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Theology as Art Form

Walter H. Capps

I agree with Gordon Kaufman that we need an alternative to the viewpoint that the work of theology is primarily adaptive and responsive. His proposals create the prospect that theology can be understood, more and more, as a constructive and imaginative endeavor. And this, I believe, is all to the good. I like what he has suggested very much. And I appreciate the spirit in which it is suggested. Indeed, I believe it is one of the most refreshing spirits or temperaments within Christian theology today. And I am being careful when making such appraisals.

However, at a certain point, some matters become unclear to me. For example, when considering the scope of the work of the imagination, I am not always certain that Dr. Kaufman makes a clear distinction between what is and what should be. Some of the time he is making recommendations about what he wishes theology would become. And some of the time he is engaged in description: this is the way theology functions even if those who are engaged in it are not always conscious that this is what is occurring. The difference between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* is not always clear. My hunch is that Dr. Kaufman is actually seeking two intentions simultaneously. But the dual focus leads to some confusion, as, for example, in the following statement:

It is obvious, then, that a central task of theology is to collect and catalog the various available models and metaphors and images which have been used and can be used for putting together the image/concept of God.

This statement, I suggest, can be read both ways. Indeed, it carries a double meaning, which, I trust, is what Dr. Kaufman intended it to do.

But I wish to push the matter further and ask the question: How would matters be changed were this understanding of the process established? For example, would there be fresh or new conceptions and images of God? If

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there would be, I would like to have some hint as to what they might be. On the surface, at least, it seems that Dr. Kaufman's proposals produce nothing very different from what has been there all along, that is, images and conceptions of God which sound rather traditional, very theistic, and, though this is not intended as criticism, thoroughly Christian.

I have another round of questions to put regarding the function of the imagination. Here, too, Kaufman's proposal is striking and attractive. As I say, I am drawn to it. Its force is to recommend that theology be conceived by design, intentionally, that is, rather than as response. It makes it clear that the theologian has work to do—critical, constructive, and imaginative creative work—all of which is directed toward specific ends. And it implies—or, rather, I am inferring—that the work of theology is guided by the resourcefulness of creativity. Hence, the theologian should be looked upon as being more of an artist than a technician, unless, of course, the artist is looked upon as being a technician too. (I recall some provocative essays published in Warburg Institute annals which explore this very possibility.)

Now, however we may decide the issue, my impression is that Dr. Kaufman's view of the workings of the imagination is rather formal. I find his use of the word "imagination" to be similar to the ways in which theologians employ the word "anthropology," as, for example, when referring to what it is to be a human being. Because such words can be employed so all-inclusively, they tend to identify categories of interpretation rather than to provide specific information. And the same lack of clarity is present when Dr. Kaufman suggests that the word "God" is an "image/concept" and sometimes even an "image-concept." Certainly the force of such contentions needs to be sharpened considerably.

It is probable, I suspect, that Dr. Kaufman isn't talking about imagination at all, not in the first place, and not in the fundamental sense. What I think he is talking about is a conception of the work of theology as being an *esthetic* undertaking, primarily, rather than, say, a philosophical undertaking, and the language he is searching for—the vocabulary by which the same proposals can be registered more forcefully and vividly—is the language which belongs to esthetic sensitivity. This places his inquiry, I suggest, within the context of analysis first mapped out by Immanuel Kant in the third of his monumental critiques, *The Critique of Judgment*, and within the legacy formed by its influence. While Dr. Kaufman's paper makes certain gestures in this direction, the entire effort seems too casual to me, and the outcome is not as rich as it could be—rich, to be sure, in provocation and suggestiveness, but not yet sufficiently rich in substance and detail.

For all of the fine talk about constructive imaginative work, all of the emphasis upon the powers of the imagination, and even for all of those gestures in the direction of bestowing creativity with a crown, there are some obstacles beyond which Dr. Kaufman has a difficult time making his way. The fatal flaw is to approach "God" as being a *regulative concept*

(though he doesn't say this precisely) which is called into function when human mental powers are involved in synthesizing activities. That God is being called upon to function in this formal regulative and synthesizing manner is made all too clear by the frequency with which Dr. Kaufman identifies the work of the theologian as involving "putting together a picture of the world" or engaging in the construction of "worldviews." The most telling language, in this respect, is the reference to "one grand vision." Dr. Kaufman tells us more than once that the theologian is there to attain the systematic and comprehensive grasp of the whole of things, the "grand vision." The theologian is involved in the synthetic ordering of experience, always straining forward to grasp all of it comprehensively. And God—it follows both formally and schematically—is the ordering principle of the "one grand vision." God functions as the formal ordering principle by means of which the synthesis is effected.

I should like to offer an amendment—or, as is said frequently in legislative councils, a "friendly amendment." And my proposal is informed by the work of such persons as Stephen Pepper, the neo-Kantian school of Marburg, Suzanne Langer, Robert Brumbaugh, and Karl Popper, not to mention the wealth of attention which has been given to the function of models and paradigms, as, for example, by Stephen Toulmin, Mary Douglas, Thomas Kuhn, and the commentators on their respective suggestions and proposals.

My work in schematic analysis has been done primarily within the Christian tradition where I too have concentrated on prominent conceptions of the deity. It is typical of our assumptions about the tradition to expect that there will be but one primary conception of God. But this, I have found, is simply not the case. And I believe this insight can be applied both to regulative and constitutive functions of "God" relative to world pictures, schematic constructions, etc. To make the longer story shorter—I am borrowing from certain impressions I have acquired while studying monastic religion—I am proposing that the Christian tradition exhibits at least two prominent conceptions of deity. The first of these has much to do with authority, that is, with the keeping of commandments, with honoring the divine will, and with obedience to the law. The other seems more closely akin to romantic attachments. But this is simply another way of saying that the first conception of deity belongs to a juridical context, and seems to have taken content from the relation of parents, as authorities, to children. The second formulation depends more heavily on the relationship between two persons, usually of opposite sexes, who love each other, whether as husband and wife or lover and beloved (as in the Hebrew love poem incorporated in the biblical Song of Songs). The first framework correlates with a covenant form which is deliberately stipulative: "If you hear my voice and obey my command, I will be your god and you shall be my people." The second bespeaks a covenant form too, but one that is nonstipulative in offering the unconditional promise: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be

blessed.” In the second covenant form, nothing is required of the recipient to keep the covenant conditions intact, for there are no specific conditions (though fidelity, rather than obedience, is evoked). And no portions of the juridical world are called into play.

Now, employing this simply analogy—which, I assure you, can be developed at much greater length—I wish to offer some summary observations regarding Dr. Kaufman’s proposals. While there is some point to the suggestion that the varying conceptions I have identified have their basis in different world pictures or schemes, I believe we can be more precise. Indeed, I doubt that we are talking about “world pictures” at all, or perhaps only secondarily. I think we are talking instead about the distinctive ways in which reality is addressed, only in some of which would it be appropriate for God to exercise a synthesizing function. One of the models I selected utilizes the language of authority while the second of the two builds upon the language of espousal. But the languages selected correspond to modal differences in addressing the world. The mode of espousal is disposed to engage the world. The mode of authority approaches reality by distinguishing responsibilities and privileges, sensing keenly that the individual is simultaneously bound and free. But we cannot pursue the details of the examples further here.

The force of my illustration is to suggest that Dr. Kaufman’s provocative proposal develops the proper sentiments but remains more analytical than being constructive or creative. There are more religious variations and theological opportunities than it puts within grasp. But this only suggests that, despite its stated intention, I believe the proposal remains tied—no, bound—to the world made certain in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. It has not yet fully entered the world sketched out in *The Critique of (Esthetic) Judgment*. But, very clearly, it points in the right direction, and it puts fresh constructive and creative conceptual and imaginative possibilities within closer reach. In praising the proposal for exhibiting this capacity, I would also want it to be more radical while being more solidly informed and nurtured by the expansive spirit of the Enlightenment.