*This paper is also available as a presentation with slides at* [*https://spark.adobe.com/video/wObkLrvuTK560*](https://spark.adobe.com/video/wObkLrvuTK560)

James M. Gustafson was born in 1925 in Norway, Michigan. Gustafson’s ideas of God and spirit were initially shaped by his father’s work as a minister of the Swedish Covenant Church, an evangelical community drawn from a largely immigrant population. Because of his birthplace (the Upper Peninsula of Michigan), Gustafson learned much as a young boy about nature - including “a deep respect for the natural environment and an almost mystical relation to waterfalls, birch trees, and other aspects.” (Cahill 1996, 179) This natural setting provided context, too, for Gustafson’s social understanding of the world. Rather than understanding the world around him as one in which colonialism influenced the inhabitants, Gustafson relished his immersion in the diversity - ethnic and social - around him.

The Gustafson family moved to rural Kansas in 1939. The new environment - while a traumatic change from the Upper Peninsula - afforded James the ability to observe the dependency of human well-being on factors outside of human influence and the “complex environment whose connections of interdependence and conflict do not always work out to human advantage.” (Cahill 1996, 179) It was through these observations that Gustafson began to focus on the overall plan for creation, which is not just about human interests.

Gustafson began his undergraduate work at North Park College in Chicago, where he met his future wife Louise. During World War II, he served in Burma and India, and he returned home to complete his Bachelor of Science from Northwestern University in 1948. He earned a Bachelor of Divinity from the University of Chicago in 1951 and was awarded a doctorate from Yale in 1955. Gustafson was ordained as a minister in the Congregational Church and is an ordained minister today in the United Church of Christ.

Throughout his schooling, his theology continued to be refined and developed. H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation*, in particular, made a special impact upon James, and this was part of the reason he traveled to Yale to study. He found that Niebuhr’s theological outlook was very similar to his own. Niebuhr encouraged Gustafson to study social philosophy and the sociology of knowledge, especially in their expression of communal experiences of God.

Gustafson’s writings focus primarily on developing a contemporary analytical method for critiquing ethical issues. Primary discussions in *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Church as a Human Community* revolve around the criticality of history and culture in the development of the Christian life. He began exploring moral-ethical decision making approaches within *Christ and the Moral Life* and *On Being Responsible: Issues in Personal Ethics*. In particular, he used excerpts from Karl Barth, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pope John XXIII to help clarify the role of personal responsibility in making ethical decisions. In *The Church as Moral Decision Maker*, Gustafson encourages the church to engage the community in moral discourse. His book *Theology and Christian Ethics* examines the roles of moral education and discernment, of theologian and Scriptures, and of historical and scientific influence in moral decision making; it also examines the relationship between moral life and spiritual life. As his writings developed, Gustafson’s preference for relativism - where moral good is relative to a particular group and time - changed to one of objectivism - where moral good is unchanging.

Gustafson published his landmark work, the two-volume *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, while teaching at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Gustafson’s theology focuses on method. The two volumes exemplify his “ecumenical scope” as Aquinas, Kant, Barth, Rahner, and Ramsey are among the many theologians brought into conversation with his arguments; throughout the pages, Gustafson takes the reader on a tour from the Augustinian piety of the Reformed tradition through the pragmatic tradition, including H. Richard Niebuhr. Gustafson is interested in accounting for the “varieties of religious emotion and affectivity… evoked by many different experiences.” (Cahill 1996, 184) Gustafson concludes the *Ethics* with the simple statement: “God will not be manipulated. / God will not be ignored or denied. / God will be God.” (Gustafson, as cited in Cahill 1996, 184)

Gustafson’s theology is unbound by creedal doctrines, and he is committed to always reviewing and revising because the church must always be reformed. In this sense, he advocates within his theology that the church continually re-examine itself in order to maintain pure doctrine and practice. To Gustafson, continuous re-examination leads to identification of areas in which “church forms and doctrinal orthodoxy” are idolized over God, such as the “privileged place of humanity in the universe.” (Cahill 1996, 178)

Above all other things, Gustafson criticizes a pompous, self-absorbed Christianity that looks to God as the one who fulfills our needs and that God’s creation exists to serve human well-being. To Gustafson, Christian faith and the moral life, should be “centered on worship of God, and response to God’s purposes.” (Cahill 1996, 179) To serve God, we must identify what it is that God requires of us and enables us to do. It is not for us to identify what we require of God. (Lehmann 2005, 5810-5816)

The task of ethics, Gustafson conveys, is to determine how to commune with nature, history, and culture in ways that reflect that God is the ultimate creator. But Christianity has a history of being more centered on humankind than God. In general, Gustafson’s work is critiqued as being a “radical attenuation of traditional Christian theism.” (Reno 1989, 326) With a few exceptions, however, the general consensus is that Gustafson “goes too far” to destroy Christian anthropocentrism.

Gustafson’s critics are varied in their reaction to his work. Regardless of their immediate reactions, they all recognize the importance of his new approach to ethical analysis. But the critics often question Gustafson’s explanations of human suffering and faith, while marveling at his notions of God.

In support of Gustafson’s work, Mary Midgley, an English moral philosopher, points that it is life itself that “forces us to acknowledge that we are amidst nature, not at its center,” a nod to a theocentric view in which God is the ultimate creator. (Reno 1989, 328) But even Midgley finds fault in Gustafson’s theology in that he is “over-committed to Christianity.” (Reno 1989, 328)

Two of Gustafson’s notable students are Douglas Ottati and Stanley Hauerwas, who is considered to be one of the world's most influential living theologians. Hauerwas’ work frequently impacts debate outside of the fields of religion and ethics. He has appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and been recognized outside of academia as an intellectual.

Through his many publications, Gustafson’s impact will continue to have effects after his death. Among his most notable contributions to ethics and theology are the following:

* a method of discernment in which “the complexities, ambiguities, and tragedies of life are confronted,” (Cahill 1996, 187)
* a method that depends on mutual listening, in which “the integrity of the decision-maker is always respected,” (Cahill 1996, 187)
* a model in which humans give one another the space to be in pain mutually,
* a context in which fidelity and forgiveness are part of the genuine experience of knowing God,
* an accountability of theology to other disciplines without the removal of religion, and
* a reality that God is the center of theology and of ethics.

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