believe, though, that my experience as a pastor is going to have a permanent effect on how I approach theology.

In this paper, I want to reflect on how pastoring has caused me to rethink the task of Christian theology. In particular, I want to emphasize two lessons I learned. The main lesson I learned about theology from pastoring is the need for theology to emerge from and directly address *historical* existence (that is, life in the here and now). Theology is for the *present*.

A second lesson I learned is that theology has to do with an integration of beliefs and ethics. Theology is not only about beliefs, or even about "applying" beliefs to life. Theology is about life itself—emerging from experience, speaking to experience.

I have come to my present understanding of theology as a *Mennonite* pastor, seeking to think theologically in a Mennonite context. I realize now that in the past ten years what I have been doing is constructing a Mennonite theology in a congregational setting.

In general, academic theologians (even Mennonites) do not tend to take congregational life as their starting point. Consequently, the theology needs to be translated by pastors into more concrete terms.

However, the work of translating academic theology into more concrete terms, integrating academic theology with congregational life, generally is not a very high priority for many pastors. So, what has resulted is a serious gap between academic theology and congregational ministry—even in the Mennonite world.

Mennonite theology has a message of peace and wholeness to offer a modern world continually plagued with interhuman violence, increasing alienation between human beings and nature, increasing breakdowns in human community, and increasing loss of meaning and hopefulness in work and other parts of everyday life.

However, to grasp and communicate this message, Mennonite theology must seek to bridge the gap between academic theology and congregational life. One way of bridging the gap is to take seriously the two lessons from my pastoral experience—that theology needs to emerge from and directly address historical experience and that theology has to do with the integration of belief and ethics.

I like the term "congregational theology" for the way I want to theologize. The term "congregational" situates this reflective and constructive activity in the present, concrete, historical lives of people in local communities. It situates the reflection in the historical lives of *particular* traditions and groups of churches.

By calling this reflective activity "theology" I am situating it within the

tradition of normative, ordered thinking about the big issues of life in light of *God*. "Theology" is not simply description of religious beliefs. "Congregational theology" is not simply concerned with what people in congregations happen to believe. There is a normative aspect included as well.

In what follows, I want briefly to discuss four distinct sources for thought and reflection, which I would call the four building blocks of congregational theology in a Mennonite context. These include: (1) the Bible, (2) the history of our tradition, (3) the present-day lives of people in the congregation, and (4) our hope, our vision for the future.

As a pastor, I especially tried to shape these various sources into a coherent theological perspective through preaching. I sought to construct an imaginative synthesis out of these four sources. The responses I received to my thinking did not come from analytical theologians. Rather, the responses came from farmers and grade school teacher, teenagers and octogenarians, people with PhDs and people who had not finished high school. I sought always to speak to their historical existence, focusing on meaning and hope and encouragement for the here and now.

My reflections in this paper do not so much follow from my success in expressing the faith through preaching. I am not sure how much I did succeed. Much more, my reflections simply follow from my struggle to speak, my struggle to find meaningful words to say.

Gordon Kaufman's reflections on theological method have been enormously helpful for me in my ministry, in particular, his proposal that theology in practice is always an act of construction rather than "hermeneutics."[1] By this he means that what theology does is not simply finding out from past doctrines what we are supposed to believe now. Theology is something we construct. We theologize in light of our historical existence—our present thought forms, our present needs. Our theology is an act of imaginative synthesis, an act of creativity, drawing on many sources and flowing out of our experience of life.

Kaufman's discussion of theological construction encourages me to affirm what I was doing as a pastor. I was theologizing. As I move into a more academic setting, I want to continue the same method—to do congregational theology in an academic setting.

When I describe the four sources of congregational theology, I am not thinking of them as authorities to be prioritized and which I would seek merely faithfully to represent. I am not proposing a "scientific method" wherein my theological task is merely to interpret revealed truths. Rather, I am thinking of the sources as the raw materials out of which one fashions a new perspective meant to speak to new situations.

The Bible

To some extent, to speak of the centrality of the Bible in Mennonite congregational theology is simply to recognize reality. Since the very beginning of the Anabaptist movement, Mennonites have defined themselves as biblical people. A common assertion among Mennonites is that we believe what the Bible says and that determines our faith and practice.

However, in my experience, the actual role of the Bible in Mennonite congregational life is a bit more ambiguous. In my years of pastoral ministry, I became somewhat disillusioned about biblical authority in the congregation.

For one thing, I found few people willing to do the work serious Bible study requires. When some difficult, conflictual issues arose in any of the several congregations I pastored, it seemed that few people were interested in detailed Bible study as a means of discernment.

There was at least one occasion, though, where people did engage in some serious Bible study. However, then a new set of problems arose. Early in my first pastorate, our congregation struggled with a difficult moral issue. An individual from each of two sides did detailed exegetical work, and then made presentations to the congregation. Both individuals used the Bible in fairly sophisticated ways and yet came to *opposite*

conclusions. In response to this impasse, most people in the congregation threw up their hands in discouragement. They concluded that the Bible as supreme authority for specific decisions does not work because it lends itself to too many interpretations.

Nonetheless, in spite of these problems, I came to realize that the Bible did serve as an important resource for that congregation. Discussion of the moral issue quite often took place with the use of biblical metaphors, images, stories, characters, prescriptions. The point was not so much proving one argument or another as it was simply communication. The Bible offered a common language, a common store of images. It did not offer a lever for a final answer, but it did help people to talk and understand at least a little better.

Along with providing a common store of images which enhanced communication, the Bible also provided a general orientation toward life which strengthened our congregational life.

The Bible, amidst its diversity, does contain a central message—that God loves the world and is working to bring about healing and restoration to it. Agreement on this core motif helped our congregation to work redemptively with the dilemma it faced. The resolution was somewhat of a compromise which did not fully please everyone. However, the style with which the decision was made was inclusive of everyone and the congregation as a whole shared a general commitment to the values of mercy, respect, and seeking wholeness for all people.

This experience helped me understand that the Bible's message of God's healing love provides the core content for all Christian theology. In the years that have followed, the most overt theological work I did as a pastor was preaching. I sought to identify biblical materials which flesh out this basic motif of God's working to bring about healing for the broken creation. Certainly, the Bible contains many diverse viewpoints and countervailing tendencies. However, my preaching experience has convinced me that the Bible serves as a tremendous resource witnessing to life, to mercy, to hope.

In recent years, I have come more and more to appreciate the concreteness of the Bible. Part of the reason why the Bible is such a crucial resource for congregational theology is that congregational theology is most of all concerned with the struggle we have to live faithfully in everyday life. The Bible is best understood as a record of past people doing precisely that same thing—struggling to live faithfully in everyday life. The Bible is useful more due to this commonality with our lives than due to its uniqueness as direct revelation of timeless truths which relieve us of the responsibility to seek faithfulness in new ways in our new contexts.

My experience with the Bible contributed significantly to my conviction that theology has most of all to do with historical existence (not abstract, timeless truths). The historicity of the Bible speaks powerfully to *our* historicity.

Mennonite History

The history of our tradition provides the second source for Mennonite congregational theology. By this I mean the Christian tradition in general—and especially self-consciousness about our particular Mennonite tradition.

In the past fifty years, a great deal of Mennonite scholarly energy has gone into sixteenth-century Anabaptist studies. Not nearly as much energy has gone into the four hundred-plus years since then. But the changes *after* the first-generation Anabaptists have formed present-day Mennonite identity more than have the original Anabaptists. So I think Mennonite history, more than Anabaptist history, is important for Mennonite congregational theology.

I want to discuss one reason for this assertion—the transformation of early Anabaptist ideals due to persecution.

The early Anabaptists were extraordinarily creative and in many ways changed the world. Some of the key values which were broadly characteristic of Anabaptists include: believers baptism, Lord's Supper as a memorial, church discipline, how salvation was understood, discipleship, mutual aid,

and their ethic of love (pacifism).[2] These values remain central to the Mennonite tradition.

However, the past four hundred-plus years have seen many changes and adaptations. The effects of the intense persecution which the first generation of Anabaptists faced cannot be overstated. In response to the persecution, Anabaptists certainly tried to remain faithful to their central values. After the first generation, their way of doing this was to exist largely as a migrating people. They sought tolerance and the possibility of practicing their faith with a minimum of resistance from the outside.

This era of harsh persecution and the resultant evolution of the group into a migrating people, who primarily sought tolerance and security, was a crucial defining moment for our tradition. What are some of the changes wrought by this era of persecution on the Anabaptist-becoming-Mennonite movement? I will mention a few.

(1) *A change from adult baptism to baptizing children of the church.* The practice of baptizing adults who made a clear and conscious choice to move from the world of darkness to the world of light was characteristic of the first Anabaptists. Their practice changed after the first generation in conjunction with the rapid evolution of the Anabaptist movement toward self-contained, ghetto-like communities. After the first generation, the practice of baptism centered much more on the integration of children of the church into the adults' church. Baptism became more of an initiation rite set at a somewhat arbitrary age to mark the full membership of children whose faith generally evolved gradually.

(2) *A change from aggressive evangelism to seeking toleration.* The first Anabaptists were zealous evangelists who sought to confront outsiders with the claims of Christ. In face of extraordinarily hostile reactions from their societies' powers-that-be, the Anabaptists/Mennonites soon became much more concerned with finding tolerant locales to quietly practice their faith within their isolated communities. Often, part of the agreements they made with estate owners included the promise *not* to evangelize.

(3) *A change from open membership to ethnicity.* The first Anabaptists came from the wider society in which the movement arose. They were just like their neighbors in language and cultural practices. However, in time the Mennonite community became distinct from the surrounding culture. This led to the emergence of Mennonite ethnicism, a development, we could say, that marks the transition between Anabaptism and Mennonitism. There were no "ethnic Anabaptists."

These changes were not simply a case of bad faith—of later generations losing the fervor and zeal of the first generation believers. More so, these changes and others that followed resulted from the need to develop new understandings in new situations.

A Mennonite congregational theology certainly will gain much from an appreciation of the Anabaptists. However, we also need a greater appreciation of developments in the years since. Partly, this is simply so we may better understand how we got to where we are. Also, however, throughout Mennonite history, people have sought to respond faithfully to their own particular contexts. We may not always like how they responded, but we benefit from a sympathetic consideration of their part in our history.

Present-Day Life

My third source for congregational theology is an awareness of present-day life. Early in my pastoral ministry, I recognized the importance of *listening* to parishioners for my doing theology. Two of the issues which I had to face almost immediately were divorce and homosexuality. I soon realized that my prescribed answers on these issues were actually of little interest to many of the people in my congregation. They were not looking to me for clear-cut, absolute answers nearly so much as for respect, compassion, a listening heart.

In face of my experiences, my theological anthropology was challenged, and I moved toward a more positive view of human beings. I came to recognize that almost always people are doing the

best they can in such difficult situations, and that usually these people are extraordinarily resourceful. The people with whom I worked did not need to be confronted with their sinfulness. Mostly, they needed the church to be a healing environment, offering a place for worship and mutually respectful fellowship and support.

Martin Buber spoke directly to me in this context. He taught me two lessons in his book *I and Thou*.[3] One lesson was that the core of life, the core of religion, the core of what God can mean to us, is found in relationality, being in loving relationships with other people and with God. Dialogue, listening, respecting, caring—these are more important than winning arguments and developing irrefutable "answers."

Buber's second lesson was that we meet God in the concrete reality of this world, with its brokenness and pain. People in congregations, especially people in crises, most of all are looking for God to be present for them in the here and now. If God is to be found, this world, this life, is where the finding has to happen.

Most recently, I pastored in a farming community. Going into that environment, recognizing my ignorance of the agricultural way of life, I knew that I had to focus on listening. I was challenged to understand God and theology as relevant to the frustrations and uncertainties of the agricultural economy. I was also challenged to find ways to offer encouragement and hope. Awareness of present-day life includes listening to the people one is around, learning from their trials and struggles and joys and successes.

Understanding present life and the issues people face in struggling to live out their faith is absolutely essential for any theological construction which draws on materials from the Bible and tradition. Such understanding is necessary for our theology to be relevant and coherent.

Hope and Vision

The fourth source for congregational theology is *hope*. We might call this the eschatological component, in which our vision for the future enters our present life.

I became convinced in my years of pastoring that hope for the future is closely connected with how we view life in the present. There is a sense of continuity between how we experience life now and the nature of our hope for the future. Hope and vision for the future have especially to do with identifying, cultivating, and ultimately trusting in the rightness, the truthfulness, of what we experience right now as life-enhancing.

I learned a great deal about hope from my study of and preaching and teaching from the Book of Revelation.[4] The basic message of Revelation is that, in spite of present-day struggles and suffering, the fundamental reality of the universe is God's healing love. The reality of God's healing love is present reality, and (in mysterious ways) we can hope for God ultimately to bring about wholeness for all of creation.

Revelation teaches that the mercy of God has already been established as the decisive force in the universe. There will be no future battle; the victory of God is already assured. God's faithfulness to the promise of healing has been expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Followers of the Lamb can be assured that healing is coming, and that faithfulness to Jesus' way is possible and is the best way to flourish.

I have found Gordon Kaufman's discussion of "a wider christology"[5] to be especially helpful in understanding the thrust of Revelation's message. Revelation teaches that in the Christ-event, the ultimate nature of reality is revealed: God's mercy and creativity are more fundamental to reality than are the violence, oppression, and seemingly overwhelming might of the powers of evil.

That the ultimate nature of reality is God's mercy and creativity is certainly seen in the particular events of the history of Jesus of Nazareth. But it is also seen in the wider events, the larger community of reconciliation that grew up in response to Jesus' work. The message of hope contained in Revelation is pertinent to all communities which cling to the conviction that love and mercy are the central aspects of life—

even in the face of many pressures and counter-examples which glorify power-politics, material gratification, and narrow self-interest as ultimate.

Hope and vision for the future serve as sources for congregational theology by clarifying for us where we want to be going. As we see in Revelation, where we want to be going is determined by our awareness in the present of the abundance of God's love and mercy. It is also determined by our awareness of God's promise that love and mercy are the goals toward which history is moving.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, I am advocating an approach to Mennonite theology which takes as its starting point congregational life. This "congregational theology" is meant to address several needs:

(1) The need for explicit theological work which seeks to keep the Mennonite vision for Christian faith alive and vital—not in order simply that our denomination survive, but much more in order that the special insights of our tradition continue to be cultivated to serve God's purposes.

(2) The need for a presentation of the Christian faith which emerges from and directly addresses historical existence.

(3) The need for continuing work to be done on constructing a theology which at every point integrates beliefs and ethics.

(4) The need for theological work which bridges the gap between academic theology and congregational life.

Endnotes

[1] Gordon D. Kaufman, "The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective," in Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), 5-8.

[2] J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 113-141, and C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 365-378.

[3] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kauffman (New York: Scribners, 1970).

[4] See Ted Grimsrud, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Self-Study Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

[5] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 374-395.

Gordon Kaufman understands God most clearly as "serendipitous creativity" or as a process. While Kaufman is concerned about de-objectifying and de-reifying God as a corrective for how the symbol "God" has been misused, the ideal of God as a process is problematic for me. How do you pray to a process? How do you have a relationship with a process? How do you feel the presence of a process? How does a process have wisdom? How does a process love? As I think of God as a process, I lose too many ways of thinking about God that still have value to me.

I like what Gayle Gerber Koontz had to say in her response to Peter Hodgson—if any language we use to talk about God is inadequate, then why not use the language of person and being? I think Sallie McFague has some good images for God which seem to meet both the needs that Gordon Kaufman attempts to meet (correctives for misuses) and my need to personalize God. For example, the concept of the earth as the body of God, provides a corrective for evolutionary concerns as well as a corrective for the idea of God "out there somewhere".

I thought Paul Lewis made a good point that the concept of God as being functions well because of the difficulties in praying to a process. While centering prayer or meditative prayer works well for "serendipitous creativity," it falls apart on other types of prayer such as thanksgiving, petition, lament, and conversational prayer. How do we read the Psalms if God is best understood as a process? At this point, I find this concept helpful as one of many ways to understand God but not as the primary concept of God.

Karen Ediger

How to Stop Constructing Things: Kaufman, Wittgenstein, and the Pragmatic End of Constructivism

Phil Stoltzfus

"...theology should become an activity of *deliberate* imaginative construction carried out as self-consciously and responsibly as possible."[1]

These words, taken from page one of the preface of *In Face of Mystery*, represent a succinct formulation of what Gordon Kaufman understands himself to be doing as a theologian. We can trace this view back a quarter of a century to his insight that the symbol "God" "denotes for all practical purposes what is essentially a mental or imaginative construct."[2] This "constructivism" has provided us as twentieth-century theologians with a more adequate frame of reference for addressing such questions as: What are we doing when we claim to talk about God? and What relevance does God-talk have for everyday life?

Kaufman has brought to bear upon this experiment many of the major philosophical positions of modernity. We find Hegel in Kaufman's early theme of "historicism"[3] and his more recent "bio- historical" emphasis. Kant plays a major role in relation to the notion of "imaginative construction" (*Einbildungskraft*) of regulative ideas—what for Kaufman becomes the four-fold categorial scheme of Human, World, God, and Christ.[4] American Pragmatism has taught Kaufman that the meaning of a symbol is a question neither of essences nor experiences, but rather of practices and future effects upon the community of inquirers.

The skeptical Pragmatism of twentieth-century Austrian/British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has played an increasingly important role in Kaufman's constructivist period. Kaufman's public theology and ordinary language theses of *An Essay on Theological Method* are Wittgensteinian, as is Kaufman's technique of applying a "grammatical" analysis to symbols to determine their functions and uses.[5] By the time of *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman has fully in place the Wittgensteinian notion that we orient ourselves out of a "picture of the world" which lies at the very root of our forms of life.[6]

It is this Wittgensteinian development that I want to focus upon here. Important as Wittgenstein has been for the later work of Kaufman, from a Wittgensteinian perspective Kaufman's above formulation of constructivism, as it stands, presents us with certain difficulties. Using the resources of Wittgenstein, as well as certain insights drawn from the discipline of modern musical aesthetics, I want to: 1) critique Kaufman's position that assertions of "self-consciousness" and "deliberateness" are necessarily an integral part of responsible theology, and 2) investigate whether the term "imaginative construction" itself is performing the ordinary language work that we would want out of such a concept. Finally, I will propose that the musicological term "performance practice" (implied in Wittgenstein) is a more adequate term because it focuses our attention less on the linguistic moments of our theological labor, and more fully on the pragmatic and activist moments.

First, earnestly and repeatedly throughout *In Face of Mystery* we find Kaufman calling upon theologians to

profess their self-consciousness. One should not take the innocence and correctness of past theological symbols for granted, but state that one is going to adopt a self-consciously critical stance towards them. Kaufman's model for conceiving of this type of theological activity, though, is one of construction—of building something. When one is building something, in what cases does it make sense to say, "I am being self-conscious and deliberate," and in what cases does it not make sense to say this?

Wittgenstein is notorious for posing these sorts of "grammatical" questions to his readers. In his texts, he will circle around a philosophical proposition that sounds artificial to him, pointing out various difficulties with the theory from ordinary language perspectives. Take, for example, the problem of a correspondence theory of truth, the view that each word or symbol that we utter corresponds in a true or false manner to an object or meaning.[7] In response, Wittgenstein cites the case of two builders who construct a building by calling out four words—block, pillar, slab, and beam—and acting upon them. Through this hypothetical "language game," the reader sees that the word "slab" in this case does not simply correspond to the *object*, slab, nor to some consciousness of "slab" in the minds of the builders, but rather the word sets in motion a whole action complex. When used properly in this game, "slab" is functioning to allow the labor of "slabbing" to move forward.[8] Wittgenstein thus shows that a correspondence theory of truth is not adequate for demonstrating the way language, at its best, is *used* to respond to certain practical needs of a situation. Wittgenstein patterns his own writing style according to this insight: " the axis of reference of our investigation must be rotated . . . about the fixed point of our real need."[9]

Let us image Kaufman's language game for the words "self-conscious" and "deliberate," and try to determine what their "real need" might be. Suppose I am in my woodworking shop constructing something. I ask for a drill, and you hand me a drill. I say, "Now, I am going to self-consciously drill a hole." Then, you hand me a screwdriver. I say, "Now I am going to deliberately screw this screw into the proper hole with this screwdriver." And so on. Why does this ritual sound so bizarre? Probably because my self-referential assertions of consciousness do not seem to be helping us in the building process. Now, I could more easily imagine *you* describing my work as "deliberate" or "self- conscious," particularly if I were moving too slowly and had a deadline to meet. Or, suppose I had constructed a statue, and you said, "It's self-conscious." That wouldn't be a compliment, either. Now, I may in fact want to consider myself as being very self-conscious and deliberate about what I'm doing as I construct; however, I wouldn't make any sense to those around me by continually *asserting* this fact out loud. It wouldn't make sense for *you* to assert it of me, either, if you wanted to encourage me along in the process.

These hypothetical language games illustrate the way I feel sometimes when I'm reading certain passages in *In Face of Mystery*. I find myself stumbling every so often over these seemingly Cartesian-like self-referentialisms. If we are going to adopt Kaufman's constructivism

model, then we're going to have be more clear about the purpose for these peculiar assertions. Wittgenstein might say that, in certain respects, Kaufman displays the philosophical disease of inserting commentary about one's intentions into one's writing; what Wittgenstein might call "an idling engine."[10]

On his more charitable days, however, Wittgenstein might invite us to investigate more carefully the role these assertions play in Kaufman's text, and how we might shift our perspective to better see what Kaufman is driving at. In his ethics section, for example, Kaufman acknowledges that an assertion of self-consciousness is not always a good thing: "[I]f we stopped to reflect before our every move, we would get nothing done at all . . . . Action is always a delicate art of sensing what is going on in the situation in which one finds oneself, discerning *what moves are demanded* in that situation and are appropriate to it, and then fitting one's own actions into the situation with sensitivity and skill."[11] Kaufman goes on to argue that in the higher modes of moral maturity, one becomes increasingly responsive in one's actions to the "overall web of action" which sustains us.[12]

It seems to me, then, that when Kaufman invokes the concept "self-consciousness," one would hope that he is not asking us to fixate upon our self-reflexive inner thought processes. For the situation of Wittgenstein's builders, we saw that the word "slab" is not most adequately seen as referring to an object "slab," nor a consciousness of "slab," but rather to an action of "slabbing." What, we might say, are responsible builders to be self-conscious and deliberate *about*? Not about our own thinking, our own consciousness, Wittgenstein teaches us, but rather about what the point of our labor is supposed to be. Just so, when Kaufman calls out, "Be self-conscious! Be deliberate!" we might say that he is trying to point us outside of ourselves, toward the "moves that are demanded" in our building process. The methodological implication for Kaufman is, then, that as opposed to indulging in biblical, confessional or philosophical theology for its own sake—a thinking about ourselves for no particular purpose—we must find a theological approach which continually keeps before us the public problems and public needs which make concrete demands upon us.[13] Kaufman often uses language of mental self-reflexivity to try to make this very crucial point. What better language might there be to point us towards that pragmatic end of constructivism Kaufman so much wants us to see?

Let us hold that question for a moment as I turn our attention to my second critique; that is, Kaufman's use of the formulation "imaginative construction" itself. Pragmatically speaking, this phrase translates poorly into ordinary language contexts. Many readers of Kaufman note that his writing style is not directly serviceable for so-called "first-order" uses of language such as prayers, sermons, and other ecclesiologically-oriented discourse. That is perhaps as it should be; however, I'd go a step further to ask "Is everyday, public discourse able to traffic effectively with some of Kaufman's own formulations, such as 'imaginative construction'?"

Kaufman displays the philosophical disease of inserting commentary about one's intentions into one's writing; what Wittgenstein might call "an idling engine."

When, in philosophical discourse, Wittgenstein encounters such puzzlers as "to believe," "to know," "to be certain," the concept "God," and so on, he will often try to negotiate an end to the work stoppage by asking the question: How would a child learn these words?[14] Well, a child in our culture might very well begin understanding the words "imagination" and "construction" as follows: "Johnny, that's a fascinating drawing—you have a good *imagination*." Or, "Susie, you've *constructed* a whole new house out of blocks—good job." These examples would seem to be point towards Kaufman's uses. But on the other hand, what about these examples: "Johnny, your *imagination* isn't going to do your weekly chores for you." Or, "Susie, you need to clean your room. It looks like a *construction* zone." These examples seem to suggest distraction, disorientation, and non-productivity, precisely the opposite of what Kaufman wants. Furthermore, when we put the words together—"imaginative construction"— it is very unclear what everyday home this phrase could possibly have for children, or for adults.

Perhaps I'm being unfair to Kaufman's phrase. I can certainly imagine adults invoking it in discourse about Kant, Kaufman, the sociology of knowledge, and perhaps in a few other contexts. Children teach us, however, that the proper referents for these words are ultimately to be found in the action effects they make upon all those who speak the mother tongue. The phrase "imaginative construction," one wants to say, has the effect of sounding philosophically artificial. It tends to point us inward, toward our thinking processes and the linguistic manipulation that appears to take place within those processes. It is no wonder, then, that theology, upon this view, becomes understood as "words about God," with "concepts" and "symbols" as its raw material. One self-consciously reflects upon symbols, deliberately constructs them, and then converses about them. It is a picturing of theology as a preoccupation with some sort of correspondence between linguistic symbols and the linguistic self-consciousness.

How could we re-formulate the phrase "imaginative construction" so that it could function more adequately to describe our theological activity? Kaufman seems to be trying to find some way to direct our attention to that "added-to"-ness of our work—how theology is never merely translation or interpretation, but necessarily involves an element of our own creative direct action poured into the process. What options besides the phrase "imaginative construction" might be available from other disciplines—other public or ecclesiological settings—so that we could more adequately test whether our discourse is meeting the "point of real need" of our public?

It seems to me that Kaufman himself does this in *In Face of Mystery*. He does not fixate dogmatically upon the term "imaginative construction," but rather allows it to pop up in completely different guises throughout the book. In the realm of ethics, the phenomenon of "imaginative construction" becomes our ability to devise a pragmatic ecological ethic.[15] In cosmology, it

becomes the process of self-generating novelty, of "serendipitous creativity."[16] In communication theory, it becomes "conversation," in which participants are led "beyond anything any of them could have deliberately decided to think or to say on their own."[17] Kaufman thus demonstrates through his narrative strategy that our language—even the phrase "imaginative construction"—must be continually formulated anew to address the need, whatever it may be, that one faces in a given discipline. We may decide that in response to a particular problem, Kaufman's formula of constructivism has itself reached the end of its usefulness, and, like him, we must look for continually new approaches for demonstrating a metaphysics of creative activity.

I propose, then, that we replace or at least enhance the formula with an allied idea from the discipline of musical aesthetics—"performance practice." In musical aesthetics, the central problem is, What are we talking about when we talk about music—the written score fixed in the past that we must interpret correctly? Or perhaps, the feelings evoked within us as the music is played? When Wittgenstein speaks of music, it oftentimes involves an observation of what musicians *do* when they make music. What takes place in the public *activity* of music-making which points to a development of musicality among performers?[18]

Twentieth-century musicology has developed more fully this "third way" of thinking about music under the rubric "performance practice." Just as theology according to Kaufman is no longer to be conceived as a scientific or hermeneutical task, we find in musicology the assertion that music-making is to be treated neither as a fixed essence nor a relativistic experience, but rather as a series of public performances which are in continual critique, so to speak, of each other. One's aesthetic attention is focused not so much upon the excellence of a *single* performance, as if to evaluate its fidelity to some previously prescribed pattern,[19] but rather upon the patterns of historical performance *practices* through time and what they demonstrate. Furthermore, the issue here is not necessarily the degree of improvisation or spontaneity one finds in a given performance; even in a jam session among jazz musicians, a completely new style of playing may, or may *not*, "work." The issue in performance practice is the extent to which one discovers a freshness in the playing which motivates one to continue to practice along the same lines and to open up new directions for developing musicality *through future public performances.*

Performers, in this view, are always "adding to" what has gone before through their musicality. To be convincing, the music must not come across as a static interpretation of some "thing," but rather, as an "imaginative construction," if you will, a manifestation of "bio-historical" "serendipitous creativity," demonstrating an "ecological ethic" through a "multidimensional," "conversational" musicality. Of course, these terms of Kaufman's function very poorly here in this aesthetic context. One's need is for other terminology, and it is precisely

How could we re-formulate the phrase "imaginative construction" so that it could function more adequately to describe our theological activity?

the term "performance practice," a phrase already in ordinary use among musicians, that does the job in specifically identifying the activity that is being engaged in when one makes music well.

Now, can this notion of performance practice in turn inform our view of the activity of theologizing? I think that it can, because, 1) it does not favor, for obvious reasons, the linguistic self-consciousness over other modes of acting, and 2) it highlights better the pragmatic and activist side of Kaufman's own philosophical/ theological temperament. An even more thoroughgoingly pragmatic approach to theologizing would emphasize that sometimes in the doing *itself* one is making a forceful critical statement. Take, for instance, the understanding of nonviolent struggle in Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The power of their "theologizing" (if one be permitted to indulge in the use of that word) came primarily through direct actions such as the Salt March and the spinning wheel campaign, which themselves spawned such later actions in the United States as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the freedom rides. The acts themselves express what they are trying to "say" on a fundamental human level which doesn't require any peculiar ability to linguistically assert one's "consciousness," one's "constructivism," or one's "conversationality" in order to grasp the power of the performance. The actions are appropriated through an observing of, and/or participating in, their doing. One engages in performance practicing as one interacts with the labor of these events.

Even if we assume that Kaufman is right, that theology really is a self-conscious, deliberate imaginative construction of a symbolic frame of reference to orient our lives, we have to acknowledge, with Kaufman, that the proof of the adequacy of one's theologizing takes place when the linguistic assertivenesses have stopped, and the pragmatic effects of those assertions can be clearly seen and responded to. We might even go so far as to say, along with the Pragmatists, Gandhi, and King, that an evaluation of two theological/metaphysical proposals takes place not so much through a conversation between symbol systems as it does through an interactive attunement between practices. In the theological enterprise there may be times—perhaps more often than we like to think—where we must rein in the urge to construct things. Instead of a discipline which argues from constructs, then, theology might take a cue, perhaps, from certain aspects of the Anabaptist-Mennonite experience, and become a demonstration of itself through the totality of life practices, both linguistic *and* non-linguistic, which interact with and critique one another through their public performances.

In September, 1941, Wittgenstein chose to quit teaching philosophy at age 52 to take up a manual labor job in a hospital located in a sector of London particularly vulnerable to German aerial bombardment.[20] Wittgenstein was doing philosophy, so to speak, through the act of placing his body within a particular setting of human need. In one journal entry, he used the word "praxis" to describe how one is to understand what it means to "believe in God."[21] Not long after Wittgenstein, an 18- year-old conscientious objector named Gordon

Kaufman began similar work in a hospital here in the U.S. If we were to apply Wittgenstein more radically than Kaufman has done in his own writing, then I think we would need to acknowledge that which Kaufman himself has shown in his life; i.e., when we really have a societal crisis on our hands which effects the viability of life as we know it, the proper theological "move" may in fact be to stop constructing linguistic things and to demonstrate theology through the everyday labor—the performance praxis—of one's body.

Endnotes

[1]*In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1993), ix.
[2]*God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1972), 86.
[3]*Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 24n.
[4]"For our purposes, the importance of Kant was his discovery that the concepts or images of God and the world are imaginative constructs, created by the mind for certain intra-mental functions and, thus, of a different logical order than the concepts and images which we have of the objects of experience." *Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 25. See also: *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), chap. 4; *In Face of Mystery*, p. 41 and chap. 6.
[5]*An Essay on Theological Method*, 6-9.
[6]*In Face of Mystery*, 48-9, 239, 477, 485. Wittgenstein is also used to describe the peculiarity of employing language referring to inner experience (164, 480), and the experience of unspeakableness in the face of mystery (61).
[7]Prompted by a quote from Augustine, Wittgenstein engages with precisely this problematic at the outset of *Philosophical Investigations*: "These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.——in this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. The meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands." *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §1.
[8]*Philosophical Investigations, §1-§10*
[9]*Philosophical Investigations* §108.
[10]*Philosophical Investigations*, §132.
[11]*In Face of Mystery*, 204-5, emphasis mine.
[12]*In Face of Mystery*, 207.
[13]"The degree of freedom and responsibility which we enjoy always depends upon our consciousness of the situation in which we are living and acting, upon our awareness of our own capacities and of the alternative possibilities of action that confront us." (*The Theological Imagination*, 256)
[14]*Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 59. Cf. *Philosophical Investigations* pp. 206, 208, etc., and §6: "The children are brought up to perform *these* actions, to use *these* words as they do so, and to react in *this* way to the words of others."
[15]*In Face of Mystery*, 207.
[16]*In Face of Mystery*, 273, 77-78.
[17]*In Face of Mystery*, 275.
[18]"Lectures on Aesthetics," 37-40; *The Blue and Brown Book* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 166-167, etc.
[19]*In Face of Mystery*, 276.
[20]Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 431-2.
[21]"*Praxis* gives the words their sense." *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 85e-85. Cf. Kaufman, "The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective" in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1996), 6: "With human existence and theological reflection understood in these broadly moral/ethical terms—i.e., terms emphasizing human living and acting in the world—theologians are free to make imaginative pragmatic moves as they reconstruct earlier Christian ideas and ways of thinking in their concern to address effectively the actual social, cultural and religious problems at hand. (This position, which I was not able to articulate clearly until the early 70's, was in some respects similar to the focus on *praxis* being emphasized by liberation theologies.)"

Novelty, Mystery, Diversity: Conversations on the Boat

Elizabeth Schmidt

Since theology is principally concerned with what is ultimately mystery about which no one can be an authority, with true or certain answers to the major questions—I suggest that the proper model for conceiving it is not the lecture (monologue); nor is it the text (for example, a book): it is rather, conversation.

Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, p. 64

We did not all come over on the same ship, but we are all in the same boat.

Bernhard Baruch

Behold, I make all things new.

Revelation 21:5

I.

It was a conversation without historical precedent. There have been other conversations, to be sure—other conferences, other symposia, other convergences of great significance for matters of Mennonite identity, vision, and mission—but this was a first. The occasion was a symposium at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, on the topic of Gordon Kaufman's theology as imaginative construction. It was a gathering of Mennonites, at a Mennonite institution of higher learning, for the purpose of theological conversation, in honor of a theologian who is also committedly Mennonite.

Lest the uniqueness of this conversation on constructive theology be overlooked, it must be noted that typically, when Mennonites gather to talk, the topic is ethics, discipleship, the church, biblical interpretation, biblical authority, Anabaptist tradition/vision/identity. This symposium was about theology. It was not primarily about ethics or discipleship, although there were ethical implications of various constructive theologies presented, such as implications for interfaith dialogue, from Alain Epp Weaver's "good Samaritan/Great Commission" model to Gerald Biesecker-Mast's "rhetorical argument" model; and implications for right or aesthetic action, from Donald Stoesz's analysis of post-modern prison architecture, to Scott Holland's "performance" of the theopoetics of desire. Indeed, in Kaufman's methodology, ethics is not the first word, but it is the last, serving as the pragmatic criterion for evaluating all theological constructions.

Nor was the symposium primarily about "the church," although there was a constructive theology that was methodologically rooted in and responsive to the congregational context (Ted Grimsrud), and a constructive ecclesiology that described the church as neither modern nor post-modern but "extra-modern," a "holy nation" whose members live in the world but not of it by being "bi-lingual" (Lois Barrett).

Nor was the symposium primarily about the authority or interpretation of the Bible, although there was a theologian who addressed the relationship of theological to

philosophical, biblical and religious studies (Peter Hodgson), as well as theologians who self-consciously utilized scripture as a given resource for constructive work (Thomas Finger, Ted Grimsrud), and a theologian who practices the hermeneutic of the "Amsterdam school," which understands the New Testament as "midrash" on the Old, and gives the church the authority of "binding and loosing" biblical material, including (did I understand right?) the very boundaries of the canon itself (Robert Veen). Instead of appeals to biblical authority, we heard William Klassen calling us to take seriously Kaufman's critique of "Mennonite bibliolatry."

Nor was the symposium primarily about Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition or identity, although there were some theologians who called for the necessity of appropriating this heritage in the methodology of their constructive work (Finger, Barrett, Grimsrud), and one who rightly raised the question of identity as "not an unrelated matter" (J. Denny Weaver).

The symposium was primarily about constructive theology: that is, admittedly human, admittedly constructive, talk about God. Mennonites got together to talk about talking about God, and admitted it, without having to derive it from an authority. Theology stood on its own as a discipline worthy of conversation, irreducible to Bible or ethics or history. Serendipitous creativity was at work. Though it received fewer inches of local press than a creation vs. evolution debate across town, through this symposium on a Mennonite theologian who talks about God in terms of the serendipitous creativity at work in the biohistorical process, novelty quietly entered the Mennonite biohistorical stream.

II.

It was a conversation in which medium met message, on a metaphorical boat. Bethel College Mennonite Church pastor Darrell Fast introduced the image during the children's story in the symposium's opening worship service, pointing out the ship in the center stained glass window, an ancient symbol of the ecumenical church. The boat returned in Peter Hodgson's Menno Simons lecture as the hermeneutical ship circumnavigating the hermeneutical circle, propelled God-ward by spirit-winds. The boat re-surfaced in a discussion question about how to relate to those on other boats, be they other congregations or other faiths. The answer is conversation, an answer in which medium and message coincide, because theology is, after all, conversations in face of mystery. In this regard, we may have come on different ships, but we are all in the same boat.

We are all in this mystery together, and we need to question one another, criticize one another, make suggestions to one another, help one another. Each of us is in a unique position within the mystery, a position occupied by no one else; and each of us, therefore, may have some special contribution to make to our common task of coming to terms with life's mysteries. It is imperative that the theological conversation be kept open to and inclusive of all human voices. (Kaufman, p. 64)

The symposium was a conversation of many voices, a diversity further broadened by presenters who gave voice to theologians not present (African American, feminist, womanist, lesbian). As these voices have shown, there is no theology in general, the point made by J. Denny Weaver. Theology is always situated, perspectival, particular. The symposium brought together a plurality of projects, each making its distinctive contributions to the conversation. Phil Stoltzfus brought forth a unique synthesis of Wittgenstein's "language games" and his own experience as a musician, to offer "performance praxis" as an alternative to "self-conscious theological construction." Lois Barrett's passionate commitment to being the church in a way that integrates faith and life came through in her constructive ecclesiology of church as "holy nation." Paul Lewis sought to construct a theology of self that interconnects his academic discipline, psychology, and his faith. Even Peter Hodgson's project had its place (though it was probably a different symposium, a different audience).

As Kaufman said in his closing response, we are all working on particular issues, and we all need each other. No one can presume to do theology in general any more. Each of us has a particular set of problems we are working on that we will send forth into the conversation. We need to recognize the importance of the tasks to which others give their attention, as well as those to which we give our attention. I find this immensely liberating and heartening. The point is not to agree, or to consolidate all projects into one grand amalgam to which we all must give assent. Rather, let us acknowledge that we are all afloat in mystery. Let us talk, let us listen, let us learn at each other's feet. Perhaps it took one who sailed beyond Mennonite boundaries to seas of other faiths, from China to secular western academia, to bring this lesson back home.

Book Reviews

Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman.* Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series, Vol. 9 (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1996). Pp. 275. ($33.00 — paperback) ISBN 0-9630160-7-5

As editor Alain Epp Weaver remarks in his introduction to this *Festschrift*, the place of Gordon D. Kaufman among Mennonite theologians has long been contested. During his decades as scholar, teacher, writer, and lecturer, Kaufman and his work have been viewed by many Mennonites as marginal, even antithetical to his formative faith community. However, as Kaufman makes clear in his opening essay, "The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective," this has not been his self perception. Although most of his work has been undertaken in a liberal university setting, at Harvard Divinity School, Gordon Kaufman confirms the unfailing influence of his identity as a Mennonite minister and theologian.

The writers of the essays that follow Kaufman's in this collection articulate perspectives all along this contested continuum. Some set forth constructive theological statements, taking Kaufman's catalytic insight about theology being "imaginative construction" as starting point and method (e.g., Daniel Liechty, Carl Keener, Duane Friesen, Scott Holland). Some present critical assessments of Kaufman's work, relying on a restatement of more familiar Mennonite affirmations about the authority of scripture and tradition, or about a prophetic stance in relation to the wider culture (e.g., Harry Huebner, Ted Koontz, J. Denny Weaver, Tom Finger). Some writers place Kaufman's historicist theological project in its own historical perspective, sketching the strand of Mennonite life and thought that is his particular lineage (e.g., James C. Juhnke), or pointing out the time-boundness of his theological presuppositions (e.g., Donald Stoesz, A. James Reimer), or speaking on behalf of "neo-Mennonites" for whom Kaufman's work not only articulates a credible present but opens a way into future faithfulness (e.g., Ted Grimsrud).

This range of perspectives represented is the collection's greatest strength. It makes it clear that one cannot undertake the work of Mennonite theology today without being in conversation with Gordon D. Kaufman. Whatever the popular perception of his work and whatever one's Mennonite theological leanings, Kaufman has been influential in ways only now being brought to light. Moreover, whether one is critical or appreciative or both, Kaufman's theological work will continue to help shape the questions being asked, the alternatives being debated, the commitments being clarified.

But this range of perspectives represented also makes it clear that if the contested perception of the work of Gordon Kaufman is influenced by prior commitments and perspectives of a given reader, on one hand, it is, on another hand, influenced by tension inherent in Kaufman's work. The tension I have long sensed in Kaufman's work and which is confirmed as I read these essays has to do with what really "drives" Kaufman's theology. Is it his concern for theology's intellectual credibility, leading him to an epistemology indebted to Enlightenment rationalism and willy nilly saddling him with an anthropology seated in the individual self as knower? Is it his moral commitment that informs his theological choices, a commitment that is in more continuity with his Mennonite tradition than his emphasis on the discontinuity of imagination and

tradition seems to allow?

Accordingly, for whom or to whom is Kaufman writing? How are we to sort out his identification of the liberal university as the locus for the theological task today, on one hand, and, on another hand, his identification with a faith community whose particular tradition has long been distinguished by its prophetic witness to the dominant culture and its institutions?

Perhaps in the end these points of tension are not the point. Perhaps what matters most is the ways in which Gordon Kaufman's theological work has invited and continues to invite the sort of conversation inscribed in the pages of this collection. More than one writer notes the significance of Kaufman's theology in shaping a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of Mennonite history and theology. This is a third thing, then, made clear by the diverse voices collected in this *Festschrift*.

Perhaps, indeed, the tension in Kaufman's work, which I first perceived as his student and which is refracted to me anew in these various essays, is precisely what makes his theology so catalytic, for Mennonites and for many more people of faith as well. For what Gordon Kaufman does is unsettle us and thereby free us to be newly creative and thereby ever more faithful. This faithful freedom is as much at the heart of the New Testament witness as it is of the Enlightenment. There is no either/or. Not tradition or imagination. Not faithfulness or freedom. There is rather our responsibility to engage what has forever been an ongoing search for what we, like Gordon Kaufman, will finally face as mystery.

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Alain Epp Weaver, ed. *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*. Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series, Vol. 9 (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1996). Pp. 275. ($33.00 — paperback)
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Finally, a major Mennonite response to Gordon Kaufman's thought has been published. After a long and prominent career at one of America's most distinguished universities (Harvard), a book of essays on Kaufman's theology has been produced by Bethel College. While it is quite scholarly in tone, the volume is laudably readable, and will strike a chord with many. Although Kaufman has been considered outside the fold by some Mennonites, this book will reveal how much modern Mennonites owe to his thinking, and even reflect it. The volume also includes an excellent bibliography of Kaufman's writings.

The essays cover a range of responses to Kaufman, from criticism to praise. Not confined to the jargon of the discipline of academic theology, there are responses from a pastoral perspective and a scientific view. From the broadest cultural sweep to the most minute examination of Kaufman's theory of the mind, these responses cover the wide-ranging thought of this impressively systematic theologian. Unfortunately, the volume lacks a response by a woman (two declined for reasons of time). Another lack obscures another 'half' of the Mennonite world, the majority of non-Western, 'non-ethnic' Mennonites in the 'two-thirds world'.

Kaufman opens the book with an essay on how his thinking reflects basic Mennonite convictions. Although many have considered his theology too liberal, Kaufman argues that his conclusions have been the logical culmination of Mennonite

assumptions. Primary among these, he says, is the view that "what faith is about fundamentally is how life is to be lived" (p. 2). The Mennonite primacy of life over thought should give his critics some pause, if they actually do pay more attention to what he does rather than what he says. The two, of course, should be consistent, and consistency is a hallmark of Kaufman's. Teaching in a bastion of American liberalism, Kaufman has attempted to articulate the truth of the gospel to a secular audience, using their terms as much as possible, without compromising the unique Christian intellectual contributions. In fact, Kaufman argues that Christian, especially Mennonite, ideas offer a way forward in the current intellectual morass.

James Juhnke places Kaufman's intellectual journey into the context of the General Conference Mennonite culture of Kansas. A long tradition of academic engagement with the broader culture fostered Kaufman's ability to meet the mainstream culture on its own terms. Rather than viewing Christian truth as something to be protected in its purity, by separating it from the world, Kaufman's intellectual ancestors sought to integrate the truth that they found in the world into a vision of the world seen through the eyes of Christ. Not only people's souls can be saved, but their minds as well, by God's grace bestowed upon our intellect. This grace requires works, of course, but Kaufman relies on the Mennonite conception of the disciple as regenerated, able to participate in God's nature, especially the Word.

Space does not permit a careful analysis of each essay, so I will concentrate on the ones which gave me new insight into Kaufman's project. Harry Huebner claims that "for Kaufman the enemy is not postmodernism but primarily premodernism" (p. 63). In other words, Kaufman thinks that theology is still too indebted to the principles of authority and tradition in its practice. Kaufman's proposal is to see theology as historical, thus drawing from experience the material which our minds can use to form a Christian vision of the world, a holistic picture bathed in the light of God. Huebner, ironically, calls Kaufman to be even more historical, by acknowledging that there can be no such imaginative construction without a tradition of ideas, and that any intellectual construction (even such a utopian one) can be tainted with the abuses of power. Huebner draws on the thought of Alisdair MacIntyre in order to propose a theological imagination which uses the intellectual materials provided by the tradition of the church, interpreting life in the context of our worship of God. Unfortunately, Huebner passes lightly over Kaufman's struggle with secularism, which I think is Kaufman's main opponent. The relation between God and truth (or the role of the church and its tradition in society) is precisely the question with which Kaufman struggles so tenaciously.

A pastoral perspective on Kaufman's thought comes from Ted Grimsrud, who sees "neo-Mennonites" (those who retain Mennonite 'doctrines' for reasons other than the authoritative pronouncement of the church) as acting out Kaufman's thought, perhaps without realizing it. With the influx of Mennonites into professional occupations and into cities in North America, the pristine purity of Mennonite theology is difficult to maintain. Even the counter-cultural communitarianism of John Howard Yoder is increasingly implausible to Mennonites who refuse to play the role of a cognitive minority in their discipline or profession. Grimsrud

applauds this initiative, seeing this movement as a new confidence being displayed by Mennonites, a confidence that life is abundant, not needing to be hoarded like a secret treasure. Dialogue, for Grimsrud as well as for Kaufman, augments the intellectual construction of faithful ideas.

Thomas Finger supplies an exceptionally clear account of Kaufman's early work on a theory of the mind, work which I agree is foundational for Kaufman's later thinking. Finger analyzes Kaufman's 'genetic' account of thinking, in which the mind proceeds to conceptualize in stages, by attending to various features of reality, and integrating aspects of the world into ever-broader categories. This evolutionary theory of the mind's function contains at its lowest stage a level which is completely non-theorized, that is, an intuitive contact with reality which escapes our carefully ordered constructions. This lowest level of awareness, in which everything is one and yet also infinite, provides a touchstone for all of our thoughts. Surprisingly, it corresponds to the highest level reached by Kaufman, the idea of God, which unites everything into one, while judging all of our categorizations as inadequate to the world's ultimate interconnectedness. This intention towards the ultimate is favored by Finger as a striving towards truth that is compatible with his own theological end, an eschatological tension between what we know of God and what is yet to be revealed of God's infinity.

Scott Holland echoes this view of Kaufman's agenda. The imagination's power to "form into one" grounds Kaufman's attempt to understand his own experience in the liberal academy as well as his participation as a pastor in a Mennonite congregation in Boston. Holland lauds the painterly way in which Kaufman puts theology into perspective, by receiving the word-event of Christ as an impressionistic swirl of light and color, and presenting the Christ-event as an expressionist would, rendering the body of Christ in the forms of the age. Although Holland would protest a too abstract form, a criticism that has often been leveled at Kaufman, the method of imaginative construction opens the way for a more poetical vision of God and human existence for God.

While the tone of this set of essays is commendably irenic, there are some important critical questions raised. Jim Reimer's essay faults Kaufman for viewing time as history, rather than seeing time itself within the eternal being of God. Carl Keener, on the other hand, calls Kaufman to an even more evolutionary understanding of history, recasting even the idea of God in eco-systemic terms. This collection of essays represents the diversity of the intellectual ferment in the Mennonite church in North America. This debate will continue, and is continuing, especially among Mennonite feminists, who I think owe much to Kaufman's opening up a space for a revisioning of Mennonite theology. While I have my own vision for this theology (painted in a more mystical, iconic style), I thank Kaufman for courageously holding to his view of the truth of God's being, and showing that Mennonite theology is not confined to one expression of faith. Difficult questions remain as to the best way to phrase Mennonite theology, and we would be well advised to each delineate our basic theological and philosophical positions as clearly as Kaufman.

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