

My Life and My Theological Reflection: Two Central Themes

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I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view. –Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

In these remarks I take up two central themes with which I have been preoccupied throughout my life, and which are expressed in the development of my theological reflection from a very early age on: the problem of God – the questionableness of all our thinking and talking about God (probably going back to before my high school days); and my life-long concern that human relations should be pervaded, above all, by loving, caring, responsible attitudes and activities (going back at least to the seventh grade). The more visible of these two themes in my writing has been my attempt to get clear, and to make new proposals respecting, the problematics of God-talk today; but underlying and deeply shaping my thinking about God have been my moral commitments, my convictions about how we humans should live.²

I.

I have no memory of a specific moment when the question of the intelligibility and plausibility of the central symbol of our western religious traditions, *God*, became an issue for me. But perplexity about what has been taken by Christians and many others to be the fundamental reality with which we humans have to do – a reality strongly affirmed in my home and community – has been with me as far back as I can remember, sometimes becoming quite strong, sometimes receding, but always there. The “God is dead” theological movement of the 1960s sharply focused this question for me, and from that point on I felt

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increasingly driven to address it directly. The so-called neo-orthodox theology which had been dominant in the United States among Protestants for several decades, and which I had more or less accepted in graduate school as the proper basis for my theological work, simply dodged the major issue of how God's reality was to be understood. It was necessary, therefore, to re-think from the ground up how theology was to be done.

I thus began what was to become a fairly long period of reflection on questions of theological method: What is going on in theological work? With what sorts of themes does it deal? What kinds of claims can theologians properly make? What alternative methods and procedures are available to theologians? This culminated in the development of a conception of theology that I call *imaginative construction*; and in consequence I have been led to re-think the whole Christian theological enterprise from this standpoint. A central feature of this reconception is my proposal that the traditional metaphors of creator, lord, and father – on the basis of which the western image/concept of God has been largely constructed – be replaced by the metaphor of *serendipitous creativity*, as we seek to construct a conception of God more appropriate to today's understandings of the world and of our existence in it.

I grew up in a Mennonite home and community; my second life-long concern, that human relations should always be *loving* ones – even with those whom we take to be “enemies” – was a central Mennonite conviction. Going the second mile, turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:39-41), was strongly emphasized by my parents, and particularly well exemplified by my mother's demeanor and activities both at home and beyond; she was a much-loved person by all who knew her. It was a conviction also strongly emphasized in the community in which we lived, the campus of Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, a Mennonite institution of which my father was president for many years. During my teens, in the late 1930s and early '40s when America was preparing for and then became a participant in World War II, this community was a sanctuary for me and my pacifist convictions when patriotic fervor became strong in nearby Newton, particularly in Newton High School. From an early age, I had been convinced of the correctness of this Mennonite pacifist emphasis on how life should be lived. I remember well an episode in the seventh grade when I directly challenged my highly respected math teacher, Mr. Bilger, who refused to believe that Jesus ever instructed his disciples to

love their enemies. (Why this issue came up in math class, I have no idea.) I knew that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had commanded his disciples to do precisely that (Matt. 5:44), and I did not hesitate to embarrass Mr. Bilger, who taught a Sunday School class at the local Methodist church, on this important point. During that same period I was trying to inform myself about those whom our American society then regarded as its principal enemies by reading Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (in English translation), and then reporting on what I was learning to my literature class – to the distress of the teacher, Miss Sinclair. I was not, of course, advocating Nazi beliefs about hating and destroying their enemies; that would have gone directly counter to my Mennonite convictions. I was simply trying to understand why anyone would advocate such a horrible view of life, hoping this would help me think more clearly about how we should respond to the Nazis.

This fundamental Mennonite criterion respecting how human life was to be lived, epitomized in such teachings of Jesus as “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31) and “Love your enemies,” and by his dramatic, nonresistant death on the cross at the hands of his enemies, has remained with me.³ It underlies my attempts in recent years to sketch a Christian ethic in connection with my notion of humans as biohistorical beings, and to address theologically such knotty issues as the enormous religious and cultural pluralism of human existence, an issue with which we must come to terms in a new way.

In 1943, when I was eighteen and about to be drafted, my concerns about the problematic character of our talk and thinking about God, and about how human life should be conducted, came together fairly strongly in my consciousness. It was the second of the two that was dominant in my decision to become a conscientious objector, not the first. I had no uncertainty about the wrongness of all killing or about the injunction to love our enemies as well as our neighbors, but I had a great deal of uncertainty about who or what God was, or whether I believed in God. This was a serious matter for me because – as Mennonites had stressed from the period of the Reformation on when they were denounced as “Anabaptists” (re-baptizers) – religious faith was a matter of thoughtful personal conviction and of mature decision and commitment about how one's life was to be led. It was not something to be taken for granted as part of the general socializing process through which we

all go from infancy to adulthood. Moreover, the Selective Service Act specified that only *religious* objectors – not those whose refusal to serve in the military was based on political or moral convictions alone – could be allowed to substitute Civilian Public Service for military service when drafted. However, since I was a Mennonite in good standing, and the Mennonite churches publicly took a pacifist position, I was given conscientious objector status with few questions asked. My worries about God never became an issue with the draft board.

These relative certainties/uncertainties – deep convictions about the fundamental moral issue of how life should be lived, considerable uncertainty about all our thinking and talk of God – have dominated my entire life. They have driven my attempts to work through the question of how important are Christian (or other) convictions about God. How important are they for human existence generally? How important should such convictions be in my own life? It is with these particular nuances that the central Mennonite theme – about the interconnection of a radical ethic of love with radical faith in God – has been at the center of my intellectual development, indeed, at the center of much of my life.

My father, an ordained Mennonite minister and former missionary to China, was president of Bethel College during my formative years. He had completed a Ph.D. at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1928, and had in his personal library many books by Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case, Henry Nelson Wieman, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and other liberal religious thinkers. I read a good many of these works in my high school years and later. References to God, prayers to God, Bible reading, hymn singing, and the like, were all frequent in our home and in the Mennonite community roundabout. So God was a quite familiar, if somewhat puzzling, figure to me. In the summer of 1937 when I was twelve years old, I became excited in reading a recently published book on evolution, *Man the Unknown* by the French writer Alexis Carrel, a volume available on the coffee table in our home. The conflicts between Carrel's evolutionary account and the biblical stories found in Genesis were clear to me, and this modern scientific view seemed much more plausible than the Bible's story – an exciting and important discovery. My father encouraged free discussion of all such issues, both in our

home and at the college, where there were religious liberals on the faculty (who took evolution for granted) as well as more conservative biblicists.

Largely because of increasing hostility toward Mennonite pacifists during my junior year in high school, especially after the U.S. entered the war in December 1941, I decided to skip the senior year and to enter college, at Bethel, in the fall of 1942. (By the end of my junior year I had already completed 15 of the 16 credits required for high school graduation, so this was not difficult to arrange.) This made life somewhat easier, of course, with respect to my pacifist convictions, but it only deepened further my perplexities about God. Two of my teachers, both historians, were of the more religiously conservative wing of the faculty. One of them, Melvin Gingerich, taught a year-long introductory course in the history of western civilization; the other, Cornelius Krahn, a course in church history. In neither case did these teachers want students to get the impression that human affairs unfolded somehow on their own, quite apart from God's governing activity; God was, after all (as the Bible taught), the Lord of history, and the course of history must have unfolded along the lines that God had laid down for it, however much it might also be filled with human evil, sin, rebellion. So some of the books that we read, and all the lectures we heard, presented this religious view of the history of the world and the church; but other textbooks presented the basically secular picture of historical developments that has been favored by most modern academic historians. I found the secular picture, and the evidence and arguments on which it was based, totally convincing, while the religious interpretations and claims of my teachers seemed to be largely special pleading and not persuasive. Along with these courses in history, I was also taking work in the social sciences and the hard sciences, especially chemistry and physics. For both of the latter and also for mathematics I had strong aptitudes, and I found these studies fascinating and their modes of argument quite convincing. In all of this, so much the worse for God, and for a life based on faith in God!

I was drafted in October of 1943, four months after I had turned eighteen, and was sent to Civilian Public Service Camp #5 in Colorado Springs, one of the camps administered by the Mennonite Central Committee. The men at this camp were working in a variety of agricultural programs under supervision of the Soil Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. My year at C.P.S. 5 provided a new and interesting experience, as I interacted with Mennonite and other conscientious objectors, many of a

very religiously conservative stripe, but some quite liberal, including some radical utopians and anarchists. My many arguments with the conservative conscientious objectors only increased my skepticism about God. But my pacifist convictions were deepened by my encounter with radicals who advocated, for example, ceasing all cooperation with the U.S. conscription program by walking out of camp, even though this action would probably lead to a prison term. This raised a question I was to debate with myself during my stay in C.P.S., as well as in later years when conscription was reinstated in connection with the Korean War.

I was in C.P.S. for nearly three years. After a year in Colorado Springs, I was transferred to the Ypsilanti Michigan State Hospital for the mentally ill, where I worked on the wards for fifteen months; after that I was transferred to a camp in Gulfport, Mississippi, to help build privies (under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Public Health) for poor people who had no sanitary toilets. Throughout this period I read widely on theological, moral, and philosophical issues, attempting to further my interrupted college education. For example, during my year in Colorado Springs I read for the first time (with very little understanding) a book I would read many times over: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. This and others of Kant's writings have deeply influenced my overall thinking on philosophical and theological issues; in particular, Kant has helped me to understand the bearing of the symbol "God" on the moral dimensions of human existence, and vice versa. I was also exploring this problematic in other less intellectual ways. I looked into studies of mysticism during these years and into writings by mystics. But, although mysticism has continued to interest me, it has always been from a distance, so to speak. I seem to be "tone deaf" with respect to so-called religious experience. When others speak of their "experience of God" or of "God's presence," or the profound experience of "the holy" or of "sacredness," I simply do not know what they are talking about. Perhaps this is one reason why the problem of God has been, throughout my life, so baffling and difficult. I have long since concluded that talk about *experience* of God involves what philosophers call a "category mistake" and should not, therefore, be engaged in. (My gradually developing understanding of the symbol "God" as a human imaginative construction [see sections IV and V below] explains how and why I came to this conclusion.)⁴

In the latter part of my freshman year at Bethel College I had begun dating a very vivacious and intelligent young woman, and this relationship developed into serious courtship during my years in C.P.S. We were married after the war ended, and for the next fifty-and-a-half years – which ended with Dorothy’s death in January 1998 – our lives were bound together. We had four children, and they have all married and have given us the joy of being grandparents several times over. There is much that I could (and perhaps should) say about this side of my life, but space will not permit that.

II.

After World War II, with my return to college, my earlier interest in the hard sciences was giving way to deep concerns about the meaning of human life and its proper ordering. My academic work became increasingly concentrated in the social sciences and philosophy. At the time of my graduation from college in November 1947, my intention was to enter a doctoral program in philosophy; but before I did that I wanted, as I said to myself, to give the Christian faith “a last chance to say something to me” that I could take seriously. So I applied to Yale Divinity School for admission to the B.D. program (for what we now call an M.Div. degree), though I had no intention of going into the ministry.

The several months before beginning that program were spent working toward a master’s degree in sociology at Northwestern University, studies that were to have a permanent impact on me. Three important developments should be mentioned. I became acquainted with the writings of George Herbert Mead and worked carefully through his posthumously published book, *Mind, Self, and Society*.⁵ His claim that human selfhood and mentality were created in and developed to high levels through the evolution of language – and thus were thoroughly *social* in character – totally reversed the commonsense belief that language is the creation of mind with the contention that our human minds are themselves a product of increasingly complex linguisticity. This insight enabled Mead to give a convincing evolutionary account of the appearance of human mind on planet Earth, and also by implication an evolutionary account of human spirituality, including religion and morality. I found these ideas fascinating and persuasive. They expanded and deepened

my early interest in evolutionary theory, and furthered my developing naturalistic understanding of everything human.

Second, sometime during these months at Northwestern, I became acquainted with Ludwig Feuerbach's mid-nineteenth century book, *The Essence of Christianity*,⁶ which argued that what had hitherto been thought of as *theology* was really disguised *anthropology* (human studies). Feuerbach showed that all the major doctrines of Christian faith, including especially the doctrine of God, could be understood as expressions of an unconscious projection of human characteristics and qualities onto a non-existent external cosmic reality. So, specifically theological claims should also be understood naturalistically.

Third, during one term at Northwestern I was permitted to join a special graduate seminar, conducted jointly by the chairpersons of the departments of sociology, psychology, and anthropology. We took up exciting interdisciplinary problems, and I presented a paper posing questions about the psychological, social, and cultural *relativism* that everyone in the seminar (including me) seemed to take for granted. My interest in this problem had perhaps begun with my experience as a conscientious objector, when I tried to understand why the Mennonite "cognitive minority" of which I was a member, and the much larger majority of American Christians, disagreed so completely about the rightness and wrongness of participation in the killing of war – each side being thoroughly convinced it knew what was truly right. These questions deepened at Ypsilanti State Hospital when I encountered delusional patients who obviously took themselves to be living in entirely different worlds from the one that I, and most others roundabout, took for granted. How could this drastic difference in our most basic judgments of reality, truth, and right be understood? Is everyone living in his or her own private delusional world, from which there is no possible escape? Are all human judgments relative to the psychological, social, and cultural contexts within which they are made? Wouldn't such a conclusion undermine the possibility of making any truly valid judgments about anything?

Those were the issues I presented to the seminar, finishing up with one last question: If we take the concept of psychological, social, and cultural relativism seriously, must we not conclude that this very concept, which all of us in the seminar took for granted, is itself in question? Imagine my surprise and disappointment, then, when no one agreed with me on the importance of this problem. In this seminar, I was told, we were dealing with psychological,

social, and cultural *facts* – not with confusing philosophical questions and theories. If I wished to pursue these obscure and probably insoluble issues, I would have to go to some other department of the university. I received my M.A. in sociology from Northwestern at the end of the summer, and by now it was clear that to deal with the questions in which I was most interested, I would have to go to “some other department.” I was ready to take my concerns and problems to Divinity School.

The Yale Divinity School that I entered in 1948 at age twenty-three was dominated by a basically neo-orthodox theology with a strong social ethics component, and was thus equipped nicely to assist me in thinking through the two central themes in which I was particularly interested. Professor H. Richard Niebuhr was working out a way of reconciling a thoroughgoing conception of human historicity (including historical relativism) with Christian faith and its claims about divine revelation.⁷ Moreover, in doing so he drew upon and amplified G.H. Mead’s social theory of human selfhood and mind, and in some of his seminars and lectures took up figures like Feuerbach and showed how they too could be fitted into – indeed, could make a significant contribution to – his sociohistorical conception of human life and Christian faith. All of this was quite appealing to me.

Niebuhr argued that humans were to be understood as strongly shaped by the historical and communal context within which they emerged and were gradually formed into responsible selves. For most of their lives people inevitably live and work largely in terms of such communally-shaped values and meanings. This explained well my own experience and self-understanding. It fitted into Mennonite emphases on the importance of Mennonite community meanings and values, and it helped me understand why others, growing up within and informed by quite different communal values and meanings, disagreed so decisively with us Mennonites. Moreover, with this understanding it was possible to think of God not so much as an extremely problematic and uncertain mysterious something-or-other – the reality and significance of which had to be established before faith could be possible – but rather as a central meaning and value orienting Christian faith and life. “God” is the principal focusing symbol in the Christian way of understanding life and the world.

The question of God was thus to be addressed in terms of whether one wanted to live a Christian life, not in terms of some abstract notion of truth.

In this way my two life-long themes were beginning to come together and reinforce each other. Life is oriented with reference to God, if it is ordered in Christian terms. What is *morally required* in human living, not some supposedly autonomous epistemological norms, is the pertinent issue here. One's moral stance – including the set of meanings and values, symbols and rituals, in terms of which one's life is oriented and formed – is the basic ground for faith in God. (This was obviously a strongly Kantian move in Niebuhr, and also increasingly in me.) Although my convictions about the validity of a radical Mennonite Christian ethic were somewhat threatened by the essentially Calvinist social ethics of Niebuhr, Liston Pope, and others at Yale Divinity School, they were not destroyed. Rather, they became better nuanced through these reflections, and thus (especially in the context of conversations with some of the other pacifists, of whom there were very few in the student body) they were in fact deepened.

These developments led me to consider taking a doctorate in theology instead of philosophy. I discovered that if I entered Yale's doctoral program in philosophy, I would not be permitted to continue theological studies to the extent I wished; but if I enrolled in the Divinity School's program in philosophical theology, I could take as many philosophy courses as I liked. I decided to stay in the Divinity School. (I had already been taking numerous courses in philosophy during my B.D. studies, and I continued that when I entered the doctoral program in theology.) My growing convictions about the interconnections of theology and ethics also led me – when I left Yale in 1953 to take a position in the Department of Religion at Pomona College (Claremont, California) – to seek ordination as a Mennonite minister. Though I did not intend to become a church pastor, my Mennonite connections and stance were important to me, and I wanted to speak and write as an authorized interpreter of a Mennonite understanding of Christian faith and life. So, as Dorothy and our young son and I traveled through Kansas on our way to our new home in California, I was ordained in my home church on the Bethel campus.

At Pomona College my teaching was lodged substantially in two large introductory courses in Bible, one in Old Testament and the other in New Testament. I also taught courses in philosophy of religion and ethics. Any courses in theology proper, however, were ruled out by my departmental chairman as probably unacceptable to the rest of the faculty and certainly

impolitic to propose. At this time I became increasingly interested in the writings of Karl Barth, including his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans,⁸ which seemed to illuminate in a striking way my own faith situation. Barth presented a highly dialectical conception of faith: as our principal human connection with God, faith must be seen – following Paul, Augustine, Luther, and others – as God's gift. Humans can in no way bring themselves into a stance of faith by their own efforts, however sincere and persistent. Thus, the more we try to believe in God, and the more we believe that such efforts are warranted, the farther we are from true faith. And contrariwise, paradoxically, the more we recognize our unfaith, our doubts, our disobedience – and thus freely acknowledge our alienation from God, our sinfulness – the more we actually stand before God in faith. So, could my deep, troubling doubts and disbelief, with which I had been preoccupied for years, be seen as actual marks of faith in God? Very puzzling and very paradoxical, but that seemed to be the conclusion to be drawn from Barth's highly dialectical and rhetorically powerful analysis. This is what the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith was all about. With the help of H.R. Niebuhr and Karl Barth – and also Paul Tillich, a figure taken up in my dissertation, who had developed a notion of "justification by *doubt*" – I was finding my way into a theological stance within which I could live productively and fruitfully.

This dialectical approach helped develop further my thinking on the problem of relativism, since it left me completely free theologically to work out a thoroughly this-worldly, and thus naturalistic and historicist, understanding of the relativities of human life and the human pursuit of truth. My doctoral dissertation was on "The Problem of Relativism and the Possibility of Metaphysics." With the help of writings by Paul Tillich, R.G. Collingwood, and Wilhelm Dilthey, I worked through an extensive study of the literature on relativism and historicity, and developed a constructive position of my own on these matters. The dissertation proposed an understanding of human existence and knowledge as always actively responding to demands of the living existential *present*, a present inexorably shaped by a particular historical past but ineluctably moving forward in anticipation of a relatively open and unknown future. So we live and work and think, as best we can, in the present in which we find ourselves – never escaping the relativities of that present – as we seek to resolve the problems that confront us in our movement into the future. The dissertation was completed in the spring of 1955, and a revised version was

published in 1960 under the title of *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*,⁹ my first book. In it are seeds of much of my later thinking about epistemological, anthropological, and theological issues.

III.

I left Pomona College in 1958 to join the faculty of Vanderbilt Divinity School as Associate Professor of Theology. There, for the first time, I had to put together a year-long set of lectures on systematic theology. So I worked out conceptions of creation, the fall, and sin; the doctrine of the trinity and christology; evil and eschatology; Christian ethics and the moral life; theological method; and so on. (I was beginning to discover the extent to which Christian theology must be understood as basically human *imaginative construction*!) In 1959 I was invited to give the Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College, and I took that opportunity to sketch in five lectures the overall theological position I was developing. It was a theology grounded essentially on the moral necessities of human life, presenting the central Christian claims about God and Christ, humanity and the world, as a kind of picture of human existence and its context that served well and made intelligible our moral responsibilities and decision-making. These lectures, revised and somewhat enlarged, were the basis of a small book published in 1961 as *The Context of Decision*.¹⁰

The systematic theology that I was working out at Vanderbilt was thoroughly *historicist* in character. Following H.R. Niebuhr, I argued that we humans always live out of the symbol-system that we have inherited, and that Christians therefore need make no apologies for, nor attempt to justify, their attention to and concern about the central symbols that give form to their faith, their living, and their thinking (this latter assumption I would soon put sharply into question). The problematic dimensions of Christian God-talk were handled simply by saying (confessionally): this is the world-picture with which we Christians live and work; this is the way we organize our lives and thinking; we recognize that there are many other symbolic pictures by means of which humans orient their lives, and this is ours. My experience as a conscientious objector in World War II had taught me that even though we may regard our way of living and thinking as right and true, we must be willing to live with and in the midst of other quite different ways of ordering life, as we seek to love our neighbors (Christians and others) as ourselves – even though we believe

these others are completely wrong in many of their ideas and attitudes. Here my moral concerns about how we ought to live were beginning to outrank and to reshape my thinking about human truth-claims, so often regarded as absolute and not to be compromised.

It was a kind of Christian *pluralism* toward which I was working (though that word was not available to me at that time); and this later served as the model for my reflection on problems of religious and cultural pluralism generally, and for my development of the notion of pluralistic or dialogical truth as a way of moving beyond the impasse created by the diverse truth-claims emphasized in different religious traditions.¹¹ But none of this was clearly visible at that time. My *ethical* convictions (basically still Mennonite) were for me more important and more certain than any others, and this meant I already had a standpoint that implied we should deal tolerantly with the variety of human faith-stances, not only among Christians but in the wider world as well. Humanly more important, and thus more fundamental, than any truth questions – about which there would always be doubts and other problems, never certainty – is the moral question of how we are to live together in the world in which we find ourselves. In my theology lectures at Vanderbilt, in my Menno Simons lectures, and in some other writings for Mennonite publications, I worked out my earliest formulations of these issues.

When I finally published my *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*¹² in 1968, all these matters, and many others, had been pulled together into a systematic statement of what I took to be the major Christian contentions and concepts, inherited from nearly 2000 years of history, that were still plausible. To make such a contemporary, comprehensive, fresh reinterpretation of the received Christian symbol-system, in all its finely-wrought details, was what I at that time understood systematic theology to be about. Though I was taking up the essentially confessional neo-orthodox stance that I had acquired at Yale Divinity School, there were some harbingers of things to come. Here are some examples: in the Preface, the book was characterized as “a work of the theological imagination” (xv), not simply as a new interpretation of tradition, an idea I was later to develop into a full-blown revisionary conception of theological method; the entirety of Chapter 28, deliberately avoiding the tendency of many theologians to tip-toe around sensitive issues, was devoted to a thorough discussion of Jesus’ alleged

resurrection, reaching the conclusion that it is not plausible today to hold that the historical Jesus had come back to life again after his crucifixion and this implied, moreover, that Christian hope should no longer be understood as involving life after death for us mortals;¹³ in Chapter 19, a theological outline of “The History of the World,” contemporary astrophysical, biological, and historical thinking was employed in a sketch of cosmic and human development from the origins of the universe (as then understood) to the present. All of this was laid out in the largely confessional terms that I had appropriated from H.R. Niebuhr and Karl Barth.

In the end, however, this approach to theology – though it reconciled in certain respects the two basic themes that had been driving my intellectual activities – proved unsatisfactory. Partly because of my growing sense of the artificiality of Barth’s dialectical interpretation of faith, which had enabled me to put aside doubts and unbelief for a while; and partly due to the impact of the so-called Death of God discussions among theologians in the early ’60s, in which I was participating, I began to move away from this neo-orthodox confessionalism. In my last years at Vanderbilt and my early years at Harvard (where I moved in 1963), I increasingly came to see that *God* was the principal theme – and also a major *problem* – with which Christian theology had to come to terms, and the largely confessional approach I had been following simply ignored its problematic dimensions.

IV.

I sought to formulate and address the issues I was beginning to discern in a number of essays, some of them initially published before my *Systematic Theology* came into print. During our family’s sabbatical leave in 1969-70 at Oxford, it became obvious that I was now moving to a quite different standpoint. This new way of thinking began to show itself especially in a lecture entitled “God as Symbol,” which I wrote in England and presented there several times, and an expanded version of which was published in 1972 as Chapter 5 of my next book, *God the Problem*.¹⁴ In that book, in addition to the contention that we order our lives largely in terms of certain fundamental *symbols*, and that it is the business of theology to examine, analyze, and assess these symbols and symbol-systems, it was stated forthrightly that the only possible test of our central symbols is pragmatic:

There is no way to establish the “truth” of the notion of God by ordinary rational or philosophical argument: that is in principle impossible. The only relevant question of truth . . . here concerns that ordering of life and the world which faith imposes: is such an ordering of the world appropriate to the world as we experience it and to the nature of our human existence, or does it involve misapprehensions of our situation and result in a stunting of human life and its ultimate breakdown? Is some other fundamental paradigm or “root metaphor” more apposite or adequate for grasping the world so as to enhance and deepen human life, or does the theistic imagery and pattern most effectively perform this function?

Note that in this passage a major criterion for assessing theological truth-claims – a *pragmatic* criterion – is *the way the symbol “God” enables us to live in the world.*

As I was writing that lecture and essay, I realized I was now working within a quite different way of thinking about the theological enterprise: theology was to be understood as through and through a *human imaginative construction* of a world-picture which could orient human life.¹⁵ A theological picture was distinguished from other similar imaginative constructions not by its grounding in divine revelation, as the neo-orthodox and much of the theological tradition as a whole had held, but rather in its utilization of the master-symbol *God* to bring all dimensions of its world-picture into focus. All claims about divine revelation were part of our God-talk, and were thus *derivative* from what was implied by the symbol “God.” Since the notion of revelation itself thus presupposed, and indeed employed, the symbol “God,” it could not properly be regarded as the principal ground justifying our human use of this idea. This meant that some new questions needed to be addressed by theologians, questions of this sort: How and why did this particular symbol (“God”) come to be deployed by (some) humans in their world pictures? Out of what materials has the human imagination constructed this symbol? How is it held before the mind – in prayer and worship? in contemplation? in day-to-day life? in theological reflection? Does it perform certain unique functions for humans? Are there some distinctive dangers to human life and well-being to which the employment of this symbol may give rise, or which it may aggravate?

And so on. In the last days of our stay in Oxford, I hastily wrote a paper (largely for myself) entitled “Theology as Construction,” in which I attempted to sketch the conception of theology now beginning to come into view. This paper was the first draft of the central chapter in my next small book, *An Essay on Theological Method*.¹⁶

Theology is there acknowledged as through and through *human work*, a constructive activity of the imagination, as Feuerbach had argued. If we are to engage in this work self-consciously and deliberately, along what lines should our constructive activity proceed? What objectives should we set? In terms of what norms should we judge our work? How can we do this work of imaginative construction most effectively? What is directly implied in this understanding is that theology is no longer to be thought of as basically a hermeneutical task, simply interpreting God’s revelation in the Bible and tradition for a new day. So methodological issues now became a high priority on my theological agenda. The *Essay on Theological Method* (1975) was my first attempt to address these issues in print and, in its latest revised edition (1995), it remains my clearest and most compact statement on them (along with a short piece most recently revised and republished under the title “Theology: Critical, Constructive, and Contextualized”).¹⁷

There is no space to summarize the argument of the *Essay* here, but I shall note briefly what is taken up in its three main chapters. Chapter one argues that *God* is the central theme which distinguishes theology from all other intellectual endeavors, and this theme is highly problematic. A brief sketch shows how the word “God” is used in English-language discourse, and lays out some of the peculiarities of this word and its usage. (The influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other “ordinary language” philosophers makes itself evident here.) The second chapter argues that all speaking and thinking of God, even of the most simple and unsophisticated sort – our prayers to God, our worship of God, our reflection on God – *presupposes* constructive imaginative activity and would be impossible without it. The task of formal theology thus now becomes one of developing norms for judging the effectiveness and validity with which this imaginative work has been carried out in the past, and of proposing criteria to help us assess our own attempts to carry through this work today. The third chapter brings the book to a conclusion by arguing that there are three indispensable constituents of all adequate

theological thinking: (1) “the explicit development of a conception of the overall context within which [our human] experience falls, a concept of the world”; (2) construction of a “concept of God, of that further reality which relativizes and limits the world and all that is in it,” including us humans; (3) reformulation of the concept of world so that it “fits” intelligibly with “the God thought to be its ultimate ground and limit.” The third constituent involves careful adjustment of “each of these [two] concepts to the other” so that “a theistic interpretation or understanding of the world . . . [is] developed”¹⁸ along with a viable conception of God. It is claimed that if these several tasks are not all carried through carefully, theological work will be faulty and inadequately presented and argued.

The *Essay* is only a methodological sketch. It was first published just a year before Dorothy and our youngest child and I were to go to Bangalore, India, where I would teach in the United Theological College for two terms, testing out some of my ideas for the first time in a non-western setting. This was an important year for all of us, enabling us to get some distance on the western culture and forms of life which we heretofore had taken largely for granted. In my *Essay on Theological Method* I had been careful to note from time to time that what I was proposing was all expressed in terms of *western* theological and philosophical concepts, methods, languages, and traditions, and that I could not, therefore, make universalistic claims for it. It was very gratifying, however, to discover rather quickly that this way of thinking freed my Indian students to do their theologizing in terms directly pertinent to their own religious and cultural context, instead of confining themselves to repeating the rigid propositions of the Euro-American theology handed down to them and regarded as universally normative by missionaries and their disciples – a relativizing of theological truth-claims in light of what was *morally demanded* for ongoing human living in the Indian sociohistorical context. My experience in India brought me into direct contact with many different religions and cultures, and I began to see that all these fascinating forms of symbolization, ritual, and morality – these exceedingly diverse ways of thinking about the world and human existence in it, and of attempting to live fruitfully within the order and orientation provided by these various inherited symbol-systems – were also to be understood as products of human imaginative creativity adapting itself in diverse locations to a wide range of historical and geographical settings and circumstances.

My Indian experience encouraged me to attempt to construct a Christian theology open to and appreciative of the many different cultures and religions around the world, and while in India I began to sketch outlines and notes for developing such a theology. But it would take fifteen years and more to give it satisfactory form. In those intervening years Dorothy and I would make a number of visits to Japan, visits to South Africa, Israel, and China, another visit to India, and several to England. I also became regularly engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue both in Japan and the U.S., and more briefly in Jewish-Muslim-Christian dialogue in the Near East and in the U.S. I attempted to take into account these broadening and deepening experiences as I gradually worked away in class lectures and in essays¹⁹ on what would finally be published in 1993 as *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*.²⁰ During this period I found myself gradually giving up the personalistic side of the traditional Christian conception of God – which until then had been at the center of my theological reflection – as I attempted to appropriate new cosmological and ecological thinking. An adequate contemporary constructive theology (it seemed to me) must take into account what we have learned about the evolutionary character of our world and ourselves in the modern astrophysical, geological, biological, ecological, social, and historical sciences. In the *Essay* of 1975 I had already suggested that an “existentialist” constructive theology (as I labeled it at that time), though it has some plausibility and seeming advantages over the “cosmological” approach I was pursuing, was not really adequate today.²¹

The first clear sign that I was getting seriously concerned about the basic anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism of traditional Christian thinking about God had appeared before the *Essay on Theological Method* was written: it is in a paper on “The Concept of Nature: A Problem for Theology,” prepared for the American Theological Society meeting in the Spring of 1972.²² In it I argued that there is a fundamental tension – a conceptual and logical incompatibility – between, on the one hand, the traditional personalistic understanding of God and of God’s intimate relation to humanity, and, on the other hand, our growing awareness that human existence is essentially constituted by, and could not exist apart from, the complex ecological ordering of life that has evolved on planet Earth over many millennia. At that time, however, I could see no way of overcoming this incompatibility of naturalistic and theistic ways of thinking. It was only in consequence of my new

methodological approach, and further reflection on these questions over the next twenty years, that with *In Face of Mystery* I finally found my way through this impasse.

My explicit movement away from traditional Christian thinking of God as a personal being first appeared publicly (I think) in my presidential address on “Nuclear Eschatology and the Study of Religion”²³ to the American Academy of Religion in 1982. I argued there that the notion of God’s providential care was getting in the way of our taking seriously our full human responsibility for the nuclear crisis in the midst of which we were living.

Christian theologians and ordinary Christian believers alike . . . dare no longer simply assume that we know from authoritative tradition or past revelation the correct values and standards, i.e., the correct faith-orientation, in terms of which life is to be understood and decisions and actions are to be formulated. . . . [We] must be prepared to enter into the most radical kind of deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditions [we] have inherited, including especially the most central and precious symbols of these traditions, *God* and *Jesus Christ*.

In the little book, *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, based on my Ferguson Lectures at the University of Manchester and soon to follow this address, I suggested the kind of reconstruction of the image/concept of God that I had in mind: We should replace the anthropomorphic notion of God, as a kind of cosmic person/agent, with the much vaguer idea of the “*hidden creativity* at work in the historico-cultural process [and in] . . . the complex of physical, biological and historico-cultural conditions which have made human existence possible, which continue to sustain it, and which draw it out to a fuller humanity and humaneness” (emphasis added).²⁴ These ideas were worked out in some detail in the constructive theology later published as *In Face of Mystery*.

V.

I cannot summarize that large book here,²⁵ but I will sketch three key concepts developed in it: first, the understanding of humans as “biohistorical” beings; second, my attempt to develop a viable conception of God by employing the metaphor of “serendipitous creativity” which manifests itself; third, in what I

call “directional movements” or “trajectories” that emerge spontaneously in the course of evolutionary and historical developments.

What is at stake in the notion of humans as *biohistorical* beings? Most of my readers probably take it for granted that human history and historicity emerged within, and are in a significant sense completely dependent upon, the evolutionary/ecological web of life on planet Earth. But we may not have thought much about the extent to which this emergence of our *historicity* has affected the character of human existence: it has even transformed significantly the biological base of human life. The gradually growing network of human sociocultural and especially *linguistic* practices (remember G.H. Mead’s ideas) appears to have put demands on the emerging human brain that account at least in part, as brain scientist Terrence Deacon has argued, for its growth into an organ of such great size, complexity, adeptness, proficiency, and creativity.²⁶ This developing co-evolution of language and the brain has opened up enormously the possibilities of human life, and has facilitated decisive transformations in the character and quality of human existence in general.

Consider the effects of the growth over many generations of what we call knowledge. In the course of history human knowledge has become increasingly comprehensive, detailed, and technologized, providing us with considerable control over the physical and biological (as well as sociocultural and psychological) conditions of our existence. Indeed, we human beings and the further course of our history are no longer completely at the disposal of the natural order and natural powers that brought us into being in the way we were, say, ten millennia ago. Through our various symbolisms and knowledges, skills and technologies, we have gained some measure of *transcendence* over the nature of which we are part. And, in consequence (for good or ill) we have utterly transformed the face of the earth and are beginning to push on into outer space, and we are becoming capable of altering the actual genetic make-up of future generations. It has been *qua* our development into beings shaped in many respects by historico-cultural processes – that is, humanly created, not merely natural biological, processes – that we have gained these increasing measures of control over the natural order as well as over the onward movement of history. In significant respects, thus, our *historicity* – our being shaped decisively by an evolution and history that have given humans themselves power to shape future history (and even future evolution) in significant ways –

is the most distinctive mark of our humanness. We are, all the way down to the deepest layers of our characteristically *human* existence, not simply biological beings, animals; we are *biohistorical* beings.

Despite the great powers that our knowledges and technologies have given us, our transcendence of the natural orders within which we have emerged is far from adequate to insure our ongoing human existence. Indeed, the ecological crisis of our time has shown that precisely through the exercise of our growing power on planet Earth we have been destroying the very conditions that make life possible. Paradoxically, then, our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live, and our growing power over many of the circumstances on planet Earth that have seemed to us undesirable, may in the end lead to our self-destruction. In orienting our lives we need to take much fuller account of the environment in which we live than we have in the past. Thinking of the world around us as constituted by (a) cosmic serendipitous creativity, which manifests itself (b) through evolutionary and historical trajectories of various sorts, working themselves out in longer and shorter stretches of time, will facilitate this.

There are many cosmic trajectories moving in diverse directions and overlapping each other in very complex ways, and on planet Earth there have been many quite diverse evolutionary trajectories producing billions of species of life in complex interaction with each other. But we can consider here only that one trajectory which eventuated in the spread and development of *human* life over all the earth, the trajectory that issued in the creation of beings with historicity. Our human existence – its purposiveness, its greatly varied complexes of social/moral/cultural/religious values and meanings, its virtually unlimited imaginative powers and glorious creativity, its horrible failures and gross evils, its historicity – all this has come into being on this trajectory, this particular manifestation of the serendipitous creativity in the cosmos. We do not know in what direction this evolutionary-historical trajectory will move in the future – perhaps toward the opening of ever new possibilities for human beings, as we increasingly take responsibility for our lives and our future; perhaps going beyond humanity and historicity altogether, however difficult it is to imagine how that should be understood; perhaps coming to an end in the total destruction of human existence.

Keeping this outline of our present situation in mind, let us return to the question of God. The biblical stories present a picture of God as an ultimate *personal* power behind all things, the ultimate origin of things. In my view we cannot continue to think along these lines. What could we possibly be imagining when we attempt to think of God as an all-powerful personal reality, existing somehow before and independent of what we today call “the universe”? As far as we know, personal agential beings did not exist, and *could not have existed*, before billions of years of cosmic evolution of a very specific sort, and then further billions of years of biological evolution and growing historical development, also of very specific sorts, had transpired. How then can we today think of a person-like creator-God as existing before and apart from any such evolutionary developments? What possible content can such a more or less traditional idea of God have for those who think of the universe in our modern evolutionary-historical way, according to which no life or consciousness can be imagined apart from the development of these very specific and quite extraordinary conditions?²⁷

In contrast with the traditional notion of a creator, however, the idea of *creativity* – the idea of the coming into being through time of the previously non-existent, the new, the novel – has considerable plausibility today. Indeed, it is bound up with the very belief that our cosmos is an *evolutionary* one in which new orders of reality come into being in the course of increasingly complex temporal developments. I suggest that we can and should, therefore, in our theological thinking, continue to utilize the idea of creativity (a descendant of the biblical idea of creation), but that we no longer think of this creativity as lodged in a *creator-agent* (a concept no longer intelligible). It was, I believe, my reading many years ago of H.N. Wieman’s 1946 book (in my father’s library) *The Source of Human Good*²⁸ that planted the seed of this proposal.

We should not think of creativity as a sort of *force* at work in the cosmos, bringing the new into being, a way of thinking that simply substitutes the notion of some kind of *impersonal* power for the idea of God-the-creator. To make a move of that sort presupposes that we know more about the coming into being of the new and the novel than we do. Creativity is itself profoundly mysterious, as the ancient phrase *creatio ex nihilo* emphasized. We can see this most vividly, perhaps, when we consider the old unanswerable question, Why is there something, not nothing? Creativity *happens*: new and

novel realities come into being in the course of temporal developments. This is an utterly amazing mystery. As Nicolas Berdyaev put it (in a book I first read while at Yale Divinity School): “Creation is the greatest mystery of life, the mystery of the appearance of something new that had never existed before and is not deduced from, or generated by, anything.”²⁹ If we think of God in terms of the metaphor of creativity, we are thus drawn into a deeper sensitivity to God-as-mystery than was true of our religious traditions with their talk of God as *the Creator*; for this latter concept suggested that we knew God was really a person-like, agent-like being, one who “decided” to do things, who set purposes and then brought about the realization of those purposes. It was this human-like model that was drawn upon by the biblical writers and their successors in their thinking about creativity. But with Darwin we have learned that significant creativity can be thought of in other ways as well. Indeed, according to the evolutionary theory *agential creativity*, of the sort exercised by humans, itself came into being (“was created”) only as cosmic processes, in course of long stretches of time, brought into being certain very complex forms of life. For us today, therefore, the truly foundational sort of creativity appears to be that exemplified in the evolution of life rather than that portrayed in human purposive activity.

I am suggesting that the metaphor of creativity is appropriate for naming God because (1) it preserves and indeed emphasizes the ultimacy of the *mystery* that God is, even while (2) it connects God directly with the coming into being – in *time* – of the new and the novel. I highlight the importance of these points by calling attention to the “serendipitous” aspect of the creativity manifest in our world – its unexpectedness, its being utterly inexplicable, and its great significance and value from our human point of view. Apart from certain particular creative developments in the evolution of life, we humans would not exist at all. We can hardly fail, therefore, to regard the continuous coming into being of the new in our cosmos as “serendipitous,” as a highly beneficial (for us) – though quite surprising and chancy – sequence of events.

The picture I am sketching here can help us discern our place within the evolutionary-ecological world that is our home. Let us note five points in this connection. First, this picture provides a way of thinking within which we can characterize quite accurately, and can unify into an overall vision, what seems actually to have happened in the course of cosmic evolution and human

history. Second, this approach gives a significant, but not dominant, place and meaning to the distinctive *biohistorical* character of human life and of the human niche within the cosmic process. Awareness of this enables us, third, to understand better the actual context of our lives and the import of the events through which we are living, thus facilitating our taking up more responsible roles in the world. (Note once again the extent to which this activity of imaginative construction is driven by the *moral* necessity of living rightly in the world.) Fourth, because this picture highlights the linkage of *cosmic creativity* with our humanness and the humane values so important to us, it can support hope (but not certainty) about the future of our human world, hope for truly creative movement toward ecologically and morally responsible human existence. Finally, fifth, a hope of this sort, grounded on the mystery of creativity in the world, can help motivate today's women and men to devote their lives to bringing about this more humane and ecologically rightly-ordered world to which we aspire.

VI.

Our modern/postmodern world-picture, taken together with the conception of God as serendipitous creativity, evokes a significantly different sort of faith and hope and piety than that associated with the Christian symbol-system as traditionally understood. The child-like trust and assurance and consolation, characteristic of the conviction that throughout our lives we are cared for lovingly by a heavenly father, is no longer available. In exchange, we humans become aware of ourselves as a unique species deeply embedded in the magnificent intricate web of life on planet Earth, with distinctive obligations and responsibilities to that web and the creativity manifest in it. Thinking of God in this way undercuts the arrogant stance of much traditional Christianity vis-à-vis the natural world as a whole, as well as with respect to other religious and secular traditions.

Moreover, understanding God – the ultimate mystery of things – in this way facilitates (more effectively than the traditional anthropomorphic creator/lord/father imagery did) maintaining a *decisive qualitative distinction*, though not an ontological separation, between God and the created order. This distinction, perhaps the most important contribution of the monotheistic religions to human self-understanding, provides the basis for regarding God (creativity)

as the *sole* appropriate focus for human devotion and worship, that which alone can properly orient human life. All other realities, being finite, transitory, and corruptible – created goods which come into being and pass away – become, when worshipped and made the central focus of human orientation, dangerous idols that bring disaster into human affairs. This important distinction between God (the ultimate mystery of things) and the idols is strongly emphasized in the symbolic picture I am sketching here.

Similarly, conceiving humans as biohistorical beings who have emerged on one of the countless creative trajectories moving through the cosmos – instead of as the climax of all creation, distinguished from all other creatures as the very “image of God” (Gen. 1:26-28) – makes it clear that we are indissolubly a part of the created order, and not in any way to be confused with the serendipitous creativity manifest throughout the cosmos. In this picture, the too easy human-centeredness of traditional Christian thinking is thoroughly undercut. We can exist only (as far as we are aware) within the boundaries and conditions of life found on the particular trajectory within the created order in which we have appeared.

These contentions have very important implications for the way we think about ethics. The Christian ethic that we have inherited was focused almost entirely on our attitudes toward, and interactions with, other persons or personal beings. But if God is understood as the creativity manifest throughout the cosmos, and if humans are understood as deeply embedded in, and basically sustained by, the web of life on planet Earth, then our attitudes and activities are to be ordered in terms of what fits properly into this web of living creativity, all members of which are neighbors that we should love; and what is in response to, and further contributes to, the ongoing creative development of our trajectory (the activity of God) within this web. Thus, the two central themes of my life and my theological reflection – the problematic of faith in God and the deep conviction about the significance of radical Christian ethics – meld into a unified naturalistic/historicistic conception of human existence in a world pervaded by serendipitous creativity.

There will be those who say that in this theology God has really disappeared in the mists of mystery, and that true faith in God is thus also gone. To that I reply, true faith in God is not living with a conviction that everything is going to be okay in the end because we know that our heavenly

father is taking care of us. It is, rather, acknowledging and accepting the ultimate mystery of things, and precisely in face of that mystery going out like Abraham (as Hebrews 11:8 puts it), not really knowing where we are going, but nevertheless moving forward creatively and with confidence: confidence in the serendipitous creativity that has brought our trajectory and us into being, has continued to sustain the human project within the web of life that surrounds and nurtures us, and has given us a measure of hope for that project here on planet Earth. Though strikingly different from certain traditional Christian emphases, this understanding of God and of the human is clearly a form of *radical monotheism* (to use H.R. Niebuhr's term).³⁰

Moreover, this conception can be developed into a full-orbed Christian interpretation of human faith and life, if the creativity that is God is brought into significant connection with the poignancy and power of the story and character of Jesus and the radical ethic which he lived and inspired in others. Since we now see that we are to love and give ourselves and our lives not only to our *human* neighbors and enemies, but also to the wider orders of life, this perspective deepens and widens the radicality of the Christian ethic.

I have recently come to reflect again on Nietzsche's cry that "God is dead," and to reassess it from the standpoint of my proposal that we think of God as creativity – keeping in mind that Nietzsche (as much as I) strongly emphasizes creativity. And I now can see, more clearly than earlier in my life, that for me, as for Nietzsche, the traditional anthropomorphic God has long since died; it was precisely the authority and authoritarianism of that God with which I was struggling for much of my life, and which for a long time I found difficult to repudiate. But with my realization that theology is, and always has been, essentially an activity of human imaginative construction, I came to see this development as the death of a particular human symbolic formation – a symbolism doubtless very important in western religions and thus in western history (and in my own life), but no longer pertinent to or nourishing of our human condition today. Theologians should not, however, give up their vocation to think through the problematics of our God-talk and our faith in God. That would be to throw out the baby with the bath. They are called, rather, to seek to re-imagine, reconceive, reconstruct the symbol "God" with metaphors drawn from the ways in which we now understand ourselves and our world.

For traditional Mennonite understandings of Christian faith, what was most important was not the creeds that we confess but how we live our lives in the midst of our neighbors and our enemies: we should be concerned about all our fellow humans, and seek to live among them in love and in service to their needs. In continuing to hold this conviction (now in an ecologically expanded form) I remain very distant from Nietzsche, who focused his life and hopes on the glorious creativity of the *Übermensch*, showing little concern for all those “little men” whom he scorned. In my view it is only as we give our lives in service (as Matt. 25:40 puts it) to “the least of these” little men and women on Earth, and to the processes that sustain all of Earth’s creatures, that we gain true human dignity and fulfillment. Not because an authoritarian divine king has so ordered things, but because (and this is one of the mysterious serendipities of history) the supposed divine authority of that king and of a man thought to be his “only begotten son” led to the formation of historical traditions that emphasized the radical ethic of agape-love, of forgiveness and reconciliation, as the right way to live humanly and humanely – even, perhaps especially as we today can see, in an ecologically-ordered cosmos pervaded by glorious creativity.³¹

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Notes

¹ Quoted in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1. What I mean by this remark is probably quite different from what Wittgenstein meant by it. I hope my meaning will come clear in the course of this paper.

² For a general statement about the background of my theological work, see “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage,” *Religious Studies Review* 20, No. 3 (1994): 177-181; for those who want to know more about how my Mennonite background has influenced my thinking, see “Apologia Pro Vita Sua,” in *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*, ed. Harry Loewen (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1988), 126-38, and another called “The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective,” in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (North Newton, KS: Bethel College,

1996), 1-19. Short pieces on specific themes in my work include "The Influence of Feminist Theory on my Theological Work," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, 1 (1991): 112-15.

³ In two early articles (among others), I explored some aspects of this central Mennonite conviction: "Some Theological Emphases of the Early Swiss Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 25. 2 (1951): 75-99; and "Nonresistance and Responsibility," in *Concern: A Pamphlet Series for Questions of Christian Renewal*, no. 6 (1958): 5-29 (reprinted, with changes, in my book *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and Other Mennonite Essays* [Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979], 63-81); see also *The Context of Decision* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961). Some more recent articles bearing on this theme: "Jesus as Absolute Norm? Some Questions," in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. R.J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, 1993), 118-21; "Mennonite Peace Theology in a Religiously Plural World," *Conrad Grebel Review* 14. 1 (1996), 33-47; and "The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective," *op.cit.*

⁴ A more explicit and detailed analysis of this matter can be found in Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), chs. 2-3.

⁵ G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957).

⁷ I found H. Richard Niebuhr's, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941) particularly helpful.

⁸ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

⁹ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

¹⁰ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Context of Decision* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961).

¹¹ A brief sketch of this way of thinking about religious truth-claims is found in my last book, *God – Mystery – Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) chs. 12-13. The earliest steps in this direction are found in my 1958 essay on "Nonresistance and Responsibility," *op.cit.*

¹² Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribners, 1968).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 464-71.

¹⁴ Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). Also translated into French. The citation here is from page 99.

¹⁵ The phrase "imaginative construction" was probably derived from my dissertation work on R.G. Collingwood, who used it to characterize the historian's act of putting together historical materials into a coherent account; see especially *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 241-49. I used the term frequently in my Ph.D. dissertation and in my first book based on it, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*; see, e.g., 44f., 93, 102.

¹⁶ Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1975, 1979, 1995; now published by Oxford University Press). Also translated into Japanese and Korean. All page references are to the third edition. This book and its title were inspired in part by R.G. Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

¹⁷ Ch. 2 of *God – Mystery – Diversity*.

¹⁸ Kaufman, *Essay*, 56, 59, and 71, respectively.

¹⁹ Many of these latter have been collected and published in books: *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and Other Mennonite Essays* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979); *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); and *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester, England: University of Manchester Press, and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985). This last book has been translated into German, Italian, Japanese, and Korean.

²⁰ Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²¹ See ch. 3, endnotes 8 and 18.

²² First published in the *Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972): 337-62. Later reprinted (with some alterations) under the title, “Theology and the Concept of Nature” in *The Theological Imagination*, ch. 8.

²³ First published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (March 1983): 3-14; and later, with some revisions, becoming the first chapter of *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985). The citation here is from this revised version, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-42. Just a couple of years later I presented a paper entitled “God and Emptiness” to the Buddhist-Christian dialogue group of which I am a member. In this “experimental” piece I explored respects in which our understanding of God would be revolutionized if we dropped our (almost universal) presupposition – taken over from Greek metaphysical reflection – that God must be thought of in terms of the concept of *being* (either as “a being” or as “being itself”), substituting instead the Buddhist notion of *emptiness* (*sunyata*) as our most fundamental metaphysical concept. Such a change would lead to radical reconception of what we mean by God, a reconception that would thoroughly undermine western thinking of God so largely in reified notions of *power* (omnipotence), and would open theologians to much more radically Christomorphic ideas of God’s “weakness” and “nonresistance” – a Mennonite-grounded proposal that I had earlier made in my *Systematic Theology* (see 219ff., 493ff.). These sorts of reflection, I think, helped prepare me to give up the substantial thinking of most traditional conceptions of God as I worked out the notion of God as “serendipitous creativity”. This paper was first published in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 9 (1989): 175-87 under the title, “God and Emptiness: An Experimental Essay,” with a slightly different version in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, ed. Taitetsu Unno (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 82-97. It has been republished (with some additions) in *God – Mystery – Diversity*, 141-56.

²⁵ A briefer presentation of the position worked out in *In Face of Mystery*, together with specific discussion of the bearing of that position on the problems posed for theology by human religious and cultural diversity, was published three years later in *God – Mystery – Diversity*.

²⁶ See Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997).

²⁷ For further elaboration of this problem and of the paragraphs immediately following, see my article, “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 2 (June 2001): 409-25.

²⁸ H.N. Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

²⁹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), 163.

³⁰ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960).

³¹ In these reflections I suggest that, after giving it a trial for some years, I gave up as inadequate for today's world the more or less traditional *confessional* stance in theology that I acquired at Yale Divinity School. That claim should, perhaps, be further nuanced. Two points should be mentioned. First, although the understanding of God that I ultimately construct – featuring the metaphor of serendipitous creativity – does seem more appropriate to modern evolutionary/ecological thinking than traditional anthropomorphic conceptions, it can hardly be regarded as rationally *coercive*. It will become effective in human life, therefore, only if and as it is affirmed and implemented through “acts of faith,” including faith in modern cosmological, biological, and social scientific ways of understanding the world and our human place within it. Thus, a kind of confessional move is still involved, though it is one that claims a significantly greater degree of “appropriateness” to today's world than the confessionalism I acquired at Yale. Second, with respect to the other theme of this paper – my (Mennonite) emphasis on a radical Christian ethic of love – I may seem to remain on more arbitrary confessional ground. Many others (including most Christians) do not find this kind of stance convincing. Is my ecological/ethical position, built on a transformed Christian pacifism, just as arbitrary as the confessionalism of the traditional God-talk that I have found so deeply unsatisfactory? Or is there justification for holding (as I do with reference to my reconstructed God-talk) that – considering the state of the world today – a radical ethic of self-giving love has a certain “appropriateness” that should be taken seriously? Two observations are worth considering in this connection: (1) Given that we humans are rapidly destroying the natural environment that sustains us (along with much other life), it is imperative that as many of us men and women as possible – especially those living in the high-consumption industrial world – *sacrifice* our own desires for comfort and ease (a “high standard of living”) in the hope of reversing continuing damage to the ecological order. (2) Given the sorry state of human affairs in the world, it is imperative that as many of us as possible act in self-sacrificial ways to promote reconciliation, peace, and justice (instead of continuing power struggles and warfare). In short, an ethic grounded in Christian self-giving love, though indeed involving a confessional stance that many may not want to adopt, has significant pragmatic justification. In my view, in the position to which I have finally come, the two basic themes (God-talk and Jesus' radical ethic of love) are not treated in substantially different ways. My overall stance is not an *arbitrary* confessional one, but one that can be regarded as *fitting* in this time and place in human history on planet Earth.



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