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Review: In Face of Mystery: a Constructive Theology

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In the final chapter, on revolution, Valeri successfully argues that Bellamy's theology had intentional social implications. "Despite the claims of scholars who have interpreted his New Divinity as apolitical, Bellamy's theology in fact culminated in a validation of worldly activism and armed rebellion" (p. 141).

Timothy J. Axford
Elgin, IL

In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology. By Gordon D. Kaufman. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1995, 509 pp., $17.95 paper.

For something construed as a "constructive theology," this work by Kaufman is most aptly titled. Though claiming to be a "theo-logy," *In Face of Mystery* leaves us only with a "cosmic serendipitous creativity which manifests itself in the evolutionary-historical trajectory that has brought humanity into being and continues to sustain it in being." To this "cosmic serendipitous creativity," with the help of the later Wittgenstein, Kaufman magnanimously gives the symbolic, western cultural name "God."

By means of his Kantian, Ritschlian, neo-Tillichian, Wittgensteinian, postmodernist and historicist accounting of the ultimate mystery of the world, from what happens to be a western and ostensibly Christian perspective, Kaufman repeatedly emphasizes his intention to provide "orientation to women and men in today's world with all of its problems." In order to achieve this end, he believes that he must "re-construct (deconstruct?) the traditional conception of God" and the "Christian-four-part categorial scheme"—God/world/human/Christ—in face of our current situation. He calls this a necessarily "imaginative task," the outcome of which ought to be a comprehensive and coherent picture of "humanity in the world under God."

In the first of the five parts of this work, Kaufman sets forth his assumptions, concerns, method and goals. Almost from the outset he makes it clear that his own metaphysical "decisions" are grounded in the current volatilities in western culture and world issues. Though truth in the traditional sense does not exist and all assertions or claims for truth (notably and especially religious truths) are culture-bound and relative, Kaufman decides as a western, white, male "Christian" to construct a theology to give orientation for our current situation. Then, claiming that the concepts "God" and "Christ" are too problematic and difficult to begin his reconceptualization of the four-part Christian monotheistic scheme, he spends much time paving the way to and grounding his own formulations of "God" and "Christ" by unpacking the more basic concept of human existence in the world. Through it all Kaufman emphasizes that what he is attempting has always been a part of theological work—taking what happens to be the tradition of the Christian worldview and criticizing, reorienting and reconstructing the religious symbols. But unlike previous generations, Kaufman asserts that this must now be done in full awareness that this is only an interpretation of the mystery of life.

The methodological-metaphysical foundation to Kaufman's movement of thought is the continuity provided by his six "steps of faith." The first is the choice to move from merely phenomenal levels to explanatory metaphysical levels of conceptualization. The second step is the choice to see the whole in "cosmic" terms, cosmic evolution. Third is the willingness to see the "more," the unexpected "directionality" of the cosmos, the "serendipitous cosmic creativity." The fourth "step of faith" creates greater specificity. It is the recognition of a particular "trajectory" of "serendipitous creativity" toward that process that eventually led to human culture and responsibility.

This step is later connected in part to his "wider Christology." The fifth step is the decision to connect the traditional symbol "God" to the "serendipitous creativity" that is the ground of our evolving, developing humanization. Finally in the term "Christ," a term traditionally (and, says Kaufman, wrongfully and idolatrously) connected to the historical person Jesus of Nazareth, we may choose to see the clue, the key to rightly understanding both "God" and human existence and their relation. Here Kaufman clarifies his earlier point that "Christ" is not actually a fourth part of Christian monotheism but the hermeneutical key for properly understanding the other three—at least from a western and Christian worldview as set within the larger pluralism of the world.

In response let me say first that this volume contains several commendable elements. Kaufman is fairly honest about the fact that his reconstruction of the "God" concept is not the traditional Christian view and that he himself is not a Christian theologian in any usual sense of the term. The problem is that he simultaneously tries to fit that very difference into the theological task of the Christian theologian as though he is doing what has always been done. Further, he has long recognized the role of imagination in the pursuit of truth in any kind of endeavor. The problem is that Kaufman's use of imagination is all too close to the popular sense of fabricating that which we know is not real. Finally, Kaufman is correct in using the triadic human/world/God monotheistic worldview as a basis for his theological work because theological work does arise as a secondary faith response to these very relations. Yet Kaufman has it all backwards. As a result any "God" concept that Kaufman may tenuously discern arises—as for all theological liberalism—out of the human sense of self. Consequently all true God-world-human distinctions arising out of creation and redemption in Jesus Christ are lost in an amorphous, hyperpanentheistic "serendipitous creativity."

Despite his claims to the contrary, Kaufman is utterly relativistic. Pluralism appears to be his one truth. Furthermore, Kaufman's "God" is a "creator" who cannot create, an "expresser" who cannot reveal, a directing creativity without the slightest clue to our existence or to good or evil. "God" is but an utterly immanent movement of evolutionary creativity. Yet to such a "God" Kaufman calls us to devotion. His "wider Christology" has lost the man Jesus to Christ-images of humane meaning and to the larger directionality toward cosmic order and humanization. Kaufman, like all theological liberals, is scandalized by the particularity of the one man Jesus and the incarnational, historical physicality of the Word. Kaufman's theology is nothing more, finally, than a self-conscious cosmic construal, an obvious metaphysical propaganda, intended as an ecological-political opiate. Kaufman's theology is at last only an exercise in pragmatic metaphysics, a more philosophically sophisticated example of what the ancient Romans did in their deification of Caesar. At best this makes Kaufman an idolater who lacks the Nietzschean courage to declare his own loss of all faith and meaning.

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Progressive Dispensationalism. By Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock. Wheaton: Victor, 1993, 336 pp., $19.95.

Progressive Dispensationalism is a refreshing contribution to serious communication between differing evangelical scholars on the issue of dispensationalism. The

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