Gordon Kaufman and a Theology for the Seeker

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Abstract: This article begins to develop a theology for the multi-worldview seeker, based on the constructive theological work of Gordon Kaufman. Seeking, as discussed in this article, is an attitude of life, characterized by interest in more than one theological, philosophical, or spiritual worldview, without any short or mid-term intention to commit oneself to one of them. In the United States, the Unitarian Universalist Association is a denomination that houses many theological seekers. The principles and sources of faith of that denomination offer an interesting foundation for the attitude of seeking. Constructing a theology for the seeker based on these principles should include a coherent account of concepts such as truth, God, spiritual growth, and ethics as they might follow from those principles. This article identifies possible incoherencies in the use of these concepts by seekers and proposes ways to escape them.

1. Introduction

In secularizing societies such as those in Western Europe as well as, to a lesser extent, in the US, being part of one specific religious, philosophical, or spiritual worldview is no longer taken for granted. Membership in many religious denominations is decreasing. People may not be willing to commit to one singular worldview, because they are not willing to limit themselves to one specific tradition, do not consider these traditions to be authoritative for their personal religious view, or because they do not want to commit themselves to a denomination. Yet, this does not necessarily imply an absence of interest in these traditions or in religion, philosophy, and spirituality at large. Another route is to look for a way to order life in a meaningful and ethical way by searching for inspiration in various traditions and looking for insight and spiritual growth by a variety of means such as lectures, retreats, books, TV programs, discussions, etc. This attitude in life, which I will call seeking, increasingly seems to be practiced by many people in Western secularizing multicultural societies. Although a large majority of seekers search without membership in any denomination or group, that is not necessary. In fact, various liberal religious groups house multi-worldview seekers. Some even explicitly mention seeking in their principles, mission statements, or in texts describing their identity. Such groups, including the congregations of Vrijzinnigen Nederland in The Netherlands, the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in the UK, and the Unitarian Universalist Association in the US, offer

pluralist programs derived from various worldviews[1] aimed to facilitate the seekers' search for truth and meaning.[2]

Surprisingly, little systematic reflection has been done on this attitude of seeking. How can seeking be done in a coherent way? What reasons are there to adopt that attitude? Which ideas are implied by seeking, and which ideas or religious views are incoherent with that attitude?

It seems that what is needed is a theology for the seeker that systematically reflects on the coherence and implications of the seeker's view and practices. This should be a theology that helps seekers to shape their search in a coherent and meaningful way, a theology that helps seekers to understand what they are doing and how they can do better and be more effective, especially if they are gathering or worshipping together. Such a theology is to be understood very broadly and does not necessarily include theist views only. The religious reflection of seekers may also consider nontheist worldviews and science, and therefore, a theology for the seeker should include those as well.[3]

Most religious traditions only use one source of faith, a limited set of sources of faith (e.g., the books included in the bible), or consider one source or one set of sources authoritative above all others. Here, it is important to realize that most sources of faith never came into existence with the intent to be compatible with other sources of faith. Thus, it is not surprising that incompatibility between sources of faith often occurs. As most traditions use only one sources of faith, to them the possible incompatibility of their source of faith with other sources of faith is not very important. For seekers, specifically, as they use many sources of faith, such incompatibility may occur. For them it is important, as they have to find ways to deal with these incompatibilities, to build a meaningful personal integrated religious view. It is for this reason, that prevention of incoherencies is an important aspect of a theology of the seeker. Thus, although incoherence may not bet the worst thing that can happen to humanity (living a good life probably is more important (see Section 8)), this article to a large extent concentrates on the prevention of incoherence.

The theology to be developed should be able to help seekers to understand what they are doing and how they can do better and be more effective, especially if they are gathering or worshipping together. Such a theology may also function as a theology for those denominations (such as the groups mentioned) who aim to house seekers and who try to describe their identity in positive wording[4]. Among seekers, a number of religious concepts which are frequently used may lead to incoherence. Among these concepts four are discussed in this article: Truth, God, spiritual growth, and ethics.

This article aims to be a starter for the development of a theology of the seeker. In Section 2, the seeker is described, and it is indicated where seekers can be found. This section will also demonstrate that American Unitarian Universalists (UUs, i.e., people being part of the Unitarian Universalist Association, UUA) can be considered as a group that houses seekers. This will be done by showing that the principles and sources of faith as formulated by the UUA are in agreement with my description of seekers. In Section 3, the need for a theology of the seeker is explicated and possible incoherencies that may arise in constructing such a theology will be identified. In Section 4, the constructive theological work of Gordon Kaufman[5] is introduced, which will prove to be helpful in constructing a theology for the seeker. In Sections 5–8 the possible incoherencies in the four concepts mentioned will be identified and discussed, and with help of the work of Gordon Kaufman, escape routes will be indicated. In this respect, Section 5 discusses the meaning of the concept of truth for

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[1] In this article I make a distinction between the words "worldview" and "tradition". Worldview will be used in the philosophical, religious, or spiritual sense and includes both theistic and nontheistic views. Thus, there are Marxist wordviews, Christian wordviews, and Buddhist worldviews. Tradition is to be understood in the sociological way as a group of people. Thus, Unitarian Universalism is primarily to be seen as one tradition, being inspired by many worldviews.

[2] See, respectively, www.vrijzinnigen.nl, www.unitarian.org.uk and www.uua.org.

[3] This broad use of the word theology is in agreement with its use by Gordon Kaufman.

[4] Many people who are a member of these groups tend to describe their identity in negative wordings: We don't believe in dogmas, we don't believe the Bible to be the single source of authority, etc.

[5] Gordon Kaufman was not a Unitarian Universalist, but a liberal Mennonite. However, because the framework Kaufman constructs is thoroughly pluralistic, his work has important applicability outside Christianity, especially also for seekers.

seekers, Section 6 deals with the concept of God, Section 7 with spiritual growth and Section 8 with ethics. Section 9 concludes this article.

2. The Seeker and Where to Find Them

The multi-worldview seeker, as I will use this concept in this article, is described by the following:

1. Interested in religion and spirituality as offered by more than one religious, philosophical, or spiritual worldview.
2. At least for the mid-term, not willing to exclusively commit oneself to one of those worldviews. By "mid-term" it is meant that seekers are not short-term seekers, looking to find a suitable religious home relatively soon. Seeking is an attitude towards life that can be adopted for many years, although of course, seekers will not exclude the possibility that they will eventually feel sufficiently at home in one worldview to commit fully to it and participate in denominations built around that worldview.
3. Convinced that, although a group or community may be a fruitful environment for seeking, in the end, the direction of their religious path is individual[6]. There is an eagerness to search and pursue their individual path with some level of dedication.
4. Looking for inspiration from e.g., various authors, scriptures, films, workshops, retreats, lectures, friends, and developments in society. Generally, seekers may feel inspired by the classical religious scriptures and have an interest in them, but do not consider scriptures as ultimate authorities.

A couple of remarks have to be made about this definition. First of all, the worldviews as mentioned in point 1 are to be understood broadly and may include inspiration by science, logic, and direct experience of miracle and wonder, such as e.g., mystical experience. A second remark has to do with the word "religious": For many seekers their seeking process might be considered religious in character. Some, however, will not identify with the word religious. This may be because they relate the word "religious" with religious organizations or denominations (a sociological understanding, conform for example Dürkheim[7]), while they don't, or because they understand religion as something which has to do with an unseen reality (Tylor)[8], which is for them not the essence of their belief. Such seekers may, or may not, identify more strongly with words such as spiritual or philosophical. In this article, religious is meant as reflection on ultimate concern (Tillich or Yinger)[9]. Similarly, the word seeking does not necessarily involve a search for a religious home or denomination (see Section 3 for a discussion of this). Neither does it necessarily seek an unseen reality. Although both may be included in the search process, at least a search for concerns, and especially ultimate concern, is included, as well as ways to ascribe that/those concern(s).

In The Netherlands and the UK, many seekers are not part of a single religious, philosophical, or spiritual organization, but look for their religious needs in a mixture of books, discussions, courses, retreats, etc. Some seekers are part of organizations which are welcoming diversity in their groups such as liberal Christian denominations, religious humanist groups, Buddhism in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, and Freemasonry. In The Netherlands, Vrijzinnigen Nederland, being rooted in two worldviews (religious humanism and liberal Christianity) explicitly claims to house seekers, and in the UK, the same applies to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, although

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[6] This is not to say that the individual is necessarily solipsistic or unmoored. Next to personal genetics and the personal story of life, the path the individual chooses will strongly depend on the scoial environment, family background, and culture the individual originates from and exists in.

[7] (Dürkheim 1912, p. 65).

[8] (Tylor 1871, pp. 383, 424).

[9] Yinger (Yinger 1970, p. 7) defines religion by: "Religion is the organized effort to make virtue of our ultimate necessities: It is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate in the face of death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart human associations".

both these groups are only reaching a small part of the seekers in those countries[10]. In the US, seekers can find a home in one the congregations of the UUA.

The description in the previous paragraph of seekers finding a home in existing denominations seems paradoxical, as the existence of these denominations, being spiritual traditions themselves, suggests that seekers find their home here, thus ending their search. The way out of this paradox appears to be the fact that these denominations, although they are religious organizations similar to many other religious organizations, do not commit themselves to one of the main spiritual worldviews, but offer a program that offers elements out of various worldviews. Thus, their program may include mindfulness meditation out of the Buddhist worldview combined with liberal Christian church services, earth-oriented rituals, as well as lectures on various philosophical traditions In the more creative communities of these denominations, members develop their own rituals that feed their spiritual needs at that moment, in that place.

The fact that inspiration is obtained from various worldviews does not imply that groups of seekers are syncretist. The various traditions remain separate sources of inspiration existing next to each other. There is no attempt to integrate these traditions into one doctrine that is valid for the entire group or denomination. If there is an attempt at integration, it is integration at the individual level, allowing each individual to make his or her own integration out of the pluralism offered.

The functioning of the UUA as a home for seekers becomes clear from their principles and sources of faith (see Appendix A). In this declaration, we find in the sources of faith a list of traditions within which UUs seek for truth, while the principles serve as a description of moral commitments, as well as a framework to regulate and place limits on their seeking.

Later in this article I will use the principles and sources of faith of the UUA as a description of seeking, therefore, I will now start with checking whether indeed, all characteristics of seekers as I have introduced them in the beginning of this section can be found implicitly or explicitly in those principles and sources of faith. Interest in religion and spirituality as offered by more than one religious, philosophical, or spiritual worldview is clear from the sources of faith. They describe the world religions that inspire them. Although UUs are inspired by the various sources of faith, at least for the mid-term many are not willing to exclusively commit themselves to one of those worldviews. This is clear from the fact that UUs have many long-term members, a fact which could not be explained if they were just some sort of introduction course and/or educational institute for the various religious worldviews that inspire them. That means that people become part of UUism because, at least for the mid-term, they are not willing to exclusively commit themselves to one of the main religious worldviews[11]. The fourth principle of UUism mentions a free search for truth and meaning. This implies that, in the end, the direction of their religious path is individual. There is an eagerness to search and pursue their individual path with some level of dedication. That this search is free is very important for UUs, and that is to be taken very strictly. If the search for truth and meaning would be expected to lead to a correspondence with a view of the group (i.e., group pressure) or of any authority such as scripture or doctrinal tradition, that search would not be considered free[12]. For this reason, dogmatics, or any authority to doctrine, is rejected. The freedom of search, as well as the acceptance of one another, is to safeguard the individuality of the search. The participation of individual UUs in UU communities shows that they consider those groups as a fruitful environment for this individual search. The mentioning of encouragement to spiritual growth implies dedication to the search process. The sources of faith are not limited to the holy scriptures of any single worldview. Next to words and deeds of prophetic women and men (to be understood as from various traditions),

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[10] Both organizations are member groups of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.

[11] Not all UUs are seekers exactly. Some may stick with UUism because they have a primary commitment to one worldview coupled with a willingness to learn from others and to be in community with people of diverse worldviews.

[12] The limitation of this freedom is the fact that the search is a responsible one, as the search is not to endanger the individual seeker nor the fellow worshippers. In that sense there is a responsibility to the group.

the UU sources mention individual experience of mystery and wonder, as well as science. This is reflected in worship, which can strongly vary in form, contents, and sources of inspiration used. Thus, UUs can look for inspiration from various authors, scriptures, films, workshops, retreats, lectures, friends, and developments in society.

Because the UU principles fit well with the description of the seeker, they can be used to get a further understanding of the seeker, to identify possible incoherencies in seeking, and possible ways out of these incoherencies.

3. The Need for a Theology of the Seeker

In the present multicultural and multireligious society, it is not surprising that people look for inspiration as offered by the various religious, philosophical, and spiritual worldviews, as such worldviews are engaged continuously in daily life. Such a search for inspiration, if it aims for finding a religious home (let us call this a type-1 search), should be considered as an intermediate phase: That phase could get two forms: (1) Between a stage in life in which there was no interest in religion and a stage where the awakening interest finds its home, or (2) a stage of being at home in one tradition and the stage of feeling at home in another tradition (or none at all). Such a phase is characterized by not-knowing; a lack of orientation; and a process of reflection on self, the world, and the way to make life meaningful. As long as the people in this phase do not claim knowledge about the topics they are in doubt of, not knowing or lack of orientation can hardly be considered incoherent.

The search of the seeker is of another kind (let us call this a type-2 search). Here, the search is no intermediate phase, but a consciously or unconsciously chosen way of life, at least for the medium term. It is a way of life committed to the search itself rather than committed to possible outcomes of that search. It is a way of enduring openness, enduring curiosity of what more the world has to offer, enduring critical consideration of the self, looking for correction, and relativization of religious views held so far. The type-2 search, in contrast to type-1, is vulnerable to incoherencies. These possible incoherencies are investigated in this article.

Due to its openness to all kind of sources for inspiration, traditions, and methods of reflection, the possibilities for individual constructive theologies of seekers are basically endless. In fact, the various sources of faith that inspire seekers offer plenty of possibilities for personal theologies, and as a consequence, the theologies of seekers may widely differ. The criterion for each of them is that it orders the life of any one specific seeker in a way that is meaningful to that seeker. Therefore, it is not straightforward to say something generally about a theology of the seeker in affirmative terms. However, what is specific to the theology of the seeker is the way of dealing with diverse and contradicting views. This way of dealing may have implications for the seeking process. Moreover, assumptions implied in the seeking process have to be made explicit as they may influence and limit the possible outcomes of the seeking process. If these aspects are not carefully considered, seeking may lead to incoherencies and if so, it may fail to order life in a meaningful way. Thus, the possibilities for individual theology of seekers may be endless, but they are not limitless. While affirmations about personal beliefs are highly personal, possible incoherencies in certain views transcend the individuals that hold them. For this reason, I will now turn to possible incoherencies in seeking, identifying limits of theologies for seekers and indicating ways to keep away from these limits.

As suggested, type-1 searches can hardly be incoherent. Such a search can result in a view on religion and life, and that results in the end of the search. Those results, of course, can be incoherent, but that does not imply incoherence of the search itself. As long as there is a stage of not knowing, lack of orientation, knowledge, and orientation, it cannot be incoherent.

For type-2 search, this is different. The searching attitude is deliberately chosen, it includes a choice of not committing to any religious, philosophical, or spiritual worldview; it includes a conviction that criteria to adopt certain ways of searching are individual; it includes the idea that the criteria for what satisfies in the available answers are individual; it declines the ultimate authority of any

specific scripture; and it may (and likely does so) include ethics, based on tolerance, or based on progressive principles.

Therefore, the type-2 search, as adopted by seekers, in contrast to the type-1 search, may be open to various traditions, but it is not value neutral, or wholly free of normative principles. For this reason, the position of the seeker needs careful consideration.

In this paper, four concepts that may lead to incoherencies will be discussed. The first concept that needs closer consideration is the concept of truth. The principles of the UUA state that their congregations are to promote a free search for truth and meaning. Now, if finding truth is impossible, the search for truth makes no sense. Thus, we have to assume that it is possible to find truth. If that is the case, it seems that truth limits the possibilities for the search going forward, as further search outcomes, if they are to order life in a meaningful way, should be coherent with truth already found. Thus, truth can be experienced as a limitation of the freedom of the search. More specifically, seekers will have to assess whether the various sources of faith mentioned contain truth, and subsequently they have to select only those sources of faith that correspond to the concept of truth that they discovered. As it is convincingly shown in literature that the truths of the various traditions often contradict, this should lead to the exclusion of some sources of faith, thus limiting the further search for truth and meaning. The complexities with respect to the concept of truth are discussed in Section 5.

The second concept that needs consideration is "God". Some of the traditions which inspire the seeker do use a concept of God, but others, such as humanism or some forms of Buddhism, do not, or they consider the existence and worship of God of secondary importance This means that among seekers there are people who consider themselves theists, others are atheists, and many, one way or another, call themselves somewhere in between. The use of the word God has important implications for worship. In fact, it might be debatable if for proper worship, it is necessary to have an entity to worship, being called God or otherwise. Of course, this depends on what is considered worship and what is considered "proper worship". In UU congregations, worship is a common practice, and in this worship, UUs participate independent of whether they are theists or atheists. But that does not mean this is true for all seekers. In fact, some seekers may consider worship that does not assume an object of worship irrelevant, because they consider worship only relevant if their act of devotion has an object. Other seekers may consider worship irrelevant, because they assume that worship always assumes a pregiven object of worship; because they do not consider such an object in their own religious view, they prefer to refrain from worship at all. As the religious views of seekers widely vary, so do their concepts of worship and proper worship. For this reason, in this article worship is to be interpreted very broadly, which means that it includes gatherings and rituals in which no given object of worship is presumed.

In worship by UUs, the word God is regularly used. For example, the word God appears frequently in the hymnbooks UUs are using[13], and that is true for the UK Unitarians and Vrijzinnigen Nederland as well. This may lead to at least two possible incoherencies. First, how is it possible that the word God is used in worship and singing, without alienating seekers who mainly feel inspired by atheist worldviews? Secondly, if God is considered as ultimate point of reference, how is it possible to adhere to a search which is free, in the sense that it may end both in theist and atheist positions? Or in other words, isn't the religious pluralism, as adopted by UUs, basically a form of polytheism, and isn't that incompatible with inspiration from monotheist worldviews? A third issue to be considered, is the actual meaning of the word God. If the views on God so widely vary among the sources seekers use, and therefore also among seekers, what do seekers do when they use the word God in their worship? And finally, if individual seekers, being inspired by several interpretations of the concept of God,

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[13] For example in the hymnbook "Singing the living tradition" (Belletini 1993), 7 out of the first 20 hymns mention the word God.

use the word God, what do they mean? To investigate this further, these four issues with the use of the concept of God by seekers are discussed in Section 6.

The third concept that needs consideration is "spiritual growth". For seekers, such as UUs, spiritual growth is important, to the extent that their principles state the encouragement to spiritual growth as an explicit element of UUism. Obviously, the authors and UU readers of the principles have an implicit idea of what spiritual growth is, taking the principle on spiritual growth as a guideline for the activities of the UU community, but: What is spiritual growth? Is it a concept to be derived from one of the worldviews that inspire seekers at the expense of other worldviews? Or is it a kind of common denominator of all those concepts, or the total of all possibilities to grow as appearing in the various traditions? How can I grow spiritually in a coherent and consistent way, if on day one, when I feel inspired by Christianity, I aim to grow following Jesus and on day two, when I feel inspired by Buddhism, I aim to grow according to the teachings of the Buddha? It is clear that spiritual growth, being one of the main reasons for seekers to gather and worship, needs closer consideration, and that will be done in Section 7.

The fourth and last concept that will be discussed in this paper is ethics. Each of the religious worldviews that inspire the seeker offers their own ethics. These ethics sometimes contradict. This may lead to a lack of guidance on moral issues, but may also lead to undesirable inconsistency over time. If seekers are willing to be inspired by the various religious worldviews in a continuously changing mix, it might follow that their personal ethics continuously change as well. This may be experienced as religion failing to help order and live life in a coherent and meaningful way. Thus, the ethics of the seeker needs consideration, which will be done in Section 8.

4. Gordon Kaufman

"There really is no universally human position available to us; every religious (or secular) understanding and way of life we might uncover is *a particular* one"[14]

For many conventional theologians, theology is a process of discovery or explication of an authoritative position, e.g., as found in sources like the Bible. For seekers, this approach, although delivering insights, in the end may have little use for discovering ultimate truth, because the seeker may realize that such a task of discovery and explication executed in the various traditions in the world results in images and concepts that often contradict[15]. Thus, the results fail in giving guidance for what is of ultimate orientation in life. An alternative approach is the so-called constructivist approach, i.e., the analysis, criticism, and construction of religious images and concepts such as God[16]. The constructivist approach was promoted, for example, by the liberal Mennonite Gordon Kaufman (1925–2011), Edward Mallinckrodt, Jr. Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School.

In his main work, "In face of Mystery", as well as his other books, Kaufman builds a thoroughly pluralistic framework[17], based on an agnostic starting point and assuming just formal, but not any material, overlap between the various worldviews (including atheist worldviews). The formal overlap is that religious worldviews are looking for symbols and creating them to help to order and live life in a meaningful way, preferably fitting with the culture they exist in.

Kaufman, considering himself a Christian, sees himself living in a culture that he considers basically Christian, but in this culture a specific interpretation of Christian symbols is not taken for granted, and Christian symbols are often interpreted in an old fashioned, and now poorly functioning (i.e., "parochial") way. Within his pluralist framework, and using the room the framework offers, Kaufman continues to construct a specific Christian theology that should satisfy three requirements:

14　(Kaufman 1993, chp. 2).
15　(Kaufman 1993, chp. 9).
16　(Kaufman 1993, chp. 2).
17　(Kaufman 1993, preface).

It should be coherent; it should help to order and live life in a meaningful way; and it should fit in the present age, i.e., help humanity with the present problems of society, including the threat of nuclear destruction and environmental catastrophe. The Christian part of his theology comes in, when Kaufman defines six small steps of faith. The six steps, although arguments are given for them, are not logically necessary. If one does not take one of the six steps or takes them differently, the process may lead to non-Christian worldviews.

For the purpose of doing theology for the seeker, Kaufman is very helpful for a number of reasons. First of all, it is constructive theology that he proposes. As explained above, discovery and explication is just part of the search of the seeker. Discovery and explication may be important for seekers because they help to identify and clarify sources of faith and inspiration. However, discovery and explication are not enough to order life and make it meaningful. To make sense of all things discovered and explained, which are often contradicting views, seekers will have to construct symbols and concepts. These symbols and concepts should, on the one hand, embrace the plurality of religious insights discovered around them; on the other hand, they should provide coherent views and help to order and live life in a meaningful way. Thus, the construction of theology as proposed by Kaufman as well as the criteria he proposes to do so, may be helpful for the seeker. A second reason to use Kaufman's work for this purpose is his agnostic starting point. As Kaufman states: "Critical theology, then, is not to be understood as a discipline that attempts to *transcend* all particular commitments and perspectives through developing a universal or generic theological stance (an impossible project, in my view). It is to be seen, rather, as a pluralistic discipline that attempts to investigate and understand, and to find ways of assessing and reconstructing the actual orientational commitments to which women and men today give themselves."[18]. This starting point is recognizable for seekers without an upbringing in a specific religious tradition, and it may be experienced as liberating by seekers with a religious upbringing who wish to critically investigate the bias this upbringing has given them. A third reason to consider Kaufman is his pluralistic framework, which denies any privilege or authority to any of the religious traditions or scriptures up front[19]. This agrees with the tendency of seekers to open up to whatever any religious tradition has to teach us. A fourth reason to consider Kaufman is his openness to any religious, philosophical, and spiritual worldview, and therefore also to nontheist worldviews such as Marxists and humanists, which deny, or relativize, the importance of an ultimate metaphysical reality called God. Kaufman states: "I am suggesting that we need secularist and Marxist theologians as much as Christian and Muslim ones"[20]. For other liberal, pluralist authors like John Hick, an ultimate reality is assumed, and each view within the variety of religious worldviews in the world can be seen as an attempt to approach this reality[21]. For seekers, especially if they are willing to seriously consider science and humanism (for example, as formulated in the UU principles), these nontheist worldviews may be important sources of inspiration, and the existence of an ultimate metaphysical reality cannot be taken for granted. Thus, for them, Kaufman offers a better starting point than for example Hick.

There are three aspects of Kaufman's work in which seekers may deviate from him, or at least interpret his framework in a specific way. First of all, Kaufman considers himself to live in a Christian culture and he has a Christian (Mennonite) background. For him, this is a reason to construct a contemporary Christian theology[22] out of his pluralist framework. This cultural background is not the case for many seekers, especially in Western Europe, because that continent is strongly secularized. Seekers may consider their background secularized and multicultural, while their upbringing (in increasing amounts) is not necessarily Christian but often agnostic or pluralist. Thus, for seekers, there is no cultural reason, as for Kaufman, to look for a specifically suitable Christian theology (even though a contemporary

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18 (Kaufman 1996, chp. 13).
19 (Kaufman 1993, chps. 3, 4; 1972, chp. 2).
20 (Kaufman 1996, chp. 13).
21 (Hick 1989) J. Hick, Glifford Lectures.
22 (Kaufman 1993, chps. 17–29).

pluralist Christian theology will be of more meaning for the seeker than an old-fashioned parochial exclusivist version of Christian theology). Second, for Kaufman, the human is a biohistorical creature[23], shaped by evolution bringing about all characteristics they have in common with animals (hence bio), as well as shaped by their history (hence historical). Kaufman mainly sees historicity as a cultural process that shapes humans over many generations and constitutes their view on concepts such as God, world, and humanity. For seekers, although they may do so in communities, the search for truth and meaning is individually chosen. It is an individual search, which means that according to seekers, and in spite of the fact that Kaufman correctly points at the importance of cultural background in religious perception, he may underestimate the influence of the individual, their personal story of life, background, and genetic characteristics on religious choices. Moreover, although a cultural background over several generations may still have influence on an individual, so have friends, contemporary news, and all kind of triggers for a change of heart, readily available in our present-day culture. Thus, present-day society may be more dynamic than Kaufman suggests. For the seeker, during his or her life time, making several shifts of emphasis between the various worldviews is not improbable at all. Third, Kaufman states, the role of the various worldviews is to contribute their insights to the ongoing discussion among humanity in the world. Seekers would not disagree with this at all, as they agree with this pluralist view, and it offers them room and inspiration in their seeking process. However, they would formulate it even stronger: The various worldviews do not only contribute to the discussion between humans. They continuously contribute to the ongoing reflection in the head of the individual seeker: "the pluralism isn't just out there, it is in me", which makes up for a pluralism which may be more radical and far reaching than most theologians, among whom even Kaufman may be one, have realized so far.

Using the strong points of Kaufman's approach, with the possible limitations and interpretations indicated in mind, we will now progress in addressing the issues which are important in constructing a theology for the seeker.

5. Truth

As described above, the search for truth and meaning is so essential to the seeker that this even ended up as one of the principles of the UUA. Yet, at the same time, seekers have many reasons to reject truth claims and refrain from making truth claims for themselves. The first reason is, as indicated, that truth claims may be incompatible with a free search for truth and meaning. Next, truth claims often cannot be proved. In fact, there are many different truth claims, often contradicting, and there is no way to decide between them. According to Kaufman a universal point of view to assess these truths and choose between them is simply not available to humanity[24]. Third, truth claims, and the willingness to defend them, if necessary, by violent means, have brought an enormous amount of suffering. In the present age, this point carries a large amount of weight given the threat of nuclear destruction. Fourth, in an ever more multicultural society, acceptance of one another (see also the UUA principles) is of crucial importance to live together in one society. Claiming truth for the own opinion may make it more difficult to accept the other individual and assess the opinion of the other in an open and positive way. Fifth, a complete respect for the truth and dignity of every individual requires us to accept that the truth for somebody else is as true for that person as our truth is for us. Sixth, the unfoldment of human potential, both on the individual level as well as on the level of the human species, benefits from the openness to every new idea. Finally, denying truth claims and refraining from them is a foundation for an attitude of active openness for ideas and religious views of others that the seeker may be eager to adopt.[25]

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[23] (Kaufman 1993, chps. 8, 9).
[24] (Kaufman 1996, chp. 2).
[25] Openness is an attitude seekers have in common with Mennonites, see Gordon Kaufman in (Weaver 1996, chp. 1).

Obviously, a search for truth and meaning as indicated by the UU principles, in combination with all the indicated objections against truth claims, may lead to incoherence.

Before looking for a way out of this incoherence, let us look at what Kaufman has to say about truth. Kaufman claims that modern historical understanding enables us to see that many quite diverse patterns of religious understanding and truth have emerged historically: The situation of humanity is pluralized through and through[26]. For this reason, Kaufman criticizes the conception of religious truth as if there were some single unified truths to which all religious truth claims approximate. The consequence, for Kaufman, is that truth is not about correspondence to a reality out there. Rather the criteria for truth are pragmatic[27], as earlier argued by William James[28]: Something can be considered true if it succeeds in illuminating humanity's situation in the world and if it helps to orient human life. With this concept of truth in mind, the various great religious traditions deliver their deepest insights and truth in a historical and pluralistic way, each seeing its own insights as contributions to the larger conversation of humankind[29].

A correspondence truth concept is basically not individualistic. If some religious concept, symbol, or insight corresponds with a reality out there, it does so for all people. A pragmatic truth concept leaves more room for an individual view: A certain insight may help to order and give guidance to the life of one individual but may not do so for another individual. Thus, the fact that the pragmatic truth of individual or group A (i.e., it is useful to that individual or group) does not contradict the fact that that same statement is not, or is less useful, for individual or group B. Thus, if A and B diverge in their concept of truth, this is not considered an incoherence. Rather this divergence is a source of inspiration as various individuals and groups may inspire and relativize each other's views.

This view of Kaufman and James helps to escape the indicated incoherence in the use of the word truth by seekers, as there are two different concepts of truth involved. The truth that seekers reject is a correspondence truth and the reasons they are doing that are indicated above. In the meantime, the truth seekers are seeking, is led by a pragmatic view on truth.

Thus, the religious truth the seekers are seeking consists of insights that are that convincing (to the individual seeker) that they are useful to give meaning and guidance to their individual life. The role of the great religious worldviews is that they offer their deepest insights, not just contributing to a discussion between people of different traditions, but contributing to an ongoing contemplation within the individual seeker as well. Going through the list of reasons to reject truth claims, they are all reasons to reject truth claims of correspondence; none of them are reasons to reject pragmatic truth claims. Thus, the proposal that seekers are seeking for pragmatic truth and that they should refrain from truth claims of correspondence solves the indicated danger of incoherence[30]. Moreover, pragmatic truth and being meaningful are almost synonyms. Thus, the pragmatic truth concept helps to order life in a meaningful way, directly bringing effectiveness to the process of seeking.

A final remark has to be made with respect to the truth claimed for this article. Like other religious claims, the truth claimed for this article is to be pragmatic in character as well. In the view of the author, it is unlikely to be pragmatic to hold incoherent religious beliefs, as they fail to help order life in a meaningful way. Thus, seekers may find it pragmatic to search for possible incoherencies and ways to prevent them. In that sense, and only in that sense, this article is claimed to be true.

26　(Kaufman 1996, chp. 8).
27　(Kaufman 1995, epilogue).
28　(James 1897, chp. 1).
29　(Kaufman 1996), God, Mystery, Diversity, chp. 8.
30　This discussion is also interesting with respect to Kaufman's opinion that one should refrain from reifying religious concepts. See (Kaufman 1993, chp. 22). Implications of this for the seeker should be investigated further.

6. God

Some religious traditions that inspire the seeker make extensive use of the symbol God: God is described as the ultimate point of reference, ultimate concern, ground of all being, or otherwise. Among these traditions and even within them, the concepts of God irreconcilably vary, God being a person, some abstract thing (nature, something of which nothing greater can be conceived), or a process. There are also traditions which tend not to use the symbol God, or leave it open, even if they do consider some form of ultimate metaphysical reality or mystery. This pluralism is reflected in the various views of theologians, making proposals of how to see God, either as the result of a process of discovery or explication (e.g., explication of Holy Scripture) or as a construction of the human mind, using various criteria. Many of these views contradict, or reflect views on humanity, the world, or ultimate reality that contradict. As several of these views may inspire seekers, this pluralism is also found in the belief systems of seekers, some of them ordering and living their lives based on a very firm and sometimes specific concept of God, while other seekers do not. Moreover, one seeker may feel inspired by various interpretations of this symbol, or to degrees varying in time, leading to pluralism within the belief system of that individual seeker. Both pluralism between seekers, as well as pluralism within the individual seeker, may lead to incoherence.

With respect to pluralism between seekers, first, the word God may be used in worship and singing in which seekers who are predominantly inspired by worldviews which have little room for the concept of God, participate too. Such worship and singing may be experienced as incoherent by seekers skeptical of the concept of God. The other way around, worship that expresses awe for the wonders of nature or that expresses thanks to the Buddha for his insights, or which admires the achievements of science (all of them being in disagreement with certain theist views), may be idolatrous to seekers who believe in God as their ultimate concern or ultimate point of reference.

With respect to pluralism within the individual seeker, such a seeker may also experience incoherence. Serious consideration, reverence, and worship of God understood and confessed in a specific way may exclude the possibility to seriously consider atheism, or other views of God. In fact, consideration of various sources of faith as adopted by UUs may be considered a form of polytheism, and in that sense, it may be incompatible with inspiration from monotheist worldviews.

Let us first consider some of what Gordon Kaufman has to say about God. Kaufman signals that the word God is a word in the English language and therefore, that word has significance as a cultural symbol and tool of self-understanding, whether we are believers or not[31]. Second, the proper business of theology is the analysis, criticism, and construction of the concept of "God"[32]. Therefore, it is not an activity of description or exposition[33]. As a definition of God Kaufman proposes: "God is the name, of that to which we can give ourselves without reservation, that in terms of which human life in the world can most properly be oriented, of that which designates the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else must be understood."[34]. This leaves open the question as to whether God should be thought of as a being, as nonbeing, or in some other way. According to Kaufman, among possible other concepts, a viable Christian concept of God that fits in the present age is to consider God as a process of serendipitous creativity evident in world history[35].

For the seeker, Kaufman's thoughts help in building a theology that is coherent, meaningful, and contemporary, although as we will see, it is possible to formulate and discuss the concept of God in a way that is more inclusive than Kaufman does. First of all, starting with Kaufman, if the approach of the theologian is that of discovery (of characteristics of the divine) or explication of the divine by means of studying authoritative sources (such as scripture), we could assume that such a process of

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31   (Kaufman 1972, chp. 11).
32   (Kaufman 1996, chp. 2).
33   (Kaufman 1995, prologue).
34   (Kaufman 1996, chp. 17).
35   (Kaufman 1985, preface).

discovery could be successful, or the process of explication could be convincing, but in such cases that would lead to conclusions limiting the freedom of the search for truth and meaning: After the successful conclusions have been reached, any search on a path towards further conclusions that contradict the conclusions so far are false and should be rejected as being idolatrous[36]. Thus, doing theology as a process of discovery or explication is either senseless (it cannot be successful) or it leads to incoherencies in the theology of the seeker. The alternative Kaufman offers, to consider theology as a process of construction, works for seekers if the criteria for a successful construction are that it results in pragmatic truth (see Section 5). Thus, an essential element in the proper business of theology for the seeker is analysis, criticism, and construction of concepts of "God", such that it helps seekers in ordering and guiding their life.

The question remains what criteria seekers could use to see what helps them in ordering and guiding their life. Here, Kaufman uses a two-level approach. The first level is a level that discusses the word God at an interreligious level: What does the word mean in English language, how can it be properly used between believers and nonbelievers, and what is the overlap in meaning of the word God among various people who worship specific differing concepts of God? At this first level, the definition of God that Kaufman offers, as introduced previously, is: God is the name, of that to which we can give ourselves without reservation, that in terms of which, human life in the world can most properly be oriented, of that which designates the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else must be understood. This definition is rather formal: For each individual it can be combined with a specific individual view, that is, a description of what it is that deserves our giving without reservation or what it is, that we use as orientation in the world. It is exactly this extra that is added when giving a description or definition of God at the second level. The second level of definition is an individual level, possibly, but not even necessarily, shared by people of similar religious faith. For Kaufman the first level definition leaves room for a lot of possible second level definitions of God, and epistemologically there is no compelling reason to choose any one of them.

Having created this room for various second level definitions of God, Kaufman continues to construct a concept that for him is a contemporary, coherent, relevant, and Christian concept: God as a process of serendipitous creativity[37]. This is a second level approach, indicating what for him deserves his giving without reservation, and what he is willing to use for his orientation in the world.

Now the question arises how seekers can deal with God. Would the proposals of Kaufman work for them? In giving his level one definition, Kaufman probably did not have in mind the idea that seekers can easily switch between the inspiration of various theist worldviews, and between theist and atheist worldviews. However, because Kaufman's approach is rather formal it leaves a lot of room for the seeker to make such switches. However, although Kaufman in his theology tends to leave this room for nontheist belief systems, his definition of God in this respect is not very clear[38]. In fact, his way of defining God, seems to suppose that God exists, or even, that it is necessary that God exists. That being undesirable to seekers, who may consider the idea that God does not exist, or that God is no proper way to symbolize what they believe, I propose to adjust Kaufman's proposal using an approach introduced by UU minister Forrest Church[39]: "God' is not God's name. Referring to the highest power we can imagine, 'God' is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each". Making Church's' definition more precise, clear, and broad it becomes: "God is the name of that which I/an individual consider(s) or experience(s) to be the ultimate mystery or the ultimate point of reference in life.". This leaves more room for atheism than Kaufman's definition, as for atheists it is

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[36] (Kaufman 1993, chp. 4).
[37] (Kaufman 1993, chp. 19; 2004, chp. 3).
[38] Kaufman would be more clear and more inclusive if instead of "God is the name, of that to which we can give ourselves without reservation … " he would have written: "God is a name, individuals can give to that which they think deserves giving themselves without reservation … ".
[39] (Church 2009).

very well possible to agree with this definition, while claiming that they do not have any experience or understanding of ultimate mystery or ultimate point of reference in life, or that they do have such experience or understanding, but that they choose not to identify that experience or understanding with the word God.

Kaufman's second level definition of God may be an appealing proposal, as one may agree with Kaufman that it fits with contemporary understanding of the world, that it is not incoherent with the Christian tradition, and that is useful in ordering and guiding life. However, so are many different proposals of many theologians from many traditions. For the seeker it adds one relevant possible construction of the symbol God, no more and no less.

Using this two-level approach, seekers can escape possible incoherence in their use of the word God. Using the first level, God can be used among seekers in their discussions and worship, as that definition does not assume that God exists or is a symbol that is necessary. It is a descriptive definition, describing the actual use of the word of God by religious seekers. In the meantime, using a second level definition of God, the specific religious view of an individual seeker can be clarified and examined. For that individual, such a definition can be normative, as that individual may believe that that is the only, or the best proper way, to worship God. By making this distinction in the use of the word God, the issues with the use of that word are solved. As the level one definition is not normative, the freedom in the search for truth and meaning is guarded. Possible differences in the concept of God between various seekers and between the various sources of faith used by them do not necessarily lead to polytheism for the individual seeker, as in the level two definition of that particular seeker, God may be unique and single.

7. Spiritual Growth

As indicated, "spiritual growth" is another important concept that needs further investigation for the seeker. Seekers derive their inspiration from various religious, philosophical, and spiritual worldviews. Many of these worldviews have implicitly or explicitly a view on humanity. What is humanity, what is humanization, what is the direction humanity should go, what is the way to salvation, to liberation, insight, etc. An important part of this view on what humanity is, and what the human is and should be, is understood as spiritual growth.

The various worldviews have various concepts of spiritual growth. These concepts can overlap, can even be identical, they can be complementary, or they can contradict. If they overlap or if they are identical that is no problem for seekers, as that overlap may be a strong indication that such an aspect of spiritual growth, pointed at by various worldviews, should be relevant to order and guide their life. If they are complementary, that is no major problem for the seeker either (except that the energy, available time, and span of attention of the seeker may be limited). In fact, the reason seekers look for inspiration in various worldviews, is most likely their differences: It is assumed that these sources of inspiration differ and that each can contribute to the ongoing reflection and spiritual growth in the individual. Each proposes points of view that the other may lack, and in that way, seekers get and aim to get a more complete, more relativized perception of themselves, humanity, the world, and ultimate reality. The various concepts of spiritual growth, as far as they are complementary, each point at different ways to grow, and in that way constitute a spiritual growth that is as broad, as deep, and as multidimensional as humanity has to offer. Indeed, for this reason, the seeker could argue that there is more incoherence on the part of people who commit to a single tradition, since this would seem to place arbitrary limits on one's opportunities to grow.

A problem arises, if the various concepts of spiritual growth contradict. Let us say that at day one, the seeker feels inspired by worldview A and that that worldview suggests growing in direction A*. Then on day two, the seeker feels inspired by worldview B and let's assume that that worldview suggests growing in direction B*, more or less opposite to A*. The result would be that this seeker does not benefit much from this growth over these two days. Now, when this happens for the first time, such a process itself may be a process of development and learning. It may be part of a process of trial

and error, and by going this route, seekers have learned that either A* or B* is not the proper way to go and they should reconsider their individual path of seeking. But now, assume that it is day three, and the seekers realize that, again, they feel inspired by worldview A and that it is not unlikely that on day four they will feel inspired by worldview B again. Should they go for spiritual growth A* and B* again? I think our seekers would consider such a choice incoherent, as it would contribute little to understanding, ordering, and guiding their life. Ordering and living a life in a meaningful way may require some consistency in the spiritual growth process.

For seekers, this constitutes a strong reason to find a concept of spiritual growth that transcends the concepts of spiritual growth from the various worldviews, and that transcends the opportunities for short-term growth as they may experience them at various moments and in various circumstances. But there are more reasons. As the search for truth and meaning is individual, so is the concept of spiritual growth. This means that if I want to get to know the path of other people, possibly learn from them, or if I think my own insights could contribute to their spiritual growth, knowledge and understanding of my own concept of spiritual growth will not suffice: I will need to understand the concept of spiritual growth of the other person, understand what we have in common, and develop language in terms of which we can discuss our differences.

This becomes even stronger if we consider a community of seekers such as UUs, with the explicit commitment to promote spiritual growth in their congregations. What is that spiritual growth, and how does a group promote that if spiritual growth is strictly individual? To find direction in how to grow and in what direction, the seeker may be helped with a concept of growth that transcends the concepts of spiritual growth from the various worldviews, but also takes the individual concepts as well as their diversity in serious consideration. Moreover, the concept of spiritual growth to be constructed should be dynamic, realizing the possibility that directions of desired growth may change in the process of seeking. In fact, such changes, if resulting from progressive insight, are desirable and an implicit goal of the search.

The phrase "spiritual growth" is hardly, or not, used explicitly by Kaufman. However, a great deal is said implicitly. As stated in Section 4, a theology should be coherent, it should help to order and live life in a meaningful way and it should fit in the present age and help humanity with the present existential problems of society, which Kaufman considers to be the threat of nuclear destruction and environmental catastrophe. Implicit in these criteria for theology is a concept of spiritual growth, i.e., spiritual growth being a process of living more coherently, a process in which life becomes more ordered and meaningful, and that is especially so if it is appropriate for the age in which individuals are presently living. For the present age this is the case if they are conscious of the threat of nuclear destruction and conscious of the environment. This would be the concept of spiritual growth that corresponds to the first level of doing theology, corresponding with Kaufman's first level of defining God. But we can consider Kaufman also on the second level, i.e., the level where he defines a Christian concept of God, as a process of serendipitous creativity. At this level, spiritual growth is a process of individual humanization and relativization[40], a process that promotes and stimulates serendipitous creativity in self, in the other, and in the world. As with the concept of God, at first level, interpretation of Kaufman suggests a definition of spiritual growth that is as broad as possible, useful for interreligious dialogue and in communities of pluralist worship. Like the concept of God, at this first level, spiritual growth is defined more or less in a descriptive way. The second level indicates what could work as an individual concept of spiritual growth, being one among many alternatives. At this individual level, the definition of spiritual growth is normative for that individual.

Similar to the discussion of the concept of God, for the theology of the seeker, I take a two-level approach, similar to that which resulted from my interpretation of Kaufman in this respect. In that discussion, the proposal for the first level definition of spiritual growth, as derived from Kaufman,

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[40]   (Kaufman 1995, chp. 3).

seems to work more or less for our purpose but still may be a bit too specific to transcend all concepts of spiritual growth that the seeker may encounter. The reason is, that it is still specifically pointing at nuclear destruction and environment, rather than being formal and descriptive, and therefore, not all relevant concepts or aspects of spiritual growth may fit in. Thus, we need a concept of spiritual growth that is broader than Kaufman's thinking would imply.

What would be most beneficial to the seeker is a first level concept of spiritual growth that is more formal and more relativizing, thus allowing room for all aspects of spiritual growth and taking seriously the various concepts of spiritual growth, as derived from the various worldviews, and as found in various seekers. In this case concepts of growth in psychology may help, as that discipline more or less investigates at a distance from specific religious traditions. More specifically the theory of nondirective therapy, helping individuals to find their way, according to their personality is most promising, as it is a most individualistic approach, looking for the norms of the patient rather than solving problems by external diagnosis and solutions based on authoritative psychological sources. Indeed, the father of nondirective therapy, also called person-centered therapy, the American psychological scientist and therapist Carl Rogers offered a concept of personal growth that can well be applied for our theological purpose of constructing a concept of spiritual growth. According to Rogers, personal growth is a process in which the image of self, and the image of ideal self, become increasingly similar. In his academic research he supports this by an analysis that such an increasing correlation indeed occurs during, and after, what he considers to be successful psychotherapy[41].

In order to construct a useful concept of spiritual growth Rogers' concept of personal growth can be easily translated and applied. In this approach, the first level definition understands spiritual growth as a process in which the image of self as a religious person, and the image of ideal self as a religious person, become increasingly similar. This can be applied to various aspects of spirituality, e.g.,

- Ethics: Spiritual growth includes a process in which my behavior and my thoughts about how I should behave become increasingly similar.
- Practical theology: Spiritual growth includes a process in which my religious practice (prayer, worship, etc.) and my ideal religious practice (e.g., should I pray? How should I worship?) become increasingly similar.
- Systematical theology: My actual belief system becomes more in agreement with what I think my belief system should be, e.g., be coherent, guide me to be a better human, give proper place to my ultimate concerns, etc.

In this whole concept of spiritual growth there is room for change in the concept of self, as well as in the concept of ideal self. Thus, my ethics, religious practice, or personal doctrine may change, but my ideals (moral, religious practice, what I think the role of God in my life should be, etc.) can change as well.

On the second level, the room that the first level concept of spiritual growth offers can be supplemented by an idiosyncratic concept of spiritual growth. This works in a similar way as we showed for using the concept of God. My personal, level two concept of spiritual growth builds on my concept of self as a religious person, my concept of ideal self as a religious person, and my view on how these individual concepts become increasingly similar.

This approach to spiritual growth satisfies the requirements indicated above: Its first level definition is formal, and because of that, it leaves room to be filled in specifically by an individual. Individuals can do so by using a multitude of contributions of various religious, philosophical, and spiritual worldviews that inspire them personally in their search for truth and meaning. It also helps in ordering and guiding life: Spiritual growth requires reflection on who I am, on what I would like

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[41] (Rogers 2003, chp. 11).

to be, as well as the possibilities to make these two increasingly similar. Yet, it leaves room for a very personal individual result.

This approach to spiritual growth is helpful for groups of seekers such as UUs, willing to encourage spiritual growth in their congregations, as it sets an agenda of reflection on self (who am I and who should I be?) reflection on the group (who are we as a group and who should we be?), and reflection on the world (what is the world and what should it be?), but also on social action and pastoral care, as such action is a means to bring the actual self (as an individual or as a group) closer to what I/we think it should be.

With these proposals in mind we can go back to the example of the seeker who is inspired by worldview A and worldview B to see if the possible incoherence is escaped. Assume again that at the first day, he is inspired by worldview A. That means that on that day, the seeker considers A to be a source of spiritual growth. Possibly seekers adjust their self-concepts a bit, or their concepts of ideal self, or their insights on how they can bring these concepts more closely together. On the second day, a similar thing happens with worldview B. About the claims of what spiritual growth is, worldviews A and B may contradict. However, that does not imply that the way worldview A helps seekers is incoherent with the way worldview B helps them. The reason is that, although the concepts of spiritual growth of worldviews A and B may contradict with each other, or that their concept of spiritual growth contradicts with the concept of spiritual growth of the seeker, this does not exclude the possibility that certain aspects of worldview A and worldview B that do not contradict, inspire seekers and are part of their path of spiritual growth. Therefore, if worldview A and worldview B contradict, the individual seeker can go back to reflection on his actual self as a religious person and his ideal self as a religious person and use those as criteria for what he accepts from worldview A and what he accepts from worldview B.

In conclusion, this two-level approach to spiritual growth, along with the proposed level one definition of spiritual growth, offers an escape out of possible incoherencies in the use of the concept of spiritual growth among seekers.

8. Ethics

We will now give consideration to the ethics of the seeker. Let us again go to the UUA principles as an example of a description of the believes of the seeker. Many of the worldviews mentioned in the sources of faith have their own ethics and these worldviews often contradict. If seekers are willing to be inspired by the various religious worldviews in a continuously changing mix, it might follow that their personal ethics continuously change as well. This may be experienced as religion failing to help order and live life in a coherent way. Moreover, reading the principles and sources of faith of the UUA, it surprises that in spite of the pluralism in sources of faith, the UUA is very clear on its ethics, as described in principle no. one, two, six, and seven, as well as the first half of principles three and five. It seems that the moral principles of the UUA precede the sources of faith and function as criteria for evaluating what the various worldviews have to offer on moral issues. This is surprising, because for some of the worldviews that inspire UUism it is the other way around. For example, in the Christian tradition, God gave humanity the ten commandments. Thus, their moral principles are there because of God, not the other way around. Thinking this way, it may seem incoherent to be inspired by the morality of religious worldviews as derived from God, while the UUA puts morality first, limiting the room for ethics as divinely given. This possible incoherence becomes clearer by asking the following questions:

- Does ethics follow from religion, or the other way around?
- How to find a proper foundation for ethics, in case of religious pluralism?
- What justifies the adoption (or rejection) of certain religious views?
- What justifies the adoption (or rejection) of certain moral rules?

Let us first again look at what Kaufman has to say about these questions. For Kaufman, and in that sense his view is typical for Mennonite spirituality, ethics has priority over religious doctrine[42]:

"Moral and ethical concerns are taken as foundational ... and religious and other metaphysical truth-claims are regarded as gaining their deepest meaning through the ways in which they help to provide orientation in life, thus facilitating living rightly."[43]. Kaufman gives the following reasons for this: The human person "is most fundamentally a practical or active being ... In this respect, moral questions (what ought I to do?) ... are prior to questions of truth and being (what is the world really like?) ... and cannot be suspended until the latter be answered." Furthermore, the great streams of civilization now rapidly flow together into one world history. That means that humanity cannot afford to stick with a pluralist system of morals, each given by its own worldviews. The dangers of climatic disaster and the threat of nuclear war are global issues facing humanity, and thus, are to be faced on a global level. Thus, ethics that suit the contemporary age must be conscious of the environment and be thoroughly pluralistic, independent of the religious worldview or specific doctrine[44].

For seekers, these arguments all may be very important, and they may justify a priority of ethics over religious doctrine. This can be seen in the UUA principles, as they actually satisfy Kaufman's requirements for a contemporary ethics: The seventh principle expresses a concern for the environment, the principles one, two, and the first half of three and five safeguard pluralism, while principle six guards against threat of nuclear destruction.

For the UUA, this emphasis on ethics over, roughly, the last 20 years became that important, that rather than characterizing themselves as a pluralist community, they consider themselves as first of all a community of religious progressives, its main point being the promotion of an ethics that helps guiding the world (and most in particular the American society) going forward[45]. Given the argumentation above, this combination of a priority of progressive ethics with a pluralism in sources of faith is not surprising. However, it does not hold for liberal denominations in The Netherlands, such as Vrijzinnigen Nederland. Although most of the seekers in these denominations will agree with the idea that it is more important to live in a moral way than to find the right religious doctrine, this does not result in these denominations being very progressive or as morally activist as the UUs. Among other reasons, this may be because Dutch society is more left-wing and less polarized than the US, and because in The Netherlands, outside the churches, there are many other organizations that defend moral progressive views. Therefore, the congregations of these denominations are better characterized as places of religious reflection, than as places of social action and reflection on society. Thus, it can be argued that there is a link between seeking and priority of ethics over doctrine, but the link between seeking and being progressive and activist is not universal.

The issue that remains to be considered is to what extent the variety of ethics of the various worldviews can be of inspiration to the seeker. Let us first signal that in fact, to a large extent, the ethics of many of the worldviews do not contradict with the morality of seekers as worded by the UUA principles. It is for this reason, that the UUA principles correspond to quite some degree with the preamble of the charter of the UN[46], as they articulate the overlap between various worldviews and give guidance on how to bridge the differences. What remains are the contradicting aspects of those morals, e.g., the permissibility of meat-eating, capital punishment, polygamy, and same-sex marriage. The answer to this issue is similar to that in the preceding section on spiritual growth: A worldview can be of inspiration, without being authoritative for ordering and guiding life in all respects.

We can now answer the various questions asked with respect to the ethics of seekers. First of all, in order to be of practical guidance in life, seekers have to assume a priority of ethics over religious

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42　(Kaufman 1972, chp. 5).
43　Gordon Kaufman in (Weaver 1996, chp. 1).
44　(Kaufman 1993, chp. 9).
45　Rebecca Parker in (Buehrens and Parker 2010), A House for Hope, John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker.
46　See http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/preamble/index.html.

doctrine. A proper foundation for these ethics has to be found in the most pressing issues of human culture, and as present human culture is to a certain extent global, presently such an ethic should be global as well. Moral rules that contradict these global ethics should be rejected. As religious doctrine follows ethics, criteria for relevant doctrines can be found, and have to be found, in the global ethics adopted. As far as these global ethics do not cover every aspect of human life, there is room for personal morality. For the larger part, using these guidelines, undesirable incoherence as well as inconsistence over time can be prevented. For the rest, personal morality can be a subject of the individual search.

9. Conclusions

This article has presented a first impression of what one encounters when constructing a theology for the seeker. First of all, we gave a description of the multi-worldview seeker. It was discussed that most seekers in Europe do not belong to a specific denomination, and that in the US many seekers find their home in the Unitarian Universalist Association. The principles and the sources of faith of this organization can be considered as a text that describes the beliefs of the seeker well, and therefore, can be used as a text to confront a theology of the seeker. That has been done in this article.

To build a theology for the seeker, a theological framework is needed that is thoroughly pluralistic, and is that broad that it also includes nontheist worldviews such as Humanism, Buddhism, and Marxism. In this article it is shown that the constructive theological work of Gordon Kaufman offers such a framework.

Constructing a theology for the seeker, this article signals various possible incoherencies and makes suggestions on how to prevent them. A first incoherence may result from the concept of truth: On the one hand it characterizes that seekers they search for truth and meaning, but on the other hand, seekers reject and refrain from truth claims. Incoherence of these two characteristics is escaped if one realizes that in the former characteristic, seekers likely use a pragmatic concept of truth, while in the latter characteristic a truth concept of correspondence is used.

Second this article signals possible incoherence in the view on the concept of God by the seeker. On the one hand, God is used in worship as a symbol of ultimate concern or ultimate reference; on the other hand, seeking does not imply believing in God. It is shown that incoherencies following from this can be prevented by a two-level approach. At the first level God is defined in a broad, more or less formal way: "God is the name of that which I/an individual consider(s) or experience(s) to be the ultimate mystery or the ultimate point of reference in life". At this level God can be discussed between seekers, or be used in the language of worship. At the second level, God is defined as a concept within the personal belief system, and such definitions can strongly vary between individuals. In this way, a meaningful individual way of believing in God is possible, while such a belief does not exclude a free search for truth and meaning. Inspiration from nontheist worldviews, as well as concepts of God that contradict the individual view, is not incoherent.

A third concept that may lead to incoherencies is spiritual growth. Each of the worldviews the seeker is inspired by may propose its own concept of spiritual growth. Combining all these proposals may lead to incoherence or confusion rather than ordering life and guiding towards a meaningful life. Here again, to prevent these problems, a two-level approach is proposed, in this case based on the work on personal growth by Carl Rogers. At the first level, spiritual growth is defined as a process in which the concept of self as a religious person and the concept of ideal self as a religious person become increasingly similar. At the second level, both self and ideal self are made explicit for the individual along with a description of how these concepts approach each other.

Finally, the ethics of the seeker are discussed. It is shown that if inspiration from the various worldviews implies adopting their various and contradicting ethics in a continuously changing mix, the attitude of seeking fails to guide life in a meaningful way. Furthermore, humans are acting individuals, and the morality that influences their acting cannot wait until the debate about religious doctrine is resolved. Therefore, for seekers, morality should have priority over religious doctrine,

which means that the latter should support the former instead of the other way around. This is something that Unitarian Universalists have in common with the Mennonite background of Kaufman.

In order to be coherent, one final remark must be made: I will make no claim for the truth of the ideas in this article, in so far as these are supposed to correspond to a reality out there. Rather my claims of truth for the ideas in this article are pragmatic: They should be considered true if they succeed in a better understanding of seeking, and if they assist seekers to order and guide their life in a more meaningful way.

Appendix A The Principles and Sources of Faith of the Unitarian Universalist Association

The following principles and sources of faith are mentioned at the website of the Unitarian Universalist Association, www.uua.org:

"Principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Sources of faith:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

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