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Theology as Imaginative Construction

Gordon D. Kaufman

It is a pleasure to be here as a guest of the Arts, Literature and Religion Section. I think it is very important that theologians be in conversation with the critics and interpreters of the several spheres of human culture, since theology is, after all, basically an attempt to grasp and understand human life and the human condition. Not, of course, human life in the abstract, but the attempt to grasp human existence in relationship to its ultimate foundation, to the ultimate resource that sustains it, in short, to God. It is impossible, then, to do theology without continuous attention to the broad reaches of human life and activity. And it is in the arts and in literature that these are most fully expressed and represented in every age. Hence, I'm very pleased to be in conversation with you people who are specialists in this area.

But I must immediately make clear that I am not such a specialist. I make no claims to expertise in these fields. Certainly I'm not prepared to argue the pros and cons of the latest critical theories or approaches. Nor do I understand all of the jargon of the critics. I hope, therefore, you'll be patient with me in this conversation. I am here to learn, just as much as anyone else in this room.

I have been asked to sketch briefly my approach to theological method as a way of opening up our discussion. I want it understood that what I am going to say here will be only a very brief and incomplete summary of a position worked out in more detail elsewhere, especially in my *Essay on Theological Method*, and I assume our discussion will concern itself with my larger position, and not confine itself to what I will be able to say in the next few minutes. In the time at my disposal now I will state my views very briefly, largely as proposals. I think I can most succinctly state my position by putting it in terms of a major thesis which I want to explicate:

This paper by Professor Kaufman and the responses were first presented at the 1980 Annual Meeting of the Academy. The responses have been somewhat revised for publication, but the paper is being published as presented. —Ed.

The proper business of theology (*theos-logos*) is the analysis, criticism and reconstruction of the image/concept of God; therefore theology is (and always has been) essentially an activity of imaginative construction.

There are two parts to this thesis. It makes a proposal regarding what theology is about, and, given that proposal, it makes a claim about how theology is done. These two parts can be conveniently explicated, I think, with the help of three subordinate theses, which we can refer to as thesis A, thesis B, and thesis C.

Thesis A. (This is simply the first part of the major thesis which I have just stated.) The proper business of theology is the analysis, criticism, and reconstruction of the image/concept of God.

Elucidation. This thesis may sound tautological, but it has a number of implications which should be made explicit, for it rules out certain traditional ways of understanding the theological enterprise. In the first place, this thesis means that theology is not to be understood as primarily or chiefly exposition or interpretation of the several creeds of the church, or of the ideas of the Bible. Doubtless both the Bible and the creeds are relevant and important for understanding the image/concept of God and for judging what are proper, and what improper, uses or formulations of that symbol, but it is their utility for getting at the notion of God that gives the Bible and the creeds their importance, not the other way around. God is the object of our interest and concern here, and the Bible and the creeds are secondary to and derivative from that primary theological focus.

Other sorts of claims that are sometimes made about theology are similarly affected by our first thesis. It is often held, for instance, that Christian theology is primarily the exposition of Christian doctrines or dogmas, as though these doctrines and dogmas were givens which the theologian must simply accept, and which he or she is then called upon to explain or interpret. But according to our thesis this is once again the wrong way around. The only given (and this is, as we shall see, a very peculiar "given") with which the theologian works is God: all doctrines and dogmas are attempts to express and interpret what we mean by "God," and they have their significance in the degree to which they are successful in doing that.

It is sometimes said that theology is primarily anthropology, an interpretation of the nature of the human, and that therefore the first task in theology is to develop a conception of the human. This is a more complex claim, as we shall see. Though we certainly cannot attain understanding of the meaning and uses of the symbol "God" without simultaneously working out a conception of certain features of human existence, and though different interpretations of the human condition, and different views of human nature, will have diverse implications for what or who we understand God

to be, the primary business of theology—that which distinguishes it from other disciplines—is not working out an understanding of humanity but rather of that supreme focus for human service and devotion, God. And a theological understanding of humanity must ultimately be secondary to and derivative from what we conclude God to be.

If the central business of theology, then, is understood to be the analysis, criticism, and reconstruction of the peculiar image/concept God, it is important for us to get as clear in our minds as possible just what sort of reality or symbol this is, how it is constructed and how properly defined. This brings us to the second part of our major thesis, the question about how theology is done.

I claim that theology is primarily a work of the imagination. This point can be grasped from two sides. On the one hand, by examining more closely what the image/concept of God has meant, how it has been understood, how it has functioned in human life from ancient Israel to the present, we are enabled to see that the only human faculty that could have put together this notion, and which can continue to hold it before consciousness, is the imagination. On the other hand, by looking at what the imagination does for human existence—creating a picture of the world, of the whole context within which human life is lived and within which human existence, therefore, must be understood—we are enabled to see that our God-talk, and everything associated with it (prayer, worship, meditation, repentance, obedience), belongs to a specific worldview, a specific interpretation of human existence, created by the imagination in one particular historical stream of human culture to provide orientation in life for those living in that culture. In other cultural streams the imagination has produced other great world pictures, and life lived in those settings has become oriented in other ways. The image/concept of God, and human existence apprehended as "under God," belong, thus, to one of many different frameworks of orientation for human life which the imagination has created in the course of history.

I wish now to examine these two points with the help of my two further theses. First, a consideration of the peculiar character of the image/concept "God," which, I have suggested, it is theology's proper business to analyze and explicate; and then, finally, a thesis about theology itself as an imaginative constructive activity.

Thesis B. The image/concept of God, a human construct like all other concepts and images, is, and always has been, built out of certain metaphors or images or models drawn from ordinary experience and then extrapolated or developed in such a way that it can serve as the ultimate point of reference for grasping and understanding all of experience, life and the world.

Elucidation. There are two points being made in this second thesis. The first is that by *God* we mean to be indicating what can be called our "ultimate point of reference," that in terms of which everything else is to be

understood, that beyond which we cannot move in imagination, thought, or devotion. Both traditional characterizations of God and more recent notions often make just this point. To refer to God as the "creator of all things visible and invisible," for example, is to say, with the aid of a dualistic mythology, that everything that exists has its source in God's activity and can be rightly understood only in relation to God's purposes for it. To think of God as "lord" of history and of nature is to understand that everything that happens has its ultimate explanation in God's intention and action, that God's sovereign will lies behind the entire movement of nature and history, and that the real meaning of that movement, therefore, cannot be grasped without reference to what God is doing. To speak of God as "the Alpha and the Omega" is explicitly to state that God defines or circumscribes everything else, and there is no way to get beyond God to something more ultimate or more significant. Referring to God as the "whence" of our sense of utter dependence, as Absolute Spirit or the Ground of Being, is to make a similar point from within somewhat different metaphysical commitments. By "God," then, we mean the ultimate point of reference for all understanding of anything; by "God" we mean the ultimate object of devotion for human life.

It is precisely this ultimacy, however interpreted mythically or metaphysically, that distinguishes God from all idols, and it is only because of this ultimacy that God can be considered an appropriate object of worship, a reality to which self and community can properly give themselves in unlimited devotion. To give oneself in worship and devotion to anything less than "the ultimate point of reference"—anything less than God—is to fall into bondage to some finite reality, eventually destroying the self and making true human fulfillment (that is, salvation), impossible. By "God," then, we mean that reality, of whatever sort it may be, which rescues us from the idolatrous enslavements into which we continually fall, and brings human life to its full realization. But it is only in virtue of being the "ultimate point of reference" that God can in this way be the savior from all idols.

If God has this kind of ultimacy—if God is in this way beyond everything finite, not to be identified with any of the finite realities of our experience in the world—then God is absolutely unique, and cannot be grasped or understood through any of our ordinary concepts or images. This is the second point being made in our Thesis B. At best, all of the concepts and images which we use to grasp God and to understand God will be only analogies or metaphors, symbols or models, drawn from our experience in the world; they will never be applicable literally. The concept of God is built up in our minds by playing off one metaphor against another, by criticizing and qualifying *this* image through juxtaposing it with *that* concept, by carefully selecting finite models which will enable us to gain some sense of that behind and beyond everything finite, that which cannot be identified directly with anything finite. Our concept of God, thus—if it is the "ultimate point of

reference" we are attempting to conceive—will never be finished or fixed in some particular form or definition; it will always escape our every definition. As that "than which nothing greater can be conceived" (to use Anselm's formula), God is beyond our every finite conception.

It will be obvious from Thesis B that the way in which God is conceived is always heavily dependent on the models and metaphors we use. A God conceived in terms of the metaphor of creativity or constructive power, for example, will be of a very different sort from a God conceived in terms of violent destructiveness; a God conceived by means of images of loving kindness and merciful forgiveness will be very different from one conceived as impersonal process or abstract unity. There are many different notions of God abroad, and that which distinguishes them from each other are the concrete models and images they employ in putting together their several conceptions. It is obvious, then, that a central task of theology is to collect and catalog the various available images, metaphors and models which have been and can be used for putting together the image/concept of God. If we had time here, we might examine some of these to see how they have functioned in the past in building up the notion of God, as well as to see some of the difficulties and problems to which they give rise. But I must move on instead to my last point, which I will state in the form of Thesis C.

Thesis C. Theology, in its attempt to analyze, criticize, and reconstruct the image/concept of God, is an expression of the continuing activity of the human imagination seeking to create a framework of interpretation which can provide overall orientation for human life; theology is, thus, essentially an activity of imaginative construction.

Elucidation. An overall framework of interpretation which gives meaning to existence is indispensable to humans. We cannot gain orientation in life and cannot act without some conception or vision of the context within which we are living and moving, and without some understanding of our own place and role within that context. Only because of the imagination's power to unify and organize and synthesize into one grand vision what comes to us in experience episodically and in fragments are we enabled to make such attempts to grasp and understand and interpret the *whole* within which human life falls. It is little wonder, then, that in the various separated geographical settings in which humans gradually created great civilizations, quite diverse conceptions of the world, and of the human place within the world, developed, as the imagination generated and followed increasingly different perspectives in the several great cultural and religious traditions.

Among the worldviews created by the imagination to provide orientation for human life was the theistic perspective generated particularly in ancient Israel. Here political and personal metaphors were utilized as the fundamental building blocks in putting together a conception of the world and of the human. The ultimate reality behind all else was a creator-God, a

"king" who had brought the world into being and now ruled it like a "kingdom." The world was envisioned as ordered by God's sovereign will, ruling through earthly intermediaries (kings or prophets or priests) who knew what God wanted done and sought to carry it out. Within this picture human life was to be lived out in response to, and under the love and care of, the just, merciful and almighty God, the fundamental Reality behind all other reality, relationship to whom gives life its only proper orientation and meaning.

The images and concepts with which theology works go back to this original mythopoeic activity in which a world-picture was created depicting all of life as derived from and ordered to God, the divine creator and king. It is, thus, the constructive activity of the imagination in which the fundamental theological images and concepts are rooted. The original mythic vision was, of course, gradually developed and shaped—constructed and reconstructed—under the impact of centuries of prophetic criticism and insight in Israel. And when Greek culture was encountered, religious reflection became philosophically self-conscious and critical, attending more directly to problems of conceptual analysis and systematic conceptual construction; but it continued to work with images and concepts and metaphors derived from its mythic origins.

Although it may be obvious to us that the constructive work of the imagination has in this way always been constitutive of theological activity, theologians have seldom understood themselves to be engaged primarily in imaginatively constructing a theistically-focused worldview; on the contrary, they have largely regarded themselves as attempting to express in human words and concepts what the divine King had objectively and authoritatively given the church or synagogue in revelation. The fact that their work was thoroughly imaginative and constructive in character was simply not recognized. However, with the aid of the contemporary theory of worldviews and conceptual frameworks, and of contemporary theory of the imagination, we are enabled to gain a fuller understanding of the human function and the logical standing of our religious and theological language; and this makes it possible for us to reconceive the theological enterprise as *explicitly* and *essentially* imaginative construction. Theological work now, therefore, can be carried on as a fully critical and self-conscious constructive activity, in a way that has never before been possible.

It is my contention, then, that theology should now be conceived as essentially the attempt to construct imaginatively a theistic worldview. That is, it is the attempt to construct an interpretation or picture of the context within which human life falls, and of the human life within that context, which has *God* as its center or focus, that in terms of which all else is understood. A central part of that task, of course, is to define and to characterize what today we can mean by "God," when "God" is conceived as the ultimate point of reference for the actual world within which we today take ourselves to be living.

I will not elaborate here the way in which this conception of theology requires the theologian to be conversant with, and to take account of, contemporary scientific views of the world and of human life, contemporary political and moral and social problems, and the like. It should be clear that if it is a picture of *our* world and *our* existence which theology is trying to draw, these are indispensable. It should also be clear that the theologian must be touch with the contemporary arts, with their reading of human life, its problems, its possibilities.

But the relation of theology to the arts is much more intimate than that. For literature and the arts are—like theology—also essentially products of imaginative constructive activity. They are attempts to depict our world, or features of our world, and to depict our human existence and its problems, in terms which will enable us to understand them more profoundly, to appropriate them more adequately, and to discern their true character and significance more sensitively. In this respect, though they use other modes of expression than does theology, their objectives and their fundamental human import are closely related. Theology always has drawn on artistic and literary images and insights in its attempt imaginatively to construct a conception of the world, human life, and God; and the creative work of writers and artists has always been heavily influenced by the reflective and interpretive activity of theologians shaping and reshaping the fundamental symbols and metaphors which have nourished faith. There is every reason, therefore, for theologians and artists, and critics of the arts and literature, to be in rather continuous conversation with each other, each aiding the other in our common task of discerning more sensitively and understanding more profoundly what it is to be human in today's world. For this reason I thank you, as a theologian, for taking the initiative to encourage such dialogue within the context of the AAR Section on Arts, Literature and Religion.

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