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THEOLOGICALLY UNFASHIONABLE PHILOSOPHY

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann

Introduction

Gordon Kaufman has recently taken an "opportunity, as a theologian, to suggest some reasons why the current philosophical discussions of 'evidentialism' may not capture much interest among many contemporary theologians."¹ Many of us on the philosophical side of the line have noticed that theologians generally have not been interested in contemporary philosophy of religion.² The fact that a prominent theologian has taken the trouble to tell us why provides an occasion for examining and perhaps mitigating some of the misunderstandings that now alienate theologians from philosophers.³

In this article of his, "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," Kaufman introduces a notion of "soft," "weak," or "quasi-" evidentialism which he applies in his introductory sketch of Judaism and Christianity, arguing that "it has characterized these faiths throughout their long histories" (p. 36). Kaufman's quasi-evidentialism, it should be noted, is much broader than anything currently at issue in philosophers' discussions of evidentialism.⁴ He presents it as simply "the presupposition that there are clear evidences in human experience and history of God's activity and nature" (p. 37). The presupposition Kaufman identifies as quasi-evidentialism can be recognized as one shared by most anti-evidentialists as well as evidentialists among philosophers of religion, by atheists as well as theists, as long as it is expressed conditionally: if there is a God, there will be clear evidences in human experience and history of his activity and nature. The fact that Kaufman discovers in his quasi-evidentialism the root of the problem of evil (p. 37), the most important objection to theism, is another indication of the pervasiveness of "quasi-evidentialism" in theism, atheism, and philosophy of religion generally. It cannot be considered an ideologically or historically distinctive position.

It is not surprising, then, that the real object of Kaufman's concern turns out not to be any philosophical position but, as he sometimes says, "the current philosophical *discussions*"⁵ over the issue of evidentialism. And what has killed the theologians' interest in the philosophers' discussions (of evidentialism and most other issues in philosophy of religion) is the fact that they "seem to presuppose essentially *traditional* theistic conceptions and



implies that the responsibility for this breakdown in communication lies with the philosophers. For although the theologians know what the philosophers are up to—continuing “to inquire into ‘evidence’ which bear on this or that detail of traditional beliefs” (p. 42)—the philosophers’ preoccupation with traditional conceptions and formulations has prevented them from “informing themselves about, and engaging themselves with, major questions which contemporary theologians find central” (p. 35).

In theory the dialogue could be resumed if the theologians were to return to the traditional territory of theology they abandoned before the philosophers recently occupied it. But in Kaufman’s view that way to reconciliation appears blocked by “an issue to which contemporary theologians have increasingly felt they must address themselves, namely, the problematic character of certain basic presuppositions of this tradition itself” (p. 36). The philosophers have largely missed seeing the largescale, systemic flaws in traditional Christian theology because “the questions considered in the [philosophers’] evidentialist debates are *internal* to the tradition” (p. 39). With the aim of alerting philosophers to these flaws, a first step in reestablishing communication, Kaufman introduces three of the considerations that have led theologians to abandon the theological tradition in which (or at least on which) many philosophers of religion are now working.

Religious pluralism

Kaufman feels that philosophers doing traditional philosophical work on traditional theological doctrines are likely to have missed “the rise of a new consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism” (p. 39), the first of these crucial considerations. Any doctrinal tradition is anti-pluralistic in its natural presupposition that the claims internal to it are true and that claims outside of and incompatible with it are false. And contemporary, traditional philosophers of religion are naturally inclined to take that presupposition seriously, whether they support or oppose the doctrinal claims. Acknowledging that even such tradition-bound philosophical thinking about religious issues exhibits “*awareness* of the plurality of religious traditions and claims,”⁸ Kaufman points out that contemporary theologians “now see the plurality among religious traditions, as well as the enormous pluralism within the Christian tradition, as themselves of *profound human meaning and importance*: what seems required now, therefore, is careful and appreciative study, together with an attitude of *openness*.”⁹

One value of this comparative study characterized by openness is that in learning about other religions one becomes better able to understand one’s own, as Kaufman points out.¹⁰ But, of course, learning about other religions is perfectly compatible with and sometimes even conducive to continuing to take the distinctive doctrines of one religion to be true (or

false), and so this advantage of pluralism is available even to those who work in the philosophically traditional way on the traditional doctrines of a single religion.

But the value of pluralism that has most theoretical importance for Kaufman really is incompatible with truth-claims in behalf of any one religion. The “new consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism” contributes to the theologians’ loss of interest in “the strictly ‘philosophical’ inquiry into the ‘truth-claims’ being made within the tradition” (p. 39), to “a profound questioning of the propriety of making dogmatic claims of any sort with regard to...[the] ultimate ‘reality’ or ‘truth’” of “religious and philosophical traditions” (p. 42). The crucial significance of religious pluralism from his point of view, then, is that it contributes to the religious agnosticism he is fundamentally advocating in this paper as a replacement for “the traditional attempts to make definitive normative claims about ‘Christian truth’” (p. 40).¹¹

Religious pluralism has practical as well as theoretical significance in Kaufman’s view of it. Its “openness” is supposed to entail more sympathy with or respect for various (particularly non-Christian) “overarching religious worldviews” (p. 39), as is especially clear in his advocacy of “a deep humility about the religious and philosophical traditions we have inherited” (p. 42) and in his characterization of the traditional, cognitivist attitude toward doctrinal claims as having a “polemical intent,” as concerned with bringing out an opposed religion’s “diabolical nature” (p. 40), a characterization he associates with Christianity specifically.

Is there really more sympathy for other worldviews in religious agnosticism than there is in traditional Christianity, his chosen paradigm of the opposition to religious agnosticism? Arrogant, intolerant attitudes on the part of individual Christians are not at issue here. There are, obviously, also arrogant and intolerant adherents to agnosticism (as well as to atheism, Buddhism, Marxism, capitalism, etc.). No one worldview has managed to attract all the world’s arrogant and intolerant people. In deciding which position is more sympathetic and respectful, then, the only relevant comparison must be between attitudes entailed by religious agnosticism and those entailed by the doctrinal propositions of traditional Christianity.

Kaufman doesn’t spell out how in his view traditional Christianity might entail lack of sympathy and respect toward other religions. But his rhetoric, as displayed in passages already quoted and, e.g., in his reference to “so-called ‘religious truth-claims’” (p. 40), suggests that he takes the deplorable attitude to stem from the mere fact that traditional Christian theologians (or philosophers) take the propositions of Christian doctrine to be *true*.¹² If the claims of Christianity are true, then, of course, any claims incompatible with them are false. On this basis Christians are committed to judging that many or most claims of other religions are false. And, Kaufman seems to think, to

judge that the claims of other religions are false is to show oneself lacking in sympathy and respect for those religions.

But, of course, rejecting some propositions as false is just an essential aspect of any search for truth. Such negative judgments need not be, and in the best traditions of Christian philosophical theology have not been, “polemical pronouncements” (p. 40) associated with dark motives of any kind. If religious propositions admit of truth and falsity at all, as the tradition maintains they do, a judgment that some religious proposition is false no more entails lack of sympathy and respect than does a correction of another person’s mistake.

But is Kaufman’s religious agnosticism itself in any way less committed to making such judgments than traditional Christianity is? Does his position entail rejecting fewer beliefs of other religions than Christianity does? No; quite the contrary. According to religious agnosticism, no one knows anything about the nature and activity of the deity. But then Kaufman’s position must reject as false all claims made by Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religions to know things of that sort. Christianity, on the other hand, can and traditionally does accept a significant number of the claims made by other religions—that there is a personal deity, for example, or that there are occasions of divine intervention in human affairs. When Aquinas acknowledges that not just Jews and Saracens but even pagans share some religious beliefs with Christians, he typifies this aspect of the tradition.¹³ Religious agnosticism, however, must reject even all such widely shared religious claims as false, because they are or are embedded in claims to know something about God, and on Kaufman’s view any such claim is false. If lack of sympathy and disrespect are inevitable concomitants of the rejection of religious claims, as Kaufman seems to think, then his position is not more sympathetic and respectful than traditional Christianity with regard to other religions, but less.

This aspect of religious agnosticism might help to explain the peculiar fact that in a short essay extolling openness, Kaufman repeatedly takes a superior, dismissive attitude towards adherents of major world religions, characterizing ancient Hebrew views of God, for example, as “crude” and describing the beliefs of the authors of Deuteronomy as “simplistic” (p. 36). And he does not stop with attributing intellectual defects to adherents of other traditions. Kaufman’s position not only implies that the adherents of major world religions are mistaken or self-deceived but explicitly holds that they are *sinful*: “If we try to overcome and control the mystery within which we live—for example,...through religious rituals or practices which promise us a secure place in the ultimate scheme of things—we sin against God, as we try to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny. We must, then, repent” (p. 44). And the form of repentance enjoined by Kaufman is the adoption of religious agnosticism. Since he attributes moral as well as intel-

lectual defects to the adherents of all traditional religions, prescribing his own position as the only antidote, it is hard to see any way in which Kaufman's position is more open, more sympathetic or more respectful, toward other religions than is traditional Christianity (or Judaism or Islam).

It seems important to say one further word about the assumption on which this part of Kaufman's argument rests. Sympathy and respect are attitudes that are shown primarily toward persons, and only in a derivative sense toward systems of belief. To have sympathy seems fundamentally to be a matter of sharing the feelings of some person. To say that one is in sympathy with Marxism, for example, is to say that one is inclined to feel about things as committed Marxists do feel. But on this basis lack of sympathy and disrespect for the adherents of a position are clearly not inevitable concomitants of rejecting the position. Reading here and there in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* will make the point vividly. Most of us do not hold or would even repudiate the beliefs for which some of those people died the horrible deaths described there, but hardly anyone can read those descriptions of noble, patient endurance of suffering without feeling sympathy and respect for those men and women. So it strikes us as a mistake to associate sympathy and respect with sharing or even with refraining from repudiating beliefs, as Kaufman seems to do. In fact, tying our sympathy and respect for persons to the worldviews they hold seems precisely the sort of mistake which has done most to provoke the religious hatreds proponents of openness, like most other people, want very much to avoid.

Christian evil

A second crucial consideration "driving contemporary theologians into major reassessments of traditional assumptions about the Christian tradition" (p. 41) is their "sensitivity to Christian responsibility for certain aspects of the massive evils which confront us today" (p. 42).¹⁴ It is, Kaufman maintains, "Christian faith, Christian ways of understanding the world and the human place within the world..." which bear "some significant responsibility" for "two horrible world wars, the Nazi holocaust and other instances of genocide, the ecological crisis, the use of atomic bombs in World War II and the ever-present possibility of nuclear obliteration of the human race, and so on" (pp. 41-42). Asking themselves "How could Christian practices, attitudes and ideas have led to these horrors?," Christian theologians "have begun to turn with new interest to see what other religious (and humanistic) traditions have to offer" (p. 42). In this way the vision of Christian evil helps to motivate the religious pluralism that is to alleviate it.

As we have seen, Kaufman's advocacy of religious pluralism includes an imputation of intolerance to Christianity, which we have already rejected, in part because it involved a confusion between the religion and some of its

adherents. That same confusion vitiates this consideration. Even if for argument's sake we supposed what we do not believe—that the people who bear the most responsibility for all the twentieth-century evils Kaufman lists would have claimed to be Christians—the supposition would obviously not imply that their religion itself led to those evils. The people responsible for the worst moral evils of our century or any other may, of course, be adherents of absolutely any worldview, even of one that forbids the evil in question, even of religious agnosticism. In perpetrating evil such people may, for example, simply violate the precepts of their worldview (like those who arrogate to themselves the privileges of an elite while subscribing to the ideal of classlessness), or they may append novel precepts to their professed worldview in a way which distorts its character (as Madame Chiang was said to have distorted the Maoist worldview during the cultural revolution).

In order to show that Christianity, rather than certain individual adherents to some version of it, bears significant responsibility for the most flagrant evils of our century, Kaufman would have to overcome a formidable array of obstacles. To begin with, he would have to hold, contrary to what he professes in advocating religious pluralism, that there is a single system of beliefs which counts as Christian, distinct from the distortions added by individual Christians (such as those foisted upon Christianity by the New England Puritans who thought that it entailed a prohibition against kissing one's wife on Sunday, or by those followers of Cromwell who supposed the Bible proved that England was the New Jerusalem). And then he would have to show that this single system of beliefs entails the rightness of moral precepts that enjoin or at least warrant world wars, genocide, ecological irresponsibility, and the like. If there is nothing which can count as *the* Christian system of beliefs, or if the Christian system of beliefs doesn't entail the rightness of such precepts, then it can't be the case that Christianity itself, as distinct from some of its adherents, is responsible for such evils. We see no sign that Kaufman is even aware of the need for overcoming these obstacles, and we are skeptical about the possibility of anyone's producing a sound argument that would achieve that result.

Cultural relativism

The last of Kaufman's three considerations that have led theologians away from contemporary philosophy of religion is "the growing awareness of the way in which all our ideas are shaped by the cultural and symbolic framework of orientation within which we are living and thinking" (p. 42).¹⁵ Cultural relativism of the sort Kaufman bases on this observation has, of course, played a role in ethics for a long time, but Kaufman is prepared to use it epistemologically, as what seems to be the principal support of his religious agnosticism. In the light of this relativism, he thinks, "it does not seem

appropriate to move directly to questions about, for example, the 'evidences' which can (or cannot) be brought forward for certain (usually quite traditional) beliefs about God" (p. 41). Some of what he proclaims as novel in this connection has been part of the background of philosophical theology as long as it has been practiced—e.g., "It is not possible responsibly to discuss questions about 'evidences' respecting *God*—i.e., the *reality*, and not simply what is all too easily assumed to be '*the traditional notion*' of God—without first addressing in some detail these questions about what we are seeking evidences for" (p. 41).

The radical side of this consideration emerges only when he insists that we must renounce "our claims to certainty of knowledge" (p. 44), that "we cannot find definitive answers" to such questions as "Are some religious or philosophical or moral or scientific traditions of more value than others in addressing such matters [e.g., "What is a truly 'good' life, and how would one possibly know?"]", or are all in various ways both helpful and misleading, leaving us in a problematic relativism?" (p. 43). On this view, our arguing, our thinking, even our experiencing, cannot lay claim to objectivity. They are all functions of the particular worldview in which our lives are accidentally embedded, and whether we are rational in accepting that worldview, or whether it is correct, are open questions we cannot answer.

But, of course, if all our arguing, thinking, and experiencing are functions of a necessarily unfounded worldview, then presumably Kaufman's agnostic pluralism is also a function of an unfounded worldview, of one perhaps identifiable as the sophisticated relativism and skepticism familiar to anyone who has been living an academic life in America in recent decades. And if Kaufman's views themselves are just a function of an unfounded worldview, then in telling us that "philosophical or theological ideas in which we take ourselves to be in a position to present conclusive evidences and arguments" are symptoms of sin (p. 44), he is fundamentally only revealing the cultural and symbolic framework that shapes his ideas. How is this biographical information about a particular theologian (or even about all contemporary American theologians) supposed to constitute an argument against traditional Christianity (or Judaism or Islam)? If Kaufman is simply expressing what his cultural framework has shaped him to think, there is no reason for anyone who feels the slightest uneasiness about these views to accept them. After all, not everyone—not even everyone in contemporary academic America—will share Kaufman's cultural framework.

On the other hand, if Kaufman's arguments and reasons have any claim to objectivity, as his earnest recommendation of openness suggests he supposes, then presumably it is false that all our thinking and experiencing are only functions of our cultural framework. And if that skeptical claim is false, then it seems reasonable enough to suppose that Kaufman's position is not the

only one that can lay claim to objectivity, that some religious worldviews might also rightfully do so.

Kaufman's morality and theology

Although Kaufman pleads for religious agnosticism and embraces epistemological (as well as ethical) relativism, at least as regards the big questions, he shows throughout the article, perhaps inadvertently, that there are certain moral and religious claims that he holds as true and apparently supposes he knows. Here are just a few such claims, which he puts forward with no sign of agnosticism or skepticism:

- (1) the Holocaust, the first and second world wars, and our treatment of the environment are all major evils (p. 41);
- (2) "God is beyond our understanding and knowledge" (p. 43);
- (3) "we dare not claim" that any of the ways in which we conceive of God "have been directly revealed by God" (p. 44);
- (4) to "try to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny" is to "sin against God" (p. 44);
- (5) God may be described as "that ultimate mystery in which both our being and our fulfillment are grounded" (p. 44).

Consider (1), which Kaufman puts forward as unquestionably true and known by him to be true. (1) is a moral claim. If there is a moral claim which Kaufman takes to be true and known to be true, what entitles him to say (p. 43) that we can't know whether some moral views are of more value than others in helping us sort out major issues? Plainly he thinks (with good reason) that he knows that moral views that see genocide and reckless exploitation of the environment as evil are of more value than those which see these things as praiseworthy or acceptable.

It seems to us, then, that Kaufman is ambivalent or inconsistent in his agnosticism and skepticism, unwittingly abandoning those attitudes when he has a point to make. In fact, inconsistency seems built into Kaufman's position. (2), Kaufman's basic agnostic claim, belongs to the family of propositions that cannot be known to be true. To claim that God is beyond our knowledge is to make a claim about God's nature, namely, that God's nature has the property of being unknowable by us. But if Kaufman is able to know one property of God's, his claim falsifies itself.¹⁶ If one of God's properties is knowable, namely, the property of being unknowable by us, then it can't be the case that God is entirely beyond our knowledge. And any known property, even the property of transcending our knowledge and understand-

ing, can be shown to entail further properties—e.g., that God is not a finite spatio-temporal entity.

But when he does make a positive point, Kaufman is, no doubt inadvertently, entering into the evidentialist discussions he deplors; for in such cases we can and should ask him for his evidence. For a theological example of this sort, consider (4), the claim that we sin against God when we try to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny, and consider it in the light of (2), “God is beyond our understanding and knowledge.” How can Kaufman know that it is not God’s will that we should strive for ultimate independence? Not on the basis of any revelation, as (3) indicates; and certainly not on the basis of any philosophical inquiry, regarding which it is a sin—this very sin—to think it yields any understanding or knowledge of God. (The sort of thing said about (4) can also be said about (5) in the light of (2) and (3).)

In repudiating philosophical theology’s characteristic concern with evidence, with the rationality and truth of religious beliefs, Kaufman advocates instead a program of preliminary questions, such as “How should God be conceived today?” (p. 41). But, of course, not even he can sustain this purely interrogatory attitude toward the subject matter of his field. And to the extent to which he has and employs a conception of God, he is subject, along with all the quasi-evidentialist philosophers of religion, to demands for evidence in support of his position. In these circumstances he would do better to abandon at least this aspect of his opposition to philosophical theology and share our worries about rationality and truth, entering into evidentialist discussions no longer unwittingly and inadvertently.

Conclusion

Kaufman deplors the lack of communication between philosophers and theologians; so do we. Kaufman seeks to remedy the lack by inviting the philosophers to come away from working at the traditional problems of theology, to join the theologians in their wanderings, in their programs of preliminary questions. We think the most powerful of the motives prompting those wanderings, those regressions to the stage of preliminary questioning, was the theologians’ growing suspicion that the traditional doctrines could not be taken seriously by intelligent, sophisticated, twentieth-century academics. But now, working in the field from which the theologians have wandered, philosophers who do take the doctrines seriously invite the theologians to return. We could use their help.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. Gordon D. Kaufman, "Evidentialism': A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 35-46; p. 35.

2. Alfred Freddoso expresses very well the philosophers' view of the rift between the two naturally allied disciplines: "Some contemporary theologians dismiss the classical discussions of the existence and nature of God as out of step with and unworthy of serious consideration by so-called 'modern man.' ... we find an attitude of distrust toward any sort of metaphysical reflection on the ostensible theological claims of the Judaeo-Christian tradition... In light of this it is at least mildly surprising that a growing number of Anglo-American philosophers, many of them highly distinguished, are finding the classical discussions of God's existence and nature to be fertile sources for critical reflection on issues in the philosophy of religion. ... At a time when many theologians have in effect discarded as irrelevant large chunks of traditional philosophical theology, it may be the unlikely lot of contemporary philosophers to crack open once again the lonely dust-covered volumes" (*The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. A. J. Freddoso; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983; Introduction, pp. 1-2; 10). It is important to note that not all theologians have turned away from contemporary philosophical theology. For instance, two theologians, Ronald Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., recently organized a highly successful cooperative conference of philosophers and theologians on some of the most difficult of the traditional issues, the results of which have been published as *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Feenstra and Plantinga; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

3. Kaufman naturally claims to be speaking only for himself among theologians; but he also says, quite plausibly, that his position is not "completely idiosyncratic" (p. 35). Without forgetting his disclaimer, we find it convenient to write as if Kaufman's position could simply be taken to be the position of contemporary theologians generally.

4. See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, ed. R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 109-38; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Once More Evidentialism—This Time, Social," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988), pp. 53-74; Stephen J. Wykstra, "Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of 'Needing Evidence,'" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 2nd edn., ed. W. L. Rowe and W. J. Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1989), pp. 426-37; Norman Kretzmann, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism" in a forthcoming volume edited by Kelly Clark.

5. P. 35; emphasis added; cf. the article's abstract, with its reference to "recent discussion of 'evidentialism'"; also p. 36.

6. P. 35; emphasis added; cf. p. 36: "these discussions continue to take for granted assumptions which are today in question for a good many theologians."

7. Although Kaufman offers some observations about religions other than Christianity—Judaism in particular—he recognizes that the theological tradition most influential in contemporary philosophy of religion is Christian, and he describes himself as a Christian theologian (p. 44). Our discussion, like his, will therefore focus on Christian theology.

8. P. 39; emphasis added.

9. P. 40; emphasis added.

10. "It is expected that comparison with other symbols and practices—for example, those of Buddhists or Jews (or Marxists)—will illuminate dimensions of Christian faith and life and symbols which have remained hidden to direct *internalist* approaches to theological questions" (p. 40).

11. On p. 44 he says of the position he advocates that it "must inevitably involve a certain agnosticism," but the religious agnosticism we ascribe to him and focus our discussion on permeates his article well before he acknowledges it by name.

12. See, e.g., p. 40; also the reference on p. 41 to "a powerful Christian sense of divine authorization and thus superiority over other religions."

13. See, e.g., *Summa theologiae* II-IIae q. 2, a. 8.

14. In our discussion we are reversing the order of Kaufman's second and third considerations.

15. For other versions of this consideration see pp. 35, 40, and 45.

16. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1980. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 13-26.

17. We are grateful to Jeffrey Hause, Thomas V. Morris, and Alvin Plantinga for comments on an earlier draft.