

Towards a Naturalistic Christianity: Developing the Thinking of Gordon Kaufman

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Since I first became acquainted with Gordon Kaufman's theology in the late 1980s, I have come to understand his biohistorical religious naturalism mostly in relation to the sciences and the scientific world view. In the science-religion context the focus has been on Kaufman's idea of God.

Kaufman also is a Mennonite Christian. He was born into a Mennonite family, was ordained, and continued his standing as a Mennonite Christian minister. He has regularly characterized the normative religious orientation as being compassionate and seeking peace and justice. In an extended reflection on his life and thought, he writes, "the central Mennonite theme—about the interconnection of a radical ethic of love with radical faith in God—has been at the center of my intellectual development, indeed, at the center of much of my life" (Kaufman 2001,6).

In this essay, I would like to develop my own Kaufmanian Christology that unites "a radical ethic of love with radical faith in God." I will do this with Darwinian theory and by drawing on some current New Testament scholarship.¹ The structure of my remarks will be Kaufman's two big ideas: the idea of God as serendipitous creativity and the idea of historical trajectories.

In the context of a scientific, evolutionary, world view, Kaufman constructs a concept of God not as a being or an agent, but as "serendipitous creativity." Serendipitous creativity refers to interactions within the natural world and human history that unpredictably give rise to new forms of matter, life, and human culture. This creativity is not an additional cause operative in the universe, beyond those causes that are discoverable by empirical and scientific inquiry. Rather serendipitous creativity is a unifying symbol for all creative causal processes--physical, chemical, biological, and historical. It includes the creativity found in cosmic, biological, and human cultural evolution. It includes the human creativity that constructs the story of this scientifically grounded epic of creation. It also includes whatever it is that gives rise to the

¹ A clue to how Kaufman can be a naturalistic Christian theologian is found in the books he read from his father's bookshelf when he was a youth. Kaufman's father was a Mennonite minister and the President of Bethel College, which Gordon attended for his undergraduate education. His father also had a library that contained many books from the "Chicago School," including Henry Nelson Wieman's *Source of Human Good*. Although in his seminary study at Yale, Kaufman was influenced by Barthian neo-orthodoxy, it appears to me that this earlier encounter with Wieman's thinking proved to be more influential as Kaufman tried to overcome a theological dualism that separated God from the world.

universe and its ongoing creativity--creative mystery. Further, the serendipity of this creativity means that it always remains mysterious, always beyond the human ability to foresee accurately the future; there is always room for surprise (Kaufman 2000). Hence God, that is creativity, relativizes all that has been created to date, including all that humans have created.² To give ultimate allegiance to what has been created and not to creativity is for Kaufman idolatry.³

A second central idea in Kaufman's thought is that of trajectories. There are countless historical trajectories emerging as a result of the causal interactions symbolized as serendipitous creativity. An example is the trajectories of various species created through Darwinian variation and selection. Similarly human history contains many cultural trajectories. Each can give rise to further trajectories such as the emergence of Christianity from Judaism in the context of the Greco-Roman world. Within a trajectory, particular historical movements or traditions may arise. For our purpose, one example is the creative development of various theories of Christian atonement, of how one is brought into relationship with God through Jesus.⁴

One of these theories, the moral exemplar or moral influence theory, has probably been in the Christian community since its beginning. In the 13th century it was developed by Peter Abelard in contrast to Anselm's substitutionary theory. According to the moral influence view, Jesus--through his life, teachings, and death--exemplified unconditional, indiscriminating love so completely that some thought, if God assumed human form, this is what God would be like (Smith 1991, 329). Anyone who is inspired by this love and lives a Christlike life is in God, for in Jesus God is love.

As far as I know, Kaufman does not cite Abelard. Yet, his book *In Face of Mystery* uses the Johannine New Testament tradition in this exemplary manner (Kaufman 1993, 406-407). In Christ God loved the world (John 3:16); if one loves another she or he is related to God, for God is love (I John 4:7-8).

² In Henry Nelson Wieman's terms, our most fundamental faith or commitment should always be to ongoing creativity and not to anything that has been so far created, to "creative good" and not to "created goods" (Wieman 1946; cf Kaufman 2006, 8).

³ The distinction between Creator or God and what has been created or the Creation is an important feature of Western religions. However, it usually has been framed as the distinction between God and the World that tends toward dualism and supernaturalism (which Kaufman and I reject). Yet Kaufman, following Wieman, maintains the meaning of this distinction within a naturalistic, evolutionary world view, so that idols are not made of what has been created. In the end, it really is how one is oriented in one's life that matters--whether towards the serendipity of the world's causality as new things emerge or towards the causal receptiveness that keeps things in being as they are (Peters 1993, 201-207).

⁴ Kaufman develops two of these trajectories ("sub-species") in *Jesus and Creativity*: Jesus Trajectory₁, the movement from Jesus the man to the second person of the Trinity (Kaufman 2006, 11), Jesus Trajectory₂, the more contemporary understanding of which this essay is an example (Kaufman 2006, 16-20).

In his last book, *Jesus and Creativity*, Kaufman carries this out more explicitly with an evolutionary view of the incarnation. In the natural world, which includes humans, serendipitous creativity is ambiguous or ambivalent. On the one hand, it gives rise to humanity and countless other species of life on Earth; on the other hand, creativity in the natural world often shows no regard for human well-being. However, in Jesus this creativity (God) is experienced as a person who shows unconditional, indiscriminating love and who seeks justice in the inhumane, unjust, and brutal world of Roman occupation. Thus Jesus represents a new mode of creativity that is normative for understanding what “God” means for humans and for how humans should live more humanely. Serendipitous creativity continues in its cosmic-biological mode, non-personally, without regard for human well being; it is nonmoral.⁵ However, in Jesus it becomes personal, a creativity among humans that is life orienting, providing meaning and moral direction that respond to the challenges of living with love, peace, and justice.

In the history of Christianity there are many metaphors of that show the significance of Jesus for the Christian community in the wider cultural context that changes over time. Some of these are Rabbi, Light to the Gentiles, Christ Crucified, Prince of Peace, and Liberator.⁶ These metaphors offer a variety of lenses through which the religious significance of Jesus can be understood. Influenced by Mennonite social justice teachings and by feminist theory, Kaufman draws on the peace and liberation traditions.

In the spirit of constructivist theology, I would like to offer for our consideration another metaphor--namely, Jesus as a Religious Genius. A genius is an exceptional individual who transforms a way of thinking, acting, or living, who creates a “paradigm shift” (Kuhn 1996), and who opens up a new cultural trajectory.

Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton has spent much of his professional life studying creativity and genius. Following psychologist Donald Campbell (1960), he takes a Darwinian approach and develops a blind variation, selection, retention (BVSr) model of creativity (Simonton 1999, 26-27). A creative person is one who brings into being new products, solutions

⁵ However, this all-compassing creativity that is the origin of all things does provide one criterion for a life orientation, namely that it calls into question the idolatries of giving ultimate commitment to whatever has been created (Kaufman 2006, 52).

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan in his book *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* devotes a chapter to each of the following symbols: Rabbi, Light to the Gentiles, King of Kings in the context of the Roman Empire, the Cosmic Christ of Christian Platonism, The Son of Man who revealed both the promise of human life and the power of evil in 5th century Christian psychology and anthropology, Christ Crucified of the Middle Ages, the Divine-Human Model that inspired Francis of Assisi to transform the way of Christian living and the institutional Church, the Universal Man of the Renaissance, the Mirror of Eternal truth in the Protestant Reformation, the Prince of Peace in the resurgence of pacifism among the Anabaptists (Gordon Kaufman’s heritage), the Teacher of Common Sense morals during the Enlightenment, the Poet of the Spirit in the 19th century Romantic Movement, and the Liberator in the social gospel and human rights movements of the last two centuries (Pelikan 1985).

to problems, scientific theories, technological inventions, kinds of music, works of art, and ways of living that are both original and useful. They are new cultural variations that in the dynamics of history are selected to continue.

There is everyday “little c” creativity, in which many engage, such as finding an original use for a piece of furniture, playing a catchy new tune, or improvising a new recipe. There also is “Big-C” Creativity where “originality is much more striking and the usefulness much more pervasive.” Big-C creativity “revolutionizes a whole domain of achievement” so that a scientific idea (Einstein) or mode of music (Bach), for example, becomes an exemplar that influences others and acquires imitators, admirers, and disciples. “Big-C” creativity is creativity at the level of genius (Simonton 2009, 23-24).

Simonton considers geniuses in a wide variety of domains such as the sciences, arts, and politics. However he intentionally decides not to discuss religious genius as identified in an earlier work by Michael Hart, who rated Mohammed, Isaac Newton, and Jesus as the top three most influential people in history (Hart 2000). Simonton thinks that the idea of genius would be demeaning for the prophet Mohamed or Jesus as the Son of God (Simonton 2009, 15). It seems to me that Simonton is thinking in the context of traditional supernaturalism. If one takes a naturalistic, evolutionary perspective, as both Simonton and I do (Peters 1982), the idea that Jesus and other founders of religious movements are geniuses becomes worth exploring.

We can begin to see how Jesus might be understood as a religious genius with the help of New Testament scholar Marcus Borg. Using comparative religion as a means of analysis, Borg sees Jesus in the three dimensions--spirit, wisdom, and politics (cf. Borg and Wright 2007, 53-76). In the spirit dimension Jesus is a Jewish mystic, comparable to the mystics and shamans of other cultures. He has a direct experience of “what is”; he is centered in God. Out of this experience comes wisdom. Like the Buddha, Socrates, and the Hebrew prophets, Jesus offers not the conventional wisdom of his day but an alternative wisdom (Borg 2006, 166-168). In his life and teachings, he proclaims a way of love and justice for all, especially for the marginalized people he healed, ate with, and spoke about in parables like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Building on the central Jewish idea of loving God and neighbor, he expanded the circle of love to include all.

This love was expressed in the political dimension in the search for justice in the face of oppression. Borg calls Jesus a “nonviolent revolutionary,” challenging the “domination system” of his day, the Roman Empire that had been accommodated by some Jewish leaders. Living with oppressed people in an oppressed society, Jesus exemplified what New Testament scholar Walter Wink calls “Jesus’ third way”--a path between submission and engaging in violence (Wink 1998, 98-111). This is the way of nonviolent resistance in the face of unjust systems of domination.

Jesus was an exemplar of this third way in his teachings and during his final week in Jerusalem.⁷ The Palm Sunday procession, the throwing the money changers out of the Temple, the debates with Jewish leaders, all are actions of a nonviolent revolutionary that protest the domination system on behalf of the poor and oppressed.⁸ Borg writes that “the opening act of this week is the Palm Sunday procession.” This was not the only procession at that time. Each year at Passover, the Roman governor Pilate rode into Jerusalem with his armed forces from the West, from the governing city of Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, to guard against things getting out of hand among the Jews. Jesus came into Jerusalem from the East. The biblical texts tell us that this was not accidental. It was a procession that Jesus planned. According to Borg, “His decision to enter the city as he did was what we could call a planned political demonstration, a counter-demonstration. The juxtaposition of these two processions embodies the central conflict of Jesus’s last week: the kingdom of God or the kingdom of imperial domination . . . two visions of life on earth” (Borg 2006, 232).

This brief analysis of Jesus’s actions suggests that Jesus is a “religious genius” in terms of originality. There were other rabbis who summarized the teachings of the Torah as loving God and neighbor. However, Jesus through his teachings and actions exemplified a historically original contribution for his place and time: a new ideal of universal non-discriminating love and justice for all people. He himself was an exemplar of that love (Borg calls it “compassion) that led to a passion for justice.

This ideal and inspiration took on a life of its own in the further creative interactions among his followers. Regardless of how we might understand their experiences of Jesus after his death, the love of Jesus continued. One way of understanding this is in light of Henry Nelson Wieman’s thought, who was a significant influence on Kaufman’s thinking. For Wieman, everything is an event--an interaction among a variety of parts in relationship. In the New Testament, the life of Jesus is told as a series of events, and his parables portray events. In such events Jesus catalyzed creative interchange with his disciples which transformed them so that they became capable of such interchange with one another. Immediately following the death of Jesus this interchange seemed to cease, only to return in a new way. During Jesus’ life it had been limited in scope to its Jewish context. However, with his death and resurrection creative loving broke through this cultural limitation to become universal in its scope (Wieman 1946, 39-44, 278).

⁷ Some of the teachings of Jesus that are effectively analyzed as advocating nonviolent resistance to the domination system are turn the other cheek, give your undergarments as well as the outer ones, go the second mile (Wink 1998, 98-111; Borg 2006,247-251).

⁸ This goes further than Kaufman does. He grew up a pacifist and was a conscientious objector during World War II. However, in light of the influence of liberation theology and feminist theory on this thought, I think he would probably support non-violent resistance in the face of oppression.

This kind of event continues as the unconditional, indiscriminating loving that Jesus practiced during his life. People today participate in the Christ event (which they may call by other names) whenever they expand the boundaries of their communities with acts of compassion and justice for all. In effect then, Jesus is a religious genius, an example of Big-C creativity, both in terms of originality (new variation) and usefulness (cultural selection).

True, as Christianity grew in numbers and complexity, there have emerged idolatrous trajectories supporting systems control, war, and domination. Nevertheless, the indiscriminating love, peace, and justice emerging from the serendipitous creativity at work in Jesus and his followers can be regarded as a set of cultural selection pressures for guiding human behavior today.

As a result of new knowledge from various sciences and their technologies, humanity has become more unified, cultural pluralism is more widely experienced, and the importance of being dependent on the wider ecological matrix of planet Earth is better understood. In this new bio-cultural environment, behavior that is based on human tendencies toward excessive consumption and violence is the inhumane way to future diminishment, decay, and death. In contrast, Jesus' example of universal, indiscriminating love inspires a religious orientation that leads to the creation and continuation of wholesome relationships with one another and other species. Other trajectories that have similar goals have evolved in other cultures. All these are needed if humans everywhere are to flourish together with other forms of life on our planetary home.

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