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# ON THE ISSUES DIVIDING CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS AND THEOLOGIANs

James A. Keller

Recently Gordon Kaufman published an article in *Faith and Philosophy* in which he gave some reasons why contemporary theologians are not much interested in the issue of evidentialism. Still more recently Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann replied to it. In this paper I argue that their reply does not engage the issue which concerns the theologian. I try to define that issue and show what implications it has for the usefulness to Christian theologians of the work of Christian philosophers of religion.

Recently in an article in *Faith and Philosophy* Gordon Kaufman gave some reasons why contemporary theologians are not much interested in the issue of evidentialism.<sup>1</sup> Still more recently Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann replied in the same journal.<sup>2</sup> I want to continue the discussion. The burden of my remarks will be that, contrary to Stump and Kretzmann, a variety of factors may well render theologians like Kaufman justified in having little interest in what philosophers like them are doing (though they also may be justified in what they are doing).

## *Kaufman's Article*

Kaufman's article is set in the context of his observation that though there is considerable ferment in both contemporary Christian theology and contemporary philosophy of religion, the theologians and the philosophers engaged in each of these enterprises do not seem to be in much communication with each other. So Kaufman proposes to explain why he (and presumably some other theologians) do not have much interest in what is going on in contemporary philosophy of religion; he focuses on the current discussion of evidentialism as a particular issue much discussed by philosophers of religion and gives three reasons why theologians have little interest in it. I point out the broader context of his discussion because it will be important for my later comments.

Kaufman begins with the claim that "evidentialist arguments are addressed to specific beliefs held by adherents of a particular religious tradition: does the evidence favor belief A or...weigh against it?" (39). Even recent questionings of the rational appropriateness of the demand for evidence, he adds, also involve evidentialist arguments. Such arguments are internal to the tradition in the sense that they assume that the claims, concepts, and terminology



of that tradition frame the crucial issues; the only matter to be decided is whether the claims are true or false. But "wider questions, about the nature of traditions or worldviews themselves and how these function in human experience and thinking, do not ordinarily come up for direct consideration in these discussions" (39). But many theologians have become very concerned with precisely these wider issues, so evidentialist arguments hold little interest for them. Kaufman states that there are many reasons for this shift in interest among theologians; he gives three.

The first of these is an increased consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism. In the past most Christians have responded to other faiths by claiming that Christian beliefs are true and all others which contradict them are false. But now many theologians are appreciative of other religions (and of other traditions within Christianity) and believe that their own understanding of Christian faith and life may be illuminated by things learned from adherents of other traditions (both inside and outside Christianity).

Closely related to this reason is the second: "the emergence of new theories about the ways in which cultural and linguistic symbolic or conceptual frames shape all our experiencing and thinking" (40). This, along with the new attitude toward pluralism has made theologians dubious about the status of truth-claims in religions. The function of religious language has come to be seen as not so much the making of truth-claims but the presenting of a framework within which meaning for human life can be found (41). So theologians have become concerned with questions like how certain concepts originated, how they functioned in human life, and what the consequences were of employing them. One result is that theologians have become very tentative about all ways of conceptualizing the central realities in the Christian faith—e.g., God and Christ; Kaufman can even speak of a sort of agnosticism about these realities (44). Not surprisingly, they also doubt the traditional way(s) of conceiving these realities. If this is the position of the theologians, they will have little interest in evidentialist arguments about some particular conception.

The third reason is the confrontation with appalling evil in the twentieth century—e.g., world wars, the holocaust, the ecological crisis. Combined with this has been the conviction that Christian faith bears "some significant responsibility" for most of those evils. This has led theologians to inquire into what other traditions might have to offer and to look with new intensity at the ways "Christian symbols, practices and institutions have actually functioned in human life" (42).

Kaufman concludes by sketching what he believes to be the context within which many theologians approach questions having to do with primary religious symbols like God. They feel that at the base of all existence is a profound mystery about which their symbols speak, but they have no certainty of the aptness of the concepts used to conceptualize it or of the correctness

of any of the claims made about it, including traditional ones. Moreover, they believe that claims to certainty of knowledge suggest a sinful desire to control that mystery at the base of our humanity, the mystery Christians name *God*.

### *Stump and Kretzmann's Reply*

Stump and Kretzmann present Kaufman's three reasons and respond to each. To his point about religious pluralism, they note that pluralism does not preclude the truth of certain religious claims, nor does belief in the truth of the doctrines of one's own religion necessarily lead to intolerance toward contradictory doctrines or to lack of sympathy toward those who believe them. They also point out that his agnosticism about God implies that he must deny religious claims made by non-Christian theists as well as those made by Christian theists, so his position also implies the falsity of the truth-claims of other religions. To his point about Christian responsibility for the evils of the world, they question whether Christians are in fact responsible. But more importantly, they claim that even if Christians were responsible, that would not show that Christian doctrines are not true, for many people act in ways which violate the precepts of their worldview.

However, their main attention is focused on responding to Kaufman's point about relativism and to the agnosticism about God to which it leads. His cultural relativism is, they say, self-defeating. What is the status of the claim that all truth-claims are relative to a conceptual system? If that is relative to Kaufman's conceptual system, why should philosophers be concerned with it? If it is a non-relative claim, then non-relative truth-claims are possible. They also claim that Kaufman's practice is not consistent with his relativism. For example, he makes claims about what is really evil (the holocaust, the ecological crisis); and he tells us things about God, such as that God is unknowable and that to "try to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny" is to 'sin against God'" (336, citing 44).

They conclude by suggesting that the most powerful of the motives which have led theologians to turn to preliminary questions about the role of worldviews and away from the traditional doctrines discussed by contemporary philosophers of religion is "the theologians' growing suspicion that the traditional doctrines could not be taken seriously by intelligent, sophisticated, twentieth-century academics" (337). Implicit in this remark is the suggestion that the discussions by contemporary philosophers of religion show that this suspicion is unfounded. Therefore, Stump and Kretzmann invite the theologians to join them in these discussions.

### *Disagreements about the Fundamental Issue and Their Implications*

Both Kaufman's article and Stump and Kretzmann's response are richer than my brief summaries convey, but I believe that I have at least outlined the

essence of the positions of each. In the space which remains I want to assess the reply and to defend a position like Kaufman's or at least to respond to Stump and Kretzmann in a way sympathetic to what I believe to be the theologian's concerns. Since my response involves some interpretive modifications and additions to Kaufman's article, I would not want to claim that it is exactly his position, but I think it captures the spirit of what he was suggesting. At least it will convey my understanding of what he was driving at and of the context of contemporary theology which his article reflects. Thus, even if my additional comments do not represent his position, I hope that they will contribute to an understanding of the differences between contemporary theologians and contemporary philosophers of religion.

First, a brief assessment. I think that Stump and Kretzmann's response is correct, given what they understand to be the issues. The fact of pluralism does not logically imply that no position is true, nor does the belief that one's position is true necessarily imply that one will be intolerant of those who hold other positions. Failure to live by a code does not show that the precepts of the code or its associated doctrines are false. To say that we can know nothing about God implies that we know at least one thing about God—*viz.*, that God is a reality about which we can know nothing. As logical points these are unexceptionable. If these are the issues, Stump and Kretzmann have rebutted Kaufman's reasons. And yet I cannot shake the feeling that they have not engaged the issues as Kaufman understands them. This is a rather bold claim on my part. Let me try to defend it by suggesting what I think their rebuttal overlooks.

I suggest that theologians of today are greatly concerned not about truth and truth-claims, but about the effects in the lives of believers which are associated with adhering to various beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Religion, they might say, is primarily concerned not with giving us truths about God but with mediating our salvation. From this perspective, the truth of the beliefs is secondary to the effects which holding them have in the lives of believers, in the community of believers, and in the larger world of which believers are a part.

That this is Kaufman's position, or more generally that of many theologians today, is not as central in his article as I make it in my comments. But there are indications in Kaufman's article that he would agree, most notably his references to the theologian's concern for the way religious symbols actually function in the religious community (42) and for the consequences of their employment (36); his mention of alleged Christian responsibility for evils as one of the three reasons he discusses; and his claim that the function of religious language "has come to be seen not so much as the making of truth-claims but the presenting of a framework within which meaning for human life can be found" (41). However, I make this claim also on the basis of my own reading of contemporary theologians.<sup>4</sup>

Assume for a minute that this is the theologian's underlying concern. Note its

implications for the points on which Stump and Kretzmann criticized Kaufman. First, consider their point that failure to live by a code does not show that the code or its associated doctrines are false. Of course not. But if those who profess a code and its doctrines often do not live by it and if others who do not profess the code often live in ways which its professors should, then one has to wonder whether professing the code has any point. If, for the sake of argument, Christianity does not motivate most of its adherents to resist great evils, then what does it matter if its doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are true?

Second, consider the point about religious pluralism. Of course, simply being convinced of the truth of one's position does not logically imply that one must be intolerant. But there has been much intolerance among and by Christians: the persecutions of Christians of different beliefs, the armed struggles over religious differences during and after the Reformation, the tendency of many Christian groups to use the power of the state to support their own versions of Christianity, the persecutions of Jews, the doctrine widely held among certain Christians for centuries that falsehood has no right to exist. Perhaps these were all aberrations of Christianity, but one has to wonder why they were so numerous and deep-seated. Why was Christianity so slow to deal effectively with them? Was there something about Christian doctrine that blinded Christians to these aberrations (assuming that they were aberrations)? One might understand also why some theologians might conclude that in our time the best way to prevent such aberrations is to stress the mystery of God, how inadequate our conceptions of God's nature are, and how tentative and undogmatic must be our profession of them.

Third, consider the point about agnosticism about God. To say that we can know nothing about God is equivalent to saying that God is a being about whom we can know nothing and thus does make a claim about God. But I think that what I take to be Kaufman's basic point on this matter can be made in a way which escapes that criticism. Rather than saying that we can know nothing about God, he might say that (at least under the present conditions of human existence) we can never show (or, perhaps, justifiedly claim to know) that our claims about God are true. This approach at least is not so obviously open to the charge of inconsistency. Some support for this proposal can be found in the way Kaufman puts his point about God's being the mystery which is the source and context of our humanity. He often puts it in the formal mode, not the material mode, saying "*God* is the name Christians give to this mystery," rather than saying "God is this mystery."<sup>5</sup> Kaufman's repeated mention of the issue of how we conceptualize God also is consistent with this proposal.

### *Relativism, Cultural Conditioning, and Confessional Theology*

But this proposal does not resolve all the inconsistencies which arise in connection with his agnosticism about God and more generally with his

relativism, for he also says that doing certain things is a sin against God. Thus he implies that he knows enough about God to know that something is a sin against God. One possible response to this difficulty is to distinguish matters on which we are more justified in being confident from those on which we are less justified.<sup>6</sup> To judge from other things Kaufman says in the article, he is far more confident in his judgments about what is evil than he is in his doctrines about the nature of God. I suggest that he might also say that he is justified in having these different degrees of confidence. Perhaps this difference is justified because it is far easier to determine that certain things are destructive of human beings and of the world they inhabit than it is to determine the nature of God (i.e., of the mystery which is the source and context of our humanity); the former realities are available for our observation and study while the latter is not.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the different conceptual systems people use seem to have far more influence over how they conceptualize “the mystery which lies at the base of their humanity” than it does over what things they consider to be destructive of human beings and other creatures. (To be sure, there are differences over what actions are overall evil, but these arise primarily because of differences over empirical claims—e.g., the Jews caused this or that situation in Germany or a certain practice does not threaten any long-range damage to the environment.) The theologian may also feel far more justified in his judgments about what sort of actions and attitudes are harmful to his relationship with the mystery at the ground of his being than he is about how to conceptualize that mystery, for the former judgment can be based on his experience of ruptures in that relationship while the latter is far less directly related to his experience.

Re-expressing Kaufman’s point in terms of degrees of justification for various beliefs enables us to understand why the theologian may feel little confidence in the correctness of even his own ways of conceptualizing God. When he reflects on the important role which conceptual schemes inherited from one’s culture play in conceptualizing the ultimate, he may conclude that the task of showing the correctness any one belief formulated in terms of any one conceptual scheme is so vast and difficult an undertaking that no one should feel much justified confidence about any formulation. Therefore, he might decide to focus his energies on matters on which it seems to him more likely that he can reach a correct judgment—or at least one about whose correctness he can feel more justified confidence.

Of course, his own judgments about the nature of God are not based on nothing. In part they are based on his experience of that reality. But his experience far underdetermines what is claimed about the nature of God. Far more of what is said about the nature of God by theologians and by Christian philosophers is determined by the Christian tradition as they have received and understood it, by other factors in their cultures, and by their own reflec-

tions. In the case of Stump and Kretzmann in particular, much of their work is a careful mining and refining of ways of understanding God which were current in the High Middle Ages. Other Christian philosophers work out of a Reformed or Episcopalian tradition. Because these traditions tended to accept such traditional doctrines as Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology, such Christian philosophers may believe it worthwhile to try to explicate and show the internal consistency of the claims involved in these doctrines.

But the theologians of whom Kaufman speaks may think this whole enterprise is of little value or interest, a point noted by Stump and Kretzmann in their conclusion and attributed to the theologian's suspicion that intellectually sophisticated believers can no longer take these doctrines seriously. However, I believe that this explanation is too narrow. I suspect that the problem is more of a general feeling that the traditional formulations are not what William James termed "live options." Theologians, like philosophers, have their reasons, sometimes rational, sometimes simply causal, for finding something to be a live option or not to be one. I could illustrate this point with any of several traditional doctrines, but I shall use the Nicene Trinitarian formulation. This will allow me to illustrate also what I understand to be Kaufman's point about the conceptualities and worldviews in terms of which doctrines are formulated.

The Nicene formulation employs a conceptuality of *ousiai* and *hypostaseis*, which was current in the fourth century; today's theologian may find this foreign to his own way of thinking about the world or even incomprehensible. He may find other ways of expressing his understanding of God and Christ more illuminating and helpful. Or the theologian may believe that the doctrine lacks Biblical support, or that it represents too great an extension into speculative categories for him to have much confidence in it. Or he may think that factors of imperial politics played too large a role in the outcome for us to have great confidence in the result. For any or all of these reasons, he may doubt that being a Christian *requires* this way of understanding God's presence in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. To be sure, he must acknowledge that the creed was accepted for centuries by most professing Christians, but he might point out that particularly in ages which lack the interest and tools of modern historiography, promulgated traditions would tend to be accepted, for no one would know how they came to be accepted, and contrary positions would tend not to be preserved; moreover, he might doubt that the acceptance of these traditions, as opposed to such Biblical formulations as that God was in Christ and God is present in the church by the Spirit, actually played a significant role in the lives of believers and of the church. For these and other reasons the theologian might not be interested in evidentialist arguments about the Nicene doctrines. Of course, all these reasons are controversial; I suggest them not as conclusive reasons against the Nicene doctrines but as possible motivations for not being interested in discussions aimed at refining



and/or supporting and/or disproving these doctrines. To be sure, if the doctrines were disproved, that might remove all but historical interest in them. But the theologian whom Kaufman represents may not even be interested in attempting a disproof, any more than most of us are interested in attempting a disproof of various Buddhist or Hindu doctrines. We all think our time is better spent elsewhere; moreover, we lack the expertise, and we are not interested in gaining it. As James pointed out, much of what we find to be live or dead options is not the result of careful prior consideration of those options. Indeed, we must find an option live before we give it careful consideration.

My suggestions about theologians *vis a vis* Nicene Trinitarianism were intended to be illustrative of suggestions which might be made in relation to many traditional doctrines. I believe that analogous reasons give theologians like Kaufman motivation for doubts about most traditional doctrines. Such doubts would be enhanced if one compared doctrines about God's nature formulated at various times and found important ways in which they reflect the cultures of the formulators, thus supporting (though not proving) the generalization that this is always true.<sup>8</sup> If I am right about these alleged reasons and motivations, it is understandable why the theologian may very well regard the traditional doctrines about God which occur in evidentialist arguments as simply culturally conditioned formulations of beliefs by which some Christians express aspects of their faith. Presumably the Christian theologian will base his understanding of God on *some* elements in the Christian tradition and perhaps on other elements in his culture (as the church fathers did in the Nicene Creed), but the elements might not be the ones which have been important for many prior Christians. For the total Christian tradition is far richer than any particular formulations, and the theologian may find that other aspects of the tradition or other ways of conceptualizing God and Christ are more relevant or more adequate to his own Christian experience. And those will be the topics on which he works. (Philosophers do the same thing.) The theologian will almost certainly have some beliefs about such doctrinal matters as the nature of God and Christ, by which he expresses his faith. But the theologian might well regard them also as simply culturally conditioned formulations of beliefs by which he expresses his faith. Therefore, he may not have much interest in evidentialist arguments for or against even the doctrinal formulations he employs. He will be more interested in the effect which believing them has on the lives of Christians than he is in proving them; he may even think the latter task impossible or at least so difficult as not to be worth attempting, or he may not even think that *correct* and *incorrect* are appropriate terms of assessment for beliefs about God's nature. This way of practicing theology may be termed *confessional* rather than *dogmatic*, for the theologian is confessing the understanding by which he lives his life rather than trying to prove its truth or its superiority over all other conceptions.<sup>9</sup> If he defended his beliefs

at all, he would do so by showing their roots in some part of the tradition (especially in the Bible) and their role in enabling him to live a Christian life.

### Conclusion

Of course, the theologian may be wrong in his conviction that certain doctrines are only culturally conditioned formulations of beliefs and in the related beliefs I mentioned. But no one can explore every issue. Each of us must focus on some issues; our choice of issues will be based on many convictions which we have not examined but which we accept. They will also be based on factors which are biographical. Many Christian philosophers today are interested in evidentialist arguments about beliefs related to our faith. That we are interested in such arguments may have more to do with our personalities and profession than with our understanding our faith; philosophers *qua* philosophers tend to be interested in arguments about matters of truth and meaning. Analogously, the contemporary theologian's interest in how concepts and beliefs arise and develop and in how they relate to life may have more to do with his personality and profession than with his understanding of his faith; I have already claimed that theologians *qua* theologians today tend to be interested in how religious belief contributes to (and expresses) the transformation of one's life.

This last point suggests that some differences between the issues which concern contemporary Christian philosophers and those which concern contemporary theologians may be the result of differences between the professions as well as the other sorts of differences we have considered. Theologians may be more interested in how beliefs affect people's lives and attitudes than they are in the accuracy of our understanding of the mystery at the ground of our being. Even if the Christian philosopher thinks that the theologian is interested in an important topic, she may claim that a more accurate understanding of that mystery will promote the desired transformation of lives and attitudes. The philosopher may also claim that her special expertise is dealing with concepts and with arguments about the matters in question; on this point I think the theologian must agree. As for the claim that a more accurate grasp will promote the desired transformation, the theologian might have two responses. First, he might ask if there is any evidence that this is so. Have the people with the greatest understanding of these matters been greatly transformed by their understanding? Second, he might wonder whether other means of promoting transformation might be even more useful, either for certain people or for most people (or perhaps even for everyone except highly skilled philosophers and theologians). The remarks in this paragraph seem to support the conclusion that division of labor based on different abilities and interests will limit somewhat the extent to which philosophers and theologians are in communication with each other, at least if, and as long as, their interests are as different as I have suggested.

The prospects for close interest in each other's work are also diminished by the different doctrinal convictions out of which contemporary theologians like Kaufman and contemporary philosophers of religion like Stump and Kretzmann work. As I suggested earlier, neither finds the doctrines involved in much of the work of the other to be a live option. I suggested possible motivations for the theologian's attitude; I have not explored reasons for the philosopher's attitude, but perhaps it is simply that none of the theologian's reasons apply to her. And it may well be that she is justified in investigating what she does and in having little interest in the theologian's investigations, even if the theologian is also justified in not being interested in her work. In any event, the division is not absolute. There are theologians who share the doctrinal convictions of philosophers like Stump and Kretzmann and there are Christian philosophers of religion who have doubts about the traditional doctrines and who share the confessional stance of theologians like Kaufman. Members of these two groups may help promote some mutual influence between theologians like Kaufman and philosophers like Stump and Kretzmann, but right now they are a minority.

*Wofford College*

#### NOTES

1. "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6/1 (January 1989), pp. 35-46. (Numbers in parentheses in discussions of Kaufman's ideas refer to this work.)

2. "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy," *Faith and Philosophy*, 7/3 (July 1990), 329-39. (Numbers in parentheses in discussions of Stump and Kretzmann's ideas refer to this work.)

3. Although I express this generalization unqualifiedly, I do not intend it to apply to all theologians today or even to all Christian theologians. For I lack sufficient acquaintance with the views of non-Christian theologians to offer generalizations about their positions or motivations. Nor do I think that the generalization is true of even all Christian theologians. But I suggest that it is true of at least most of those Christian theologians whose position Kaufman's original article represents. Unless otherwise noted, henceforth *theologians* refers to them. Also, for the sake of convenience, I will use masculine pronouns to refer to theologians and feminine ones to refer to philosophers, though both groups include both sexes.

4. I cannot even begin to give adequate documentation for this claim. But consider the importance of movements in contemporary theology which take the center of Christianity to be ending oppression and achieving a more just order: liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, and ecological theology. Consider too John Hick's judgment that the major religions are "centrally concerned with a radical transformation of the human situation," which Christians term *salvation* ("Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy*, 5/4 [October 1988], p. 365). I suggest that Hick's judgment expresses

the views of many contemporary theologians, notably those whom Kaufman exemplifies. Such a concern has important roots in the Christian tradition (e.g., Matt 7:20-21).

5. He uses the formal mode in several places: e.g., “the ultimate mystery, a mystery which we may (in faith) choose to call ‘God’” (44); “the image/concept ‘God’ seems intended to symbolize that—whatever it might be—which brings true human fulfillment” (43); and several similar locutions on pp. 43-44.

6. This too is more hinted at than explicitly developed in the article. But Kaufman speaks of a “sphere which we humans can (and should) largely control” (44) in contrast with something like the sphere of God, which humans cannot and should not try to control. Moreover, the confident way he uses historical findings as well as this quote suggest to me that he would distinguish the degree of justification we have for our judgments on different subjects.

7. This distinction might also provide a basis for a reply to another inconsistency with which Stump and Kretzmann charge Kaufman: “claiming that we can’t know that some moral views are of more value than others in helping us sort out major issues” (336) while at the same time confidently pronouncing certain things (e.g., the holocaust and environmental damage) as evils. I suggest that Kaufman might claim to be more justified in making judgments about particular evils than in holding general theories about the nature of good and evil or about purported underlying causes of particular evils (e.g., the Christian idea of *original sin* or the Buddhist idea of *tanha* [craving]).

8. This suggests a reply to Stump and Kretzmann’s criticism of Kaufman’s claim that we dare not claim that our concepts of God were directly revealed by God (44). They charge him with inconsistency, for his claim implies that he knows that God did not directly reveal them (336). But suppose it is true that concepts of God reflect the cultures of their formulators. Then either the concepts were chosen by their formulators or God used concepts which would fit well with the culture when God revealed various things. In either case we should expect to think and speak about God by means of concepts which fit our culture, not concepts formulated in different cultures. Moreover, if we are therefore not obliged to use the latter, the statement that we dare not claim that any of our concepts of God were directly revealed might be one way to resist any who would use the contrary claim as a basis for requiring that we use certain concepts. Once again, the focus on the effects of holding certain beliefs would lend additional justification to Kaufman’s way of stating his claim, even if it is inconsistent with the claim that we know nothing about God. (Of course, it would not be necessary to state the claim as Kaufman has; my point is only that his way of stating it becomes understandable and, I think, less objectionable than Stump and Kretzmann find it.)

9. This confessional approach implies that Stump and Kretzmann are not quite right in claiming that the relativist theologian must deny the truth-claims of adherents of other traditions and thus was no more tolerant than were non-relativists. For he need not unambiguously deny their claims. While he must deny that they are justified in claiming to have so accurate an understanding of the ultimate mystery as to imply that everyone else should adopt their understanding, he can grant that they may well have a way of understanding that mystery which enables them to relate as effectively and as savingly to it as does the Christian’s way. Whether this would be enough to satisfy them depends, of course, on how they understand their own claims.