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Reflections on Gordon D. Kaufman's
In the beginning . . . Creativity* and *Jesus and Creativity

Editors' Note

This special issue was prompted by the recent publication of two books by Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the beginning . . . Creativity* (2004), and *Jesus and Creativity* (2006), both published by Fortress Press. Kaufman, Professor of Theology, Emeritus, at Harvard Divinity School, has been stretching the constructive boundaries of Christian theology for many years. His own theology has evolved substantially over the last four decades through such works as his *Systematic Theology* (1968), *God the Problem* (1972), *Essay on Theological Method* (1975), *The Theological Imagination* (1981), *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985), and *In Face of Mystery* (1993). Because his two most recent works represent yet another significant development in his constructive thought, we invited responses to those two works from the authors included in this issue. David E. Conner has written a review essay of *In the beginning . . . Creativity,* Randall E. Auxier has offered a review essay of *Jesus and Creativity,* Nancy R. Howell has articulated questions raised and left unanswered by the first book, and Wesley J. Wildman and Edgar A. Towne have engaged various themes in both books. Kaufman has contributed a deeply thoughtful response to each of these articles.

We express our sincere gratitude to all of these authors for helping us sort out these important issues together, and to Michael West, Editor-in-Chief at Fortress Press, for providing advance copies of *Jesus and Creativity*.

Nature, God, Jesus, and Creativity

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I. Introduction

What would theology look like if it were entirely this-worldly, with no traces of mythology or supernaturalism? How would we speak about Jesus if we were to reject the pre-existence-incarnation-crucifixion-resurrection-ascension-deification-Trinity trajectory of interpretation in traditional Christology as both implausible and ill-suited to orient modern people to the challenges of the contemporary world? In his recent books *In the beginning . . . Creativity* and *Jesus and Creativity*, theologian Gordon Kaufman gives the clearest, the most persuasive, the most hopeful, and the shortest answer to these questions that Christian theology has ever seen.[1] He is to be commended on all four virtues.

In *Jesus and Creativity*, Kaufman rejects the traditionally dominant trajectory of Christological interpretation (he calls it "Jesus-trajectory$_1$") in favor of another interpretation in which *creativity* is the central theme (in a flourish of creativity, he calls this "Jesus-trajectory$_2$"). Jesus-trajectory$_2$ involves a naturalist worldview closely coordinated with fascinating views of God, nature, and the human condition, a view he develops in both books. In this essay, I briefly sketch Kaufman's creativity viewpoint before discussing several points in more detail. This will involve taking account of developments in Kaufman's thinking all the way back to the monumental *In Face of Mystery*.[2]

II. The Creativity Viewpoint: Nature, God, Jesus, and the Gospel

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[1] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the beginning . . . Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); *Jesus and Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

[2] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Kaufman's naturalistic worldview rejects the supernatural causal agents that have been so vital to religious mythologies of all kinds and in all eras. Naturalism in this basic sense is an ancient worldview and, in a variety of forms, has been amply present within Western, South Asian, and East Asian philosophical reflection right from the beginning. It has persisted alongside more popular and frankly more exciting worldviews of divine beings and discarnate entities constantly meddling in affairs on planet Earth. Religious forms of naturalism such as Kaufman's scrupulously avoid crass reductionism, yet they take the natural and social sciences seriously as a source of vital information about many aspects of the world—indeed, more reliable information than we can get in any alternative way. This subordinates information from sacred traditions of purported revelation to the findings of science whenever there is conflict or overlap, though of course science does not and cannot exhaustively address all aspects of reality. Human beings are not enfleshed souls but rather bio-historical creatures. The naturalistic viewpoint also struggles to discern any rational basis for the widespread human hope in an afterlife, and it certainly rules out any form of afterlife that requires either a supernatural location or supernatural means of transformation from one life to the next.

These implications of a naturalist worldview disturb many religious people, particularly those who realize that their day-to-day beliefs presuppose a different sort of worldview. Often such folk value their working religious beliefs so highly that they just do not see the point of a naturalist worldview, and this is true regardless of their religious affiliation. Naturalism seems to violate virtually everything that they prize about religion, from the moral motivation and joyous hope of an afterlife to the fervent expectation of supernatural answers to their heart-felt prayers. Christians of this dismayed sort can see that naturalism, if true, would force them to approach the Bible's accounts of miracles with great suspicion, which casts a pall over the Bible's role as an authoritative, practical, and inspiring guide for their daily lives.

Meanwhile, others find the supernatural world utterly implausible. They are deeply uncomfortable with the inauthentic pretense they feel compelled to uphold when they involve themselves in religious practices that presuppose a supernatural worldview. And they desperately long for a serious interpretation of religion that fits their naturalist way of living and understanding. Survey data suggest that this group is much smaller than the supernaturalist group in the United

States at the current time. This is not surprising; the popular dominance of supernaturalism has probably been unbroken since the beginning of religious belief. What is surprising is that so few theologians have undertaken to speak directly to and on behalf of such people. Kaufman does so, without any hint of apology to supernaturalists, on the premise that many people today find the supernatural view implausible—a premise stated often throughout the books in question.

The root of the problem of a supernatural worldview is its mistaken allowance of causal agency from outside of the natural flow of causal processes within the world of nature. The greatest offender in this regard is, of course, God, at least when conceived of as a supernatural being with intentions, plans, and both the power and willingness to act in the world. It follows that the first theological move within a naturalist worldview is to reform the idea of God, purging it of anthropomorphic and anthropocentric elements. In fact, there are many resources for non-supernatural ideas of God in the history of theology and philosophy, but Kaufman bypasses that tangled issue and proposes to conceive of God as a process of creative activity rather than as a personal supernatural being. It is questionable whether anthropomorphic and anthropocentric elements in theological ideas can or should ever be completely eliminated but the idea of God as creativity certainly heads in that direction.

Kaufman relishes describing the trajectories of creativity that arc through the long history of the universe and also through the evolutionary history of our planet. In human beings, that creative process combined biological and historical-cultural components into a symbolic, spiritual, moral, and yet thoroughly bodily species. We are deeply entangled in our amazingly fecund ecological context, and yet we are also capable of creatively transcending our environment through understanding and influencing it. Not all creative trajectories are conducive to human flourishing, and Kaufman freely allows that we could get smashed to smithereens by an asteroid, or destroy ourselves through our own wicked stupidity with deadly weapons or ecological negligence. But serendipitous elements of creativity make our existence possible and support our cultural and personal aspirations, and it is those aspects that we most strongly identify with the word “God.” We are the creative fruit of serendipitous creativity itself.

Once Kaufman’s view of God is in place, the deep religious question is no longer how we can be reconciled with a supernatural

divine person in order to escape hell and gain eternal fellowship with God in heaven. Rather, in our time, and in a naturalist framework that emphasizes creativity, the Big Question is whether we can exercise our creative powers to continue the human project, enhancing the parts we prize, controlling our violence, and shunning our terrible ability to destroy our world. Of course, human beings participate in the serendipitous creativity that produced human life and we can, if we so choose, enrich that happy trajectory of creativity still further. But many challenges stand in the way and we face a profoundly uncertain future, so we need a model.

Kaufman believes that traditional Christological thinking does not help with this question. In fact, in Jesus-trajectory$_1$, it is not even clear that Jesus can be a relevant model for us because his true humanity is accompanied by true divinity in a way that does not apply to the rest of us. In Jesus-trajectory$_2$, however, we learn to see Jesus as an expression of creative, natural, and very human possibilities that he both taught and enacted in his life. We certainly can take that as a model for creatively engaging our lives and our human and planetary future. Jesus' radical commitment to *agape* love, and his burning conviction that it should and could be expressed at every moment of our lives, present a compelling picture of an extraordinarily creative possibility. Some understandably reject it as unrealistic; they did so in Jesus' own time and they do in our time as well. For example, we are not likely to see an "*agape* military strategy" anytime soon. But those who sign up to be followers of Jesus' radical vision of human life commit themselves to live according to that vision of *agape* love. There is no afterlife here, but there is life abundant. There are no supernatural rescue stories, but there is a relentless drive for justice that enhances health and happiness for everyone. There is no supernatural consummation of worldly history, but there is a future lying open before us and subject to our creative influence. Jesus is not the only model and norm for a lifestyle of ecological responsibility, social justice, and a better future, but his vision is one that we can choose. And that is good news indeed.

This is not Jesus' gospel, which was shot through with supernatural elements and expectations of an immanent in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. It is not Paul's gospel or that of the early church or indeed of most churches since that time, all of which centralize Jesus Christ as the supernatural gateway to reconciliation with God. But nor

is Kaufman alone in proclaiming this gospel to his eager minority audience of naturalist Christians. The elements of this view have been present all along within the wider Christian movement, but they have been so tangled up with mythical and superstitious elements that they were difficult to tease out. It is only changing circumstances that have allowed this gospel to become distilled into the clear, focused, and encouraging form that a number of modern theologians have given it. And, as I have said, none has been more persuasive or more hopeful, more lucid or more concise, than Kaufman.

III. The Rhetoric of Creativity

With this statement of Kaufman's view of God, Jesus, nature, humanity, and the gospel in place, I turn to a series of comments on it, beginning with reflections on Kaufman's rhetorical strategy.

A large number of Christian theologians in the modern period have struggled to say what they believe about the religious significance of Jesus the Christ in a way that both maintains their intellectual integrity and remains continuous with the so-called "classical Christological tradition"—that is, the theological tradition that affirms the Chalcedonian Definition of the Two Natures, that Jesus was truly human and truly divine. I will not name names here, because these are delicate issues. But these struggles have been ungainly at times. Some theologians obfuscate about the resurrection because they doubt that it happened but feel they cannot afford to hurt ordinary Christian believers by saying so straight out. Some theologians avoid talking about Jesus in their Christology because they find the gospel pictures of Jesus morally and religiously indigestible and cannot own up to that in public. Some theologians use language that suggests they uphold the Chalcedonian Definition when in fact they are stretching their terminology to the point of distortion in order to protect and nurture a religious tradition that they think continues to have value. And some theologians continue to speak of reconciliation through a substitutionary atonement even though they are appalled by the suggestions of scapegoating and child abuse in that view, all because they do not feel comfortable stating their real view in plain language.

Of course, those who know the Christological literature also know that there are many sincere theologians who mean what they say and say what they mean. But the conceptual gymnastics evident

particularly in the liberal wing of Christological reflection are appalling. Conservative evangelical theologians who can honestly affirm what Kaufman calls Jesus-trajectory$_1$ get tired of pointing out the absurd pretense in some liberal Christologies. Most evangelical theologians seem to have interpreted the decline of liberal denominations as liberating them from the unpleasant obligation to flush out the theological fakery and misleading terminological wrangling of much liberal Christological reflection, because most of them do not even bother critiquing it any more.

I say this in order to situate Kaufman's little Christology book in an historical context that many theologians will instantly recognize and even take for granted. Against this history, the book will be read in two ways. On the one hand, supernaturalist theologians will simply dismiss it as being completely clear about the vacuous Christology that liberals have long been afraid to own up to professing. If they bother with the book at all, they will say of Kaufman something like what Karl Barth insultingly said of Ernst Troeltsch a century ago, that the results of his theology prove that there was nothing there in the first place and that the entire approach was wrongheaded.[3] On the other hand, among naturalist theologians there will be a mixed reaction. Those who are completely out of the closet as naturalists will leap for joy at such crystal clarity, but there are not many of them. Meanwhile, still-closeted or half-hearted naturalists will wring their hands in frustration and envy at the freedom Kaufman feels to speak his mind with no apology for his naturalist worldview, with no concern to engage the still-dominant supernatural worldview competitor, and with no tell-tale signs of lingering remorse at surrendering the implausible supernatural mythologies within which Christological beliefs were first formed and have been nurtured ever since.

Some theologians might also feel that Kaufman is somehow cheating, bypassing the agonizing trek through tangled historical undergrowth that is involved in trying to preserve some semblance of continuity with the classical Christological tradition. It might not seem fair to them that Kaufman just leaps over that tangle of briars and bogs like Superman and lands in a sunny clearing having simply left the classical Christological tradition behind him. What about loyalty?! What about protecting the faith of ordinary Christians?! How can

[3] See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951-1963), 3.3: 409; and *Church Dogmatics* 4.1: 387.

Kaufman simply disregard all of the concerns that have haunted liberal Christology since the Enlightenment?! It calls to mind the boy who pointed out that the vain king had no clothes on. I suppose some in the crowd were mad because they really wanted to say that themselves, but this irritating kid went ahead and said it first. Just as the kid was unconstrained by the social traditions that make speaking the obvious truth difficult at times, somehow Kaufman has found a way to become unconstrained by the classical Christological tradition that has made speaking the truth about that tradition, and by extension about Jesus, painful. Of course, Kaufman reaches back behind the classical Christological tradition to the older and more fundamental principle that Jesus is important, and that Christians should follow him. It is this primal conviction rather than the unfolding classical doctrinal tradition that constrains Kaufman's reflections on the moral and religious significance of Jesus.

It is important to remember that, unlike the innocent child in the fairy tale of the ridiculous king, Kaufman had to take a long and arduous journey to this enviable place of liberation in which theologians speak their mind without fancy terminology or fear of theological enemies. He recounts part of this journey in the Preface, hinting that *In Face of Mystery* did not get the Christological material quite right and stating that he was fortunate not to have attempted to write a book on Christology prior to this time. The eventual book—tellingly titled *Jesus and Creativity* rather than attractively alliterated *Christ and Creativity*—is thus the fruit of a long process of striving for clarity of mind.

IV. Kaufman's Confidence in Naturalism

I applaud Kaufman's decision to speak about God and Jesus to and for those who find unbelievable traditional beliefs about Jesus' divinity or the virgin birth—a group that I think is roughly the same as those holding a naturalist worldview. This decision makes everything about both *In the beginning . . . Creativity* and *Jesus and Creativity* far simpler than would otherwise be the case. It facilitates a clarity and compactness that would be unimaginable if he had to tangle constantly with supernaturalist objections. But I do wonder about his confidence in a naturalist worldview. In fact, I lean strongly that way myself, but, as a pragmatist philosopher with a commitment to fallibilism in human

inquiry, I am always wondering whether alternative views can be rendered plausibly. In fact, I think there are relatively plausible versions of supernaturalism. One of the key factors in making a supernaturalist worldview plausible is to avoid the sort of ridiculous special pleading that forces supernatural evidences to favor one religion and oppose all others, as if purported supernatural evidences were not available to every religion. Another is to make sure that science retains a strong voice in determining our view of the way the world works. But impartial and science-friendly forms of supernaturalism do exist.

The point of this consideration is this: the Christologies associated with impartial and science-friendly forms of supernaturalism tend not to suffer from the moral dangers that much traditional Christology does, such as vulnerability to anti-Judaism or cultural imperialism. They also tend to avoid many of the implausible conceptual formulations about which Kaufman rightly complains. The key to this sort of Christology is to reject the proposition that Jesus Christ is absolutely, universally, uniquely, unsurpassably significant for revelation and salvation. Correlatively, this is to see God at work in many ways other than through Jesus the Christ—in Trinitarian terms, it is to protect the role of the Holy Spirit from a creeping Christomonism. I have argued elsewhere that this kind of absolutist interpretation of Jesus Christ is a necessary (but not sufficient!) condition for most of the dreadful errors in the classical Christological tradition, from its implicit support of the moral failures of the Christian churches to its lurching into exclusive, extreme, and implausibly anthropocentric claims about God's work in Jesus Christ.[4] Without that absolutism, Christology even in supernatural worldviews can achieve impressive plausibility. In other words, the main problem with Christological plausibility is not the supernaturalistic worldview in which the Classical Christological tradition is framed, but the absolutist hermeneutical distortion of Christology that is so desperately anthropocentric, so culturally insecure, and so morally dangerous.

I suspect that this amounts to a disagreement with Kaufman about where the most important fault line runs within contemporary Christology. He appears to believe it runs between naturalist and supernaturalist worldviews, and correspondingly that religious plausibility, moral efficacy, and even the future of the human species

[4] Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in Contemporary Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

and Earth's ecology depend on convincing a lot of people to cross over and join the naturalist side. I consider this a worrying conclusion because I am fairly strongly convinced that very few people will cross over to the naturalist side, even if the future of the world depends upon it. The vast majority of people are of one mind about this: they just do not like it over there and will remain supernaturalists no matter how clear and short Kaufman's books are. But I am relieved to be able to commend a different analysis of the major fault line: it runs between absolutism and anti-absolutism. And there are both naturalists and supernaturalists on the anti-absolutist side. In fact, survey data suggest that the anti-absolutist side is the comfortable majority, though the noisy extremes of culture wars sometimes disguise that fact. From my point of view, this is very good news. Anti-absolutists have the numbers to exercise some political clout if they get organized, whereas naturalists will remain a small even if admirable minority for the foreseeable future.

Of course, Kaufman has no obligation to speak to anyone beyond his chosen audience. But it is just as well that the rest of us can appreciate what Kaufman has done and then, with naturalists and supernaturalists joined hand-in-hand against absolutist interpretations of Jesus Christ, work creatively together on human and ecological survival, with Jesus as inspiration and example. Any kind of agreement that consolidates social pressure toward less absolutism and arrogance in foreign relations, economic practices, global poverty, and ecological sustainability is a creative step in the right direction.

V. On the Person of Jesus the Christ

Perhaps it is Kaufman's highly attuned Mennonite moral sensitivities, or perhaps it is because he studies the New Testament more carefully than most, but his portrayal in *Jesus and Creativity* of Jesus' moral and spiritual vision is genuinely bracing. In that respect, the book reminds me of another book published a shade over a century ago, in which historian and theologian Adolf von Harnack presented his view of the essence of Christianity.[5] Harnack's book included a compelling, even thrilling account of Jesus' view of *agape* love and of

[5] Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

the radical character of his moral example and teachings. The result was an instant best seller in German that was quickly translated into numerous languages. Kaufman's book offers a similarly gripping portrayal of Jesus' radical moral stance.

Kaufman is clear that the Christian can choose to follow Jesus' example or not. He is also clear that the Christian follower *must deliberately* choose to follow Jesus because his radical example is costly, and we do not just accidentally stumble into behaving and deciding the way Jesus would have done. Most uniquely, Kaufman stresses that there are no guarantees that taking Jesus' life and teaching as a norm for our own behavior and decisions will solve the desperate problems we face. No theologian has acknowledged as plainly as Kaufman does that human moral action always has the status of a reasoned gamble. It is not irrational to adopt an *agape* lifestyle but neither is it guaranteed to produce the fruits we hope for it. There are no such guarantees in the world of naturalism. There are only creative trajectories to which we are attracted and can commit ourselves if we so choose.

Yet the creative trajectory through Jesus has made a real difference in human affairs and shows promise of making a difference to the human future. So our curious minds naturally ask the question about the person whose wisdom we yearn to understand and whose example we seek to follow. When we turn to *Jesus and Creativity* for an answer to this question, we find a puzzle. Kaufman actually says very little about the nature of this person, Jesus, beyond the fact that he was human like all of us and participated in a trajectory of creativity that has extended far beyond his own life. In fact, Kaufman even acknowledges that Jesus' ongoing influence was partly due to a combination of factors that were significantly outside of his own control, such as the way that some of the disciples reacted to experiences of his presence after his death, and the way others reacted (or overreacted) to stories about those appearances.

Traditional Christology speaks about the person and work of Christ, and is careful to speak of both because Christ's work is believed to be so profound that a special theory of the person of Jesus the Christ cannot be avoided. But Kaufman avoids it. And I wish to lodge a complaint about this. I am not asking Kaufman to abandon his naturalist framework, or to develop the sort of Spirit Christology that effectively posits a supernatural spiritual force that fills some people more than

others, like water poured in varied amounts into drinking glasses. Many naturalist theologians, some of them frankly pseudo-naturalists I would say, use this approach to explain how Jesus could have been so different from the rest of us, and I think Kaufman may be wise in refusing to go down that path. Yet something is still missing. I would name the missing piece a *theory of religious genius*. He indicates that he needs such a theory when he mentions Jesus as one of a *class* of people, among whom he counts the historical Buddha and the Prophet Muhammad, but he does not furnish the account that is thus begged. Such an account is necessary to provide for the naturalist what traditional Christology always treated under the heading of the doctrine of the Person of Christ.

VI. Comparing Kaufman's Creativity and Process Theology

The theologically informed reader of both *In the beginning . . . Creativity* and *Jesus and Creativity* quickly notices similarities between Kaufman's creativity view and process theology. The obvious question about this is whether Kaufman is in fact espousing a process view of God and nature under another name. The same question arises in the case of Jürgen Moltmann's theological view,[6] which is process-like even though he never signs up for anything like Alfred North Whitehead's prehensive theory of causation, which lies at the root of the diverse tradition of process theology.[7] In the case of Kaufman, the answer to this question, like all good theological answers, is yes and no.

The "yes" part begins with the plain fact that Kaufman shifts from substantive categories for speaking of God to process categories. This categorial shift is a central plank in the platform of process theology. Equally obvious is the fact that Kaufman's use of "creativity" is quite close to Whitehead's use, despite dramatic differences in their ideas of God. The "no" part derives from the influences on Kaufman's thought. In fact, he has probably been more influenced by the Chicago School's naturalistic interpretation of religion in the early part of the

[6] The key work is probably Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), though the process point of view strengthens through Moltmann's writings.

[7] See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

twentieth century—perhaps especially by Henry Nelson Wieman and Shailer Matthews[8]—than by Whitehead.

There is an intriguing double comparison to be made with process theology. Because the process tradition is diverse, I shall focus on the thought of process theologian John Cobb, a friend and long-time dialogue partner of Kaufman's. Cobb is an orthodox Whiteheadian in his view of God and nature, for the most part, though he extends Whitehead considerably on the theme of Christology.[9]

The first comparison concerns the conception of creativity in Christology. Cobb and Kaufman both centralize the concept of creativity in their Christologies, but they do so in different ways. In Cobb's case, the fecundity of creativity is such that we can never predict the kind of novel results that might arrive on the scene. In order to answer the question about the person of Christ that Kaufman mutes, Cobb speculates that Jesus was precisely such a novel production within the world process—continuous with the past and yet expressing new dimensions of creativity that human beings had not expressed up until that time. Now, this is by no means a direct translation into process categories of the two natures or the incarnation, which are concepts that have to be profoundly revised to be intelligible in Cobb's framework. But it does furnish a theory of the person of Jesus Christ, and it certainly remains open to the possibility that the classical Christological tradition was onto something in its speculations even if it did not voice them with perfect insight. Kaufman, by contrast, strictly limits his account of Jesus' person to the statement that he was an unusually creative but ontologically ordinary human being.

Kaufman's strict limitations on what creativity can achieve in a personal life differs from Cobb's so sharply chiefly because their ideas of God are not the same. Cobb accepts Whitehead's prehensive theory of causation in which the divine process is a type of creativity that actively lures the world process into the realization of novel and beautiful harmonies. Kaufman's creativity itself has no independent ontological standing relative to the world process; it is the creative

[8] See, for example, Shailer Matthews, *New Faith for Old* (New York: MacMillan, 1936); and *Is God Emeritus?* (New York: MacMillan, 1940).

[9] On his process perspective, see John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977). On his Christology, see Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975).

spontaneity of the world, under another name—and this is by no means a reductionist statement but rather an affirmation that the ontological depth of the world is creativity itself. Where Cobb has a kind of divine consciousness to draw on, Kaufman does not. Cobb's God feels the world and responds to it, but Kaufman's God appears to lack the sensory capacity or focal attention required for active responsiveness (and this is a great virtue, in my view). Thus, it only makes sense that Cobb has options for speaking about the person of Jesus Christ as the uniquely powerful embodiment of a principle of creative transformation that are not available to Kaufman.

An unsympathetic critic might charge that Kaufman's use of the word "God" is deeply misleading, not merely because God is not a personal agent, as most users of the word would assume, but also because there is no conscious divine identity of any sort at all. Such a critic might urge Kaufman to speak instead merely of the spontaneous and mysterious depth of the world process. This probably would involve not a world with a finite age emerging from nothing but an everlasting world of Aristotle's or Whitehead's sort, or of the sort envisioned in contemporary physical cosmology where our Big Bang is but one of infinitely many such events in an everlasting multiverse. This kind of scenario would allow us to dispense with the word "God" altogether, were it advantageous to do so. In fact, I believe Kaufman would be open in principle to doing this, if it were morally advantageous, except that he knows the word "God" has tremendous moral leverage at the current time, and he honestly believes that the real story about the reference of that potent word is the one he tells.

The second comparison also concerns creativity, but this time in relation to God's nature. Cobb's God is definitively good. More than that, the role of God in luring and shaping the world process is often humanly recognizable as good, though just as often God's preferences are not scaled to human interests. There is a lot more to creativity than God in Cobb's (and Whitehead's) view, and not all of it is good in a humanly recognizable way. Some of it is quite hostile to human interests and those of any kind of ordered beauty. Cobb decisively distinguishes God from such hostile and perhaps evil forms of creativity. Kaufman, by contrast, displays a fascinating ambivalence at this point. In fact, this ambivalence has been present in all of his writings that centralize the idea of creativity, all the way back to *In Face of Mystery*. It is amply evident in *In the Beginning . . . Creativity*

and in my view is still present in *Jesus and Creativity*. On the one hand, Kaufman speaks of God as creativity and goes to great lengths to emphasize that creativity is not always friendly to human interests. Yet, on the other hand, he speaks of God as the trajectories of creativity that are serendipitous relative to human interests, thereby distancing God from the nasty events that destroy harmony and peace. Which is it? Is Kaufman ambivalent simply because he has not yet made up his mind on this point? Should not he resolve to join with Cobb and exhaustively identify God with only the serendipitous creativity that typically supports good and wholesome human aspirations? And should not Kaufman repudiate the broader idea of God as creativity itself on the grounds that it is morally and religiously useless?

VII. Creativity Itself versus Serendipitous Creativity

As it happens, I know from several long conversations with Kaufman that he is intimately aware of this issue and is very far from backing unreflectively into a contradiction. In fact, he acknowledges the equivocation problem in his earlier writings and believes that *Jesus and Creativity* at last resolves it. But I contend that he has not yet achieved a perfectly clear way of expressing himself on this most subtle and complex of points.

In *Jesus and Creativity*, Kaufman apparently intends to clarify his thinking on the relationship between creativity itself and the trajectories of creativity that are serendipitous for the human project (see especially 49 and 99-100). God as creativity itself is profusely expressive and "works" along many fecund trajectories. Some of these creative trajectories flourish and others die out. Some creative trajectories naturally support the growth of human civilization and culture, health and happiness. Others are hostile to human interests, such as asteroid collisions, which are an essential part of the process of planetary formation within a solar system. In this case, competing trajectories—planetary formation and ecosystem survival—can achieve a symbiotically creative, even if occasionally prodigiously destructive, convergence. A similar example is the often deadly yet vital symbiosis between bacterial and mammalian life on our own planet. The layering and interconnection of creative trajectories becomes incredibly, awesomely complex in an ecosystem. Overall, the human project is sustained by enough trajectories of creativity that we can call the

creativity manifest in our own history "serendipitous." This is still a fairly dangerous sort of serendipitous creativity, more like the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time than akin to the solicitous care of a doting parent. But it is well worth celebrating and gives good reason to continue to hope and work for a positive human future.

Yet there is no question that, even in *Jesus and Creativity*, this serendipitous creativity does not exhaust God, which Kaufman understands as creativity working itself out in all trajectories, whether or not they are amenable to human interests. So where Kaufman believes that the tension between creativity itself and serendipitous creativity has been resolved, I think this last book clarifies and sharpens the problem. Serendipitous creativity is a part of God (as creativity itself) but not all of God. Serendipitous creativity may be dangerous but it is an existentially meaningful object of religious faith, hope, and love; in particular, it can sustain an approximation of the religious ideal of divine love. By contrast, God as creativity itself is a morally perplexing religious concept, at best, and at worst it ought to be utterly repudiated as morally disastrous for human affairs. Kaufman has clarified this distinction in *Jesus and Creativity* but not yet shown us why it makes sense to apply the word "God," which he clearly wants to be a morally useful concept, to creativity itself rather than strictly to the serendipitous parts of creativity.

Consider clear alternatives to Kaufman's view. Cobb and Whitehead refuse to let the word "God" get dragged down into moral uselessness by aligning it with creativity itself, and they limit its semantic scope to something akin to Kaufman's serendipitous creativity. That strikes me as clear, albeit metaphysically problematic for reasons that I will not venture to explain here. In my own view, and in Robert Neville's theology, God is clearly aligned with something akin to creativity itself, rather than just the humanly serendipitous parts of creativity, even though this threatens to dissociate God from human moral discourse.[10] Again, this is clear, though morally problematic. Kaufman seems to follow the latter path by treating God as creativity itself yet he continues to assign religious and moral relevance to this idea of God—and he does this by focusing on the serendipitous parts and not the rest. Either we love and worship and serve God—all of

[10] See Robert Cummings Neville, *God the Creator: On the Immanence and Transcendence of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968).

God—or we love and serve and worship the humanly serendipitous parts of God, in which case we should apply the word "God" only to those parts of creativity itself. Kaufman requires us to ground our religious beliefs and moral convictions in one part of God knowing that other parts of God contradict them.

I am inclined to read this ambivalence in a generous way, and in two stages. First, in terms native to Kaufman's thought (though not clearly exploited in his two short creativity books), I would argue as follows. In Kaufman's constructivist approach to theology, we cannot know what God is like so we should apply the word "God" in the ways that suit our purposes, making sure we take full responsibility for whatever choices we make. So Kaufman supposes that God is creativity itself, which is the closest he approaches to a full-blown metaphysical theory, but then he would also have to recognize that this usage is useless for the moral purposes to which he believes religions and religious people should commit themselves in our time—especially ecological responsibility and non-violence. So he takes his own theological method seriously and constructs the meaning of the word in a more useful and fruitful way, construing "God" as serendipitous creativity, which is a narrower meaning than his hinted-at metaphysics suggests is ultimately required. When and if circumstances require it, Kaufman would transform the meaning of "God" in a new direction to accommodate the needs of that new context. This no doubt strikes some readers as cynical and opportunistic, and indeed I have heard a number of people analyze Kaufman's theology in these terms. But I believe this criticism is shallow, and can be seen to be shallow once it is recognized that *all people construct their theologies and concepts of God to suit their purposes*. Doing it in the open as Kaufman does is not cynical; it is just unusually honest.

Second, despite this first Kaufmanesque move, we still have to admit that the central moral and religious problem remains: our concept of God draws on both the morally potent serendipitous creativity and the morally ambivalent creativity itself. I suggest that there is a positive way to handle this awkward rhetorical and theological situation. Drawing on the insights of apophatic mystical theologians, it is possible to see our provisional constructions of "God" as way stations along a path that yields a continually broadening and deepening vision of the divine. We construct God as a powerful man, as a supernatural agent, as serendipitous creativity, and in a thousand other ways. But to the one

who follows the path and does not get locked into any one symbolic way station, to the one who understands that the path never ends because the path is the destination—to that one, the lifestyle of traveling the path constructs God as creativity itself. The Madhyamaka School of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy has exquisitely refined conceptual techniques for speaking of a reality that is present ultimately in and through various conventional constructions of it. The Middle Path (the meaning of "Madhyamaka") is constantly strung out between conventional and ultimate reality, so that we can only speak of the ultimate through *uppaya*, or artful means. In Kaufman's language, God may be creativity itself, ultimately, but we can never meaningfully speak in face of mystery in these terms without forsaking our moral obligations to the world around us. Yet whenever we construct "God" in an efficacious way, we find ourselves engaging creativity itself in and through those artful constructions—we engage not just the bits we like or can understand but the whole incomprehensible reality of it.

When viewed within this mystical-theology framework, it appears that Kaufman is not equivocating after all. Rather, he is tracing a theological middle path between conventional and ultimate reality, and using his tracings to invite us to make a difference in our world right now even as we learn to encounter God as the conception-defying spontaneity of creativity itself.