GORDON D. KAUFMAN’S THEORY OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

by

Daryl Timothy Culp

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ABSTRACT

Gordon D. Kaufman has proposed a theological method based on the claim that language is an imaginative construction. His central thesis, that language is the medium and form for all of our thoughts, results in a theological method which focuses on the orientation of its user, connecting the speaker to the physical and social world.

Kaufman’s analysis of religious language is based on his view of language in general. He sees religious language as an external codification of internal mental states. In the process of expressing experience, however, language also generates that experience, by being the medium which orders and organizes it.

Theology, then, is the unification of the system of religious meaning. Religious language is defined as a world-view (a way of looking at the world) and a world-picture (a constructed system modelling the world). The task of theology is to construct an adequate map of the world (judged by pragmatic means) by which the speaker can navigate through this confusing reality.

The imagination, however, is also receptive, and creates linguistic images for a variety of purposes, such as representation, orientation, and evocation. The analysis of religious language is as much a task of judging linguistic images (their quality as well as their function), as it is the construction of those images and their interconnections.
Although thought is set in the medium of language, this does not imply that language determines thought. That religious language is constructed does not mean that it can be judged only on pragmatic grounds. While the effects of religious language are important to analyze, it is also important to reflect upon what sorts of thoughts are generated by that language, in an attempt to address the ultimate mystery in which we live.

Kaufman’s view of language, that it is an artificial construction agreed upon by a community, can result in conclusions other than the relativist ones which he proposes. If language is a convention, then it is a tradition of interpretation, or, more radically, a narrative world in which speakers live, modified by intra-linguistic rules particular to the community which holds those conventions.
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INTRODUCTION

Gordon D. Kaufman's primary contribution to the theological community has been his argument that religious language is an imaginative construction. This claim is based on a more fundamental principle, that language is the medium in which all of our thinking takes place. All of Kaufman's ideas about language flow from this assumption: language shapes thought, since it is in language that thought is expressed.

I am interested in the ways in which theories of language are related to theological method, and the religious ideas and experiences which are associated with particular methods. A one-directional logical relation does not necessarily hold between these aspects of theological thinking. In some cases, method is formulated because an insight into God's being has been reached (or given). A religious experience may be achieved by some rigorous methods, or may be a disruption of a person's methodical life. The ideas which encapsulate this experience may result in a revision of how theological reflection should be done, or philosophical analysis of how we think may clarify the ways in which theological reflection is carried on.

Language, for Kaufman, is not only the container of thought, but also the producer of thought, since thinking is a linguistic process. He has recently described language as "a complexly ordered system of public symbols continuously employed by the imagination to shape and order and classify experience, and to project alternative futures." Here, the three main elements of his theory of language are stressed: that it is a system, that it shapes experience, and that it is a tool used to encounter the world and potentially modify it.

I will argue that Kaufman's analysis of religious language (and therefore his theological method as well) is dependent upon his view of language in general. Kaufman

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attempts to incorporate insights from various philosophies of language, and examines various aspects of language: public and private, form and content, abstract and concrete, meaning and knowledge. He attempts to integrate these dimensions into a unified view of language, but this combination results in tensions within his theory.

Unfortunately, language and thought are difficult to disentangle in Kaufman’s epistemology. His formulation of the relation of language and thought gives rise to a problematic question: how can we ever think independently of language? This conundrum arises because language is usually distinguished from experience, that is, contact with the world and reception of information from that world. Kaufman, however, argues that experience is performed within language. By identifying the medium of thought (language) with the activity of thinking, he draws the incorrect conclusion that because thinking goes on in language, it is restricted to that domain.

Kaufman’s theological conclusions are based on his epistemological theory, especially his view of language as an imaginative construction. Although this definition of language creates opportunities for revising theological language, I will show that his theory is limited because it downplays the receptive aspect of the imaginative process, does not sufficiently link language to its context, and does not adequately distinguish between concrete and abstract concepts of language. While I concur with some of his re-interpretations of Christian ideas, I do not subscribe to the ways in which he reaches those conclusions.

I will argue that Kaufman’s theory of language is inadequately developed, and therefore results in an unnecessarily narrow view of theology. Kaufman’s definition of language is used in his theological reasoning in order to modify the religious language of Christian doctrine. The public language of the church is viewed as a system which can and must be imaginatively constructed anew in each generation. This claim raises the question of what can be retained and what must be changed. On what criteria do we decide how to construct doctrines for a new age? Kaufman’s theory of language places most of the weight of judgment on the active imagination, which integrates sensations and perceptions into a unified system of concepts. Since he views this system as in constant historical progression, however, it is not clear where the independent norms for judgment of that system lie.
The contexts of human existence, Kaufman argues, are ultimately mysterious, since the inter-locking systems of existence are too complex for us to ever adequately describe or explain. Our language about the whole, the sum of the contexts in which we live, is necessarily abstract (completely general) and yet incomplete (leaving out the particular). We use symbols and images to characterize the ultimate unity of all that is, the meaning and purpose of existence, but these ideas serve more to orient human life in the cosmos, than to definitely describe the cosmos as a whole.

Theology should not begin, then, with the most difficult question, that of God, because this notion escapes our grasp, by its transcendence, its mystery. The idea of God, in fact, calls us to re-examine our concept of God, so that it lives up to its referent. The mystery of God requires us to be tentative about our theological formulations, always questioning our language about God, since God’s reality transcends our conception of it. Kaufman does give some criteria for judging our language about God, suggesting that it is in the ordinary, everyday lives of believers that faith is tested. This principle is not so much a pragmatic judgment of language as it is a recognition that words and actions are integrally linked. We must examine the “form of life” in which our words are embedded, as much as the intellectual cohesiveness of our ideas.

Our theological work, according to Kaufman’s method, should begin with the construction of a concept of the world in which we live, using the conceptual tools provided by other intellectual disciplines. The results obtained in other fields of intellectual endeavour should not be accepted wholesale, but will be transformed by theology’s placing them in a larger context. The mysterious nature of the cosmos as a whole, Kaufman maintains, should give us pause in our construction of world-views, that is, conceptual structures which attempt to integrate all of the information we have about the world.

Kaufman’s ardour for a more humane world resounds throughout his work. The humanist impulses which fuel his passion draw from our deepest desires to see a better world (but perhaps also from our deepest fears about what our world could presently become). His liberal impulses towards a more just and equitable society are unexceptionable, although the methods he proposes in order to reach those goals may be questionable. Although Kaufman’s
methods for pursuing these visions may appear radical, his theological proposals are surprisingly customary, using typical theological ideas, albeit expressed with novel terminology. Readers may be misled by the rhetorical strategies Kaufman uses to encourage theologians to reconsider the traditional ideas; in the end, he uses the material provided by the history of Christian thinkers, although he re-fashions it considerably. Constructive theology, for Kaufman, uses the materials of the past, but in the service of the future.

A. Context: theological attention to language

The discipline of theology has been pre-occupied in this century with questions about language, a concern underlying the current ferment in discussions about theological method. Some philosophers have argued that an analysis of language is necessary before philosophers or theologians can even begin to sort out how to think about the world in which we live. The debate about religious language has often been framed in the terms of the logical positivists, who defined bothersome religious questions out of intellectual existence. However, several other theories of language have impacted upon theological thinking in recent years, especially the hermeneutical schools, structuralist theories, and the sometimes chaotic (often deliberately so) field of deconstruction.

In theology, the linguistic turn has given rise to three main currents: narrative theology, hermeneutics and deconstruction. The first argues that religion is like a language, and that believers learn the grammar of faith, exhibited by the stories of the church (Scripture and tradition). Narrative theologians use the linguistic theories of structuralism in order to argue their case. Structuralists analyze signs (more general than speech) for their meta-linguistic functions (giving information about how the sign is to be taken) as well as for their intra-linguistic manipulation of the code of language. These theorists look at the power of

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signs to articulate and elucidate experience, as well as their power to mystify. I will argue that Kaufman uses structuralist theories, although he does not mention them as such, and he comes to different conclusions than the narrative theologians.

Recent attention to narrative regards the story-form of religious texts and rituals as central to their meaning. Religion takes a special linguistic form for these theorists, and that form distinguishes theological ideas from other concepts, giving them a unique cognitive status. Theology, as a reflection on these stories, takes on a role somewhat like literary analysis, although viewing the religious texts as providing knowledge, not fiction. This strategy would seem to limit religious truth to the community which holds to particular narratives. Christianity, for example, would only be true for those who hold the Christian Bible as authoritative. Then, the rational principles for Christianity may be derived from the Bible, and may even be seen as universal, but argument can only be founded on the texts, which are seen as the world in which believers live. Critics who rely on structural theories of language restrict the meaning to the text itself, rather than its contexts (including the author). The meaning of the text is found by analyzing the structure of the text, and subsuming it under a general classification of types of texts, such as the typical narrative structures.

Hermeneutical theologians rely on theories of interpretation, not only of texts but also of existence (they thus rely on sociological and psychological theories in this effort). They argue that religious language interprets the world, and theology is the analysis of the principles (or conceptual apparatus) by which religious believers arrive at the meaning of existence. If theology is a reflection on originary texts, then its task is interpretation. The search for the

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meaning of the text becomes the primary concern. Historical context provides a key for some interpreters; for others, the reader contributes as much as the author to the creation of meaning. I will argue that Kaufman uses history as a hermeneutical key to unlock the meaning of the Biblical texts, but he uses present history to interpret the past meaning of those texts.

Concentrating on language also requires observing the effects of words. The speech-act theorists adverted to the situations in which locutions accomplish a social task. The relation of language and power is closely examined by critical theorists, especially feminist theologians. Doctrines are closely examined for their implications and repercussions in everyday life. The power of theological words is addressed by these thinkers, past usages being criticized for being oppressive.

A focus on the language of theology has led to a reconsideration of the task of theology, especially the methods by which it conducts its analysis. Those who have taken the linguistic turn would argue that language so fundamentally shapes our thinking that meaning is radically new in each historical period (as well as in different geographical locales at the same time, if not also in each person). If language is constructed out of experience (including the memory of a tradition, handed down by elders as a means of forming the experience of children), then theology integrates the experiences of each age into a new synthesis.


The metaphor of construction weaves its way through Kaufman's writings, serving as a central theme, upon which he elaborates the grand design of his theological theory of language. All language is theological, he claims, since it is constructed around some organizing principle which acts as a source for the meaning produced by the inter-relation of words and phrases. Theologians differ, however, on how meaning is produced, and how language relates to the theological enterprise. Kaufman's work arises in the context of an overall ferment in theology today, much of it stirred up by disagreements about how language works.

Many disenchanted with the pursuit to extract the essence of meaning instead expose the fissures in the text, deconstructing its significatory intentions. These theorists would seem to have dispensed with common rational principles, although there is method in their analysis of texts, especially in their exposition of the relation of language and power. The authoritative status of the holy text is challenged, as its meaning is questioned. By drawing attention to language, many theologians seek to loosen the authoritative grip which God-talk has on its speakers, and to encourage the creative construction of new God-talk, more meaningful to a contemporary audience. It would seem, though, that reconstruction must proceed on a different basis than deconstruction, since the former takes the stability of texts more seriously than the latter. I will show that Kaufman does not follow the deconstruction route, thinking that language is a stable system of meanings.

This dissertation examines the thought of one theological thinker who views language as a construction. The thesis that religions are constructed by the human mind, and therefore artificial and conventional, lies beneath attempts to render theological language more inclusive and emancipatory. The new experiences of the feminist and liberation movements require not only a re-thinking of theological concepts for Kaufman, but a re-construction of the system of theological ideas. Such linguistic engineering depends on a view of language as a malleable

tool, an instrument for changing reality, but one which can be shaped according to the wishes of the user. This tool of language, though, is double-edged, since it also shapes the thoughts of those who use it. This capacity of language renders the task of theological construction doubly important for Kaufman.

To say that theology is built out of basic elements is not controversial, but much depends on the materials with which one builds, and the way in which they are put together. A recent volume of essays which collects the writings of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology\(^\text{10}\) well summarizes this approach to theology. The basic building blocks of theology are considered to be the experiences of those on the margins: women, blacks, gays and lesbians, and so on. These voices are pieced together into a quilt, each piece retaining its distinctive shape and pattern (true to its origin and context). Put together, these voices create a larger pattern, a richly textured theological artifact. Each author works with the materials given by the experience of a group with a distinct identity, and constructs theological metaphors appropriate to that group.

Questions about the method of constructive theology arise when one considers what sort of tool language is, and what effects it has on the tool user. Since language is so intimately connected with thinking, the danger of this view is that language will begin to use its speaker, rather than the other way around. As well, if all language is constructed by people, then it becomes difficult to know how to judge the various constructions. Theological language becomes identity construction rather than thinking about God. Language becomes a vicious circle, from which our thoughts cannot escape. This dissertation will examine whether these conclusions are a necessary outcome of the assumptions of constructive theology, or whether starting from different assumptions about language results in a more congenial method of thinking, both theological and otherwise.

B. Kaufman’s Writings

Kaufman has published several intriguing autobiographical reflections throughout his career, which shed light on his own view of the transition evidenced in his writing. He acknowledges that his theological career has seen some rather profound shifts in the ways in which he has formulated his own methodological procedure. However, there are also some important continuities. In many ways, Kaufman’s career has been pre-occupied with the question of the meaning of the word “God,” and his changing view of language has affected the way in which he formulates his thoughts about God. On the other hand, his consistent dedication to the transcendent and immanence of God has been maintained throughout this pilgrimage, and is displayed throughout all of his talk about God.

Kaufman characterizes his early thinking as participating in “an approach which has led to thinking of theological work as essentially a kind of hermeneutic task, the translation or interpretation of traditional ideas and perspectives into a more contemporary idiom.”\(^{11}\) This approach implies that the theological tradition contains some content of meaning which can be transferred to the present through the techniques of translation or interpretation. This hermeneutical view of language implies that the meaning of language lies within the mind of the author, and is expressed into written form.

This approach can be seen in one of Kaufman’s earliest articles, “Some Theological Emphases of the Early Swiss Anabaptists”\(^{12}\) in which he examines the writings of the forerunners of the Mennonite church, and attempts to distill the themes and ideas which predominate in their work. He identifies their dedication to the primacy of life over a verbal assent to doctrines. One can see in this denigration of spoken or written beliefs Kaufman’s early view that the meaning of language lies primarily inside the human mind. In an


autobiographical article, he suggests that this Mennonite dedication to “the priority of life—and of the standards or criteria in terms of which life is to be lived—over formulations of doctrine or belief” is an intellectual principle which has been retained throughout his career.

Kaufman suggests that his Mennonite background was formative in his philosophical views, not because of particular beliefs that were held, but because of the way in which they were held by a community. He argues that his philosophical relativism developed early in his life, “the central impetus toward which came directly from my Mennonite formation as a member of a cognitive minority.” In encountering Christians who supported war, Kaufman realized that “questions of truth and right are not simple ones, that it is easy for persons to be completely mistaken even when they supposed they understood what the truth was.” The fundamental disagreements between Christians about the interpretation of seemingly absolute Scriptural pronouncements against killing sparked in Kaufman a realization of the relativity of truth.

In his doctoral dissertation, “The Problem of Relativism and the Possibility of Metaphysics,” Kaufman argued that relativism is not a negative principle, but a positive contribution to intellectual activity. His first published book, Relativism, Knowledge and Faith, based upon his dissertation, expands this epistemology, and attempts to analyze cognitive activity on the assumption that any of our perceptions, and even the sum total of them, can be mistaken. His theory of knowledge is based, however, on an analysis of the way


in which thinking is intimately connected with its environment. It is thus contingent and particular, and proceeds by constructing ever more complex levels of representations, each built upon the previous level.

Already in his first book, the major influences on Kaufman’s thinking are apparent. In an intriguing piece in the *Harvard Guide to Influential Books*, Kaufman identifies some of these formative influences on his thinking. Immanuel Kant is singled out as of primary importance, in particular his insight that our ideas are constructed. This would prove to be a consistent theme in Kaufman’s writings. In addition, George Mead is noted for his “theory of selfhood and mind as social and linguistic through and through, rather than fundamentally individualistic and rationalistic” and Henry Wieman for his view that that “the idea of God is to be seen principally in terms of the functions it performs in human life and thought (rather than in terms of its putative ‘meaning’).” Reading these books during his twenties, Kaufman reflects, shaped his thinking profoundly, for the rest of his life.

In his second book, *The Context of Decision*, Kaufman lays out a foundation for ethics that considers actions more important than beliefs, in that the experience of history, and our actions in it, judges our beliefs, and renders them right or wrong. In this volume, there is not much consideration of the role of language in action, a concern which pre-occupies Kaufman in his later writing.

Kaufman uses the relativist method formulated in his first book to redraw the map of Christian theology. He writes that in his *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, he attempted to show “how all the major concepts of the Christian theological vocabulary fit together to give a picture of human life as historical through and through . . . [and] how the


concept of God as understood by Christians was put together by means of an imaginative synthesis of a number of central metaphors.”²¹ Already, we can see some of his later emphasis on language, especially the role of the imagination in working with language. The structure of the system of Christian language is one of his main concerns, as well as the ways in which that system is connected to the world.

Some of Kaufman’s major theological sources of inspiration include Paul Tillich’s insights in his systematic outworking of theology under the aegis of “justification by doubt” (Kaufman’s phrase), and Karl Barth’s emphasis on God’s grace as the source for a sola fide position on revelation.²² He cites Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr as particularly influential, in their careful and principled critique of Christian pacifism. Kaufman describes the major discontinuity in his thinking as a disagreement with Barth, coming to the conclusion that theology could not be conducted on the basis of the “otherness” of revelation. Until then, he had conceived of the concern of theology “as the essentially hermeneutical one of handing on with as little changed as possible (though in updated form of course) traditions ‘once for all delivered to the saints.’”²³ Kaufman identifies the break with this view of revelation as occurring after the publication of his Systematic Theology (a new preface to the second edition indicates his disagreements with his former work).

Kaufman describes the major shift in his thinking as a realization that “theology was today, and in fact always had been, a work of the human imagination—the production of a picture or conception of human life in the world under God, created as humans sought to envision and to understand (at first in mythic modalities) themselves and the world in which they lived.”²⁴ This realization came about partly as a result of a meditation on the role of symbols in thought, especially the symbol of God.

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²¹ Kaufman, “Apologia,” 133.
²³ Ibid., 179.
This new view of the task of theology entailed a revision of his theological method. This project acts as a middle period in Kaufman’s thinking, beginning with the publication of a set of essays questioning his former views (and those who held similar views) collected under the title *God the Problem.* 25 This volume sets out the difficulties entailed by his changing theological mind. His *Essay on Theological Method* 26 articulated the principles of his new views, and “turned upside down the basic pattern of thinking underlying the *Systematic Theology.*” 27 With his new theological method, Kaufman conceived theology as “a work of the human imagination, creating and recreating overall perspectives on human life in the world.” 28 Interestingly, Kaufman indicates that the seeds of this thinking were already sown in the *Systematic Theology,* although his attempt to “present an ‘interpretation of Christian faith within the limits of history alone’” 29 had been incomplete.

His next book is something of an aberration, since it brackets out many of the more philosophical concerns that had preoccupied him to this point, and concentrates on specific doctrinal issues central to Mennonite theology. *Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Mennonite Essays,* 30 although it is a collection of earlier essays, can nevertheless be seen as an application of his theological method to specific issues in the systematic theology of a particular denomination.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., quoting *Systematic Theology,* x.

The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God\textsuperscript{31} is a collection of essays which "tries to give some notion of what a Christian theology would look like if developed self-consciously as a work of imaginative construction, with humanization as its ultimate governing principle."\textsuperscript{32} This book is an extension of his work on methodology, expanding on some of the ideas in the Essay. In Theology for a Nuclear Age,\textsuperscript{33} he argued that the nuclear crisis motivates in a new way the search for new imaginative constructions about God.

Kaufman’s later thinking developed as an attempt to broaden his anthropocentric concept of history. With the publication of In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology, Kaufman situated his theology in the context of a general view of the biological and historical world. While not forsaking his earlier view of language, a different emphasis is pursued in this work. In many ways his magnum opus, all of the themes pursued by Kaufman over his theological career are considered and woven into a deeply textured analysis of the Christian faith. Reasoned arguments are given for pursuing such a faith, and a systematic framework is developed in order to provide intellectual justifications for the faith. Although his emphasis on language as an imaginative construction is retained, it is modified by a concerted effort to analyze the context of language, and to link language to that context. In a way, Kaufman returns to his hermeneutical roots, viewing language as an interpretation of all of life.

Kaufman’s theological framework, in this later stage, is composed of an epistemological element, the previously worked-out notion of imaginative construction (an essentially religious activity, based as it is on faith-assumptions), and an ontological element, the new idea of “serendipitous creativity,” a historical and empirical reality which Kaufman claims to detect in the history of the universe, based on recent scientific theoretical


\footnote{32} Kaufman, "Apologia," 136.

constructions and discoveries (thus a secular activity, tied to no particular cultural or religious assumptions). Kaufman intends in this work "to draw upon—but not simply re-present unchanged, or eclectically juxtapose—significant insights, understandings, and commitments from each of these (at present only partially adequate) perspectives on life and the world [the secular and the religious], in order to move toward a new holistic (Christian) faith-perspective." In this volume, Kaufman takes up the themes of his earlier works, and recombines them into a more full-orbed theology, putting them in the context of the history of the human species on this planet.

There are a number of articles which Kaufman has published since this major work which give intriguing insights into his thinking. In "Reconstructing the Concept of God: De-reifying the Anthropomorphisms," he tackles the difficult issue of the tendency of religious language to be idolized. Similarly, in "Empirical Realism in Theology: An Examination of some Themes in Meland and Loomer," Kaufman addresses the epistemological status of theological talk, and has some particularly blunt criticisms of popular conceptions of the enterprise of theology.

Kaufman has recently published another book, entitled God—Mystery—Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World, dealing with the problem of relativism, but this time attempting an integration of supposedly divergent theoretical perspectives (namely, various religious perspectives). Some of Kaufman’s articles on Buddhist theology are


contained therein, providing a good test of his method, as applied to another religious framework.

I have also been fortunate to peruse an unpublished article by Kaufman on "Reading Wittgenstein: Notes for Constructive Theologians." For several years, Kaufman has offered a seminar at the Harvard Divinity School on Wittgenstein, and some of the insights pertinent to theology are summarized in this dissertation.

Some difficulties of chronology arise in examining Kaufman’s published work, since most of his books consist of collections of articles published earlier. As well, in some cases, he has incorporated material previously published in articles into one of his books. I will examine Kaufman’s thought according to the chronological order of the final published version. Two exceptions are the Systematic Theology, which was re-published in 1978, and An Essay on Theological Method, which was re-published in 1979 and 1995. In both cases, I analyze the final edition, but place it chronologically in his developing thought according to the date of first publication.

C. Critics of Kaufman

There are very few treatments of Kaufman’s thought in its entirety. Two doctoral dissertations focusing solely on his thought have been written, both without the benefit of his latest writings: Samuel Carey Heard, Jr.’s “Implications of Gordon Kaufman’s Radical Historicist Perspective for Representative Problems in Philosophy of Religion”38 and Donald Stoesz’s “The Confessional and Apologetic Aspects of Gordon Kaufman’s Thought: An Interpretation.”39 A brief summary of Kaufman’s thought is included in S. Alan Ray’s The Modern Soul: Michel Foucault and the Theological Discourse of Gordon Kaufman and


David Tracy, a Ph.D. dissertation published in the AAR series, but little analysis of Kaufman’s thought is attempted.

In addition, there is an M.A. thesis by Victor Froese, entitled “Imagining God: A Critical Review of the Theology and Method of Gordon D. Kaufman” (published in revised form as an article in The Conrad Grebel Review) and an M.A. thesis by Glenda Hildebrand, "Imaginatively Constructing God Concepts: Exploring the Role of Imagination in Gordon Kaufman’s Theological Method." Two collections of essays have been published, which collectively cover the important themes and issues of Kaufman’s work: Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honour of Gordon D. Kaufman edited by Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honour of Gordon D. Kaufman, a festschrift edited by Alain Epp Weaver.

Kaufman is mentioned in several summaries of contemporary Christian theology. David Tracy, in his five-type analysis of Christian theology, cites Kaufman as one of many examples of “revisionist” method. Ronald Thiemann devotes a chapter to refuting Kaufman

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in *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*,46 placing Kaufman in the context of other major theologians who have reconceptualized revelation. Hans Frei, in his analysis of five types of contemporary theology, cites Kaufman as the representative of what Frei calls "*theology as a philosophical discipline* in the academy."47 Frei argues that Kaufman takes the generally accepted rules of the discipline of academic philosophy, and applies that procedure of reasoning to Christian theology, thereby erasing its distinctive insights. Frei argues that, even if Kaufman does not deny the existence of God, his method of argument gives general philosophical procedures precedence over the self-description of Christian ideas.48 Kaufman argues, in contrast, that "Theology does not begin with the general metaphysical task and proceed (eventually) to talk about God; it begins with the problem of the meaning of talk about God and then, in dealing with this problem, finds it also must address general metaphysical issues."49 The question of the meaning of the symbol of God, then, is of prime importance to Kaufman. The argument of this thesis supports Frei’s contention, though, in that Kaufman addresses questions of meaning before he deliberates about the meaning of the word "God."

There are a myriad of articles on Kaufman’s thinking, and a multitude of book reviews, analyzing various aspects of Kaufman’s thought (see the bibliography). In addition, a recent conference on his theology was held at Bethel College in Kansas, from which I benefited substantially. Some of these papers have been published in the March 1997 issue of *Mennonite Life*.

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48 Ibid., p. 28.

D. Structure of the argument

The progression of Kaufman's thoughts about language and religion will be divided into three chapters. Each chapter will illustrate the connection between his development of a linguistic theory and his analysis of religious language. The chapters proceed according to a topical progression, from the role of language within the self, through the system of language, to the relation of language to the world (both physical and social). This progression indicates a general shift in focus within Kaufman's career, as he has paid attention to different aspects of language. However, the systematic nature of his thinking leads him to consider most of these topics at many stages in his thinking. Therefore, each section of my analysis follows a chronological sequence as well, as I present his developing formulations on each aspect of language considered.

In the first chapter, Kaufman's view of the role of language in the development of the self will be examined. He argues that language is an integral part of the cognitive process, since it is produced by the imagination, yet it also guides the construction of images. Kaufman sees language as the medium within which we think. As we express our internal ideas, the medium of language already forms our thoughts, since we articulate them using the code of language. In this respect, Kaufman has brought the linguistic turn to bear upon Kant's categories. Instead of certain (synthetic a priori) ideas being the preconditions of all thinking, however, Kaufman sees the structure of language as conditioning all thinking. Words are instruments picking out particular features of our environment, which could just as easily be identified in other ways. The grammar of our language encourages us to put words together in habitual patterns, providing conventional ways for linking ideas together. Kaufman concludes from this premise that language is an arbitrary convention, not a natural or necessary connection to the world. I do not find this a reason, however, for finding language to be subjective. While language may be relative to a person's viewpoint or perspective, it is a public form, and thus represents common agreements about the arbitrary conventions of the code (such as names and relations between them).
Thus far, Kaufman’s view of language could be considered as a correspondence view, in which language can be compared to reality (if only indirectly). However, language is not only the medium of thought in Kaufman’s view, it is a condition for the emergence of consciousness. Only by representing the world can the mind become conscious of its own existence. In that process, the mind becomes aware of the representation as a figment of the imagination, owned by a self which constructs it. However, the awareness that the world exists independently of the self arises because of language, and this realization forever sunders the self from direct contact with the world. Kaufman thinks that many people do not realize the implications of this process, instead thinking that their linguistic constructions represent the way things really are. The development of the self, in Kaufman’s view, should make us aware that our linguistic constructions are only ours, and thus are subjective and relative. What is the force of this argument? Does this mean that all thoughts are equal? It would seem to render thinking private.

In reply to the problem of a private language, Kaufman thinks that pragmatic considerations should be used to judge the truth of our linguistic formulations. As well, Kaufman thinks that linguistic systems should be judged by their practical effects on societies and human persons. This seems to be the only way, however, that experience of the world impinges on his theory of imaginative construction. To me, the important question is not how we express our thoughts, but what thoughts we express, and how to judge them. Language is a complex structure by which we articulate ideas, and I do not think it limits our thoughts, but rather allows them to range free. I think that language is multivalent, allowing any possible thought to be expressed (limits to thought are social, whether habit or power).

The criterion of coherence is central to Kaufman’s theory of the judgment of language. However, present and future imaginative constructions also have to be factored into a linguistic system in a consistent way. According to this view, religious language is a set of images and relations between those images. Theology is a reflection upon the network of language, ordering the images according to coherence and consistency, and developing rules for revising the system.
Even though Kaufman proposes that language is a set of constructed images and links between those images, he does not think that these images correspond in a direct way to the world. Reality can be described in many ways, he thinks, and so various linguistic structures can be developed in order to represent the world. He argues that this procedure has happened throughout the history of the world, and sees the development of different linguistic structures as evidence of his view. This use of history, however, begs the question as to how we can judge whether one linguistic structure is better than another.

The second chapter will examine Kaufman’s view of the form of language. Since language is symbolic, he thinks, it abstracts from the reality to which it refers, thus distancing itself from the very reality which it purports to represent. Kaufman thinks that language expresses inner states of consciousness, and so does not refer to reality directly. Since ideas are couched in the terms of language, however, they do not refer directly either, only through language. This is a rather circular argument, for words refer to ideas and ideas refer to words. However, it seems to me that distinctions between the value of words and ideas can be made, regardless of how directly they refer to experience. Even if reference (of either words or ideas) is indirect, this does not render it impossible.

Kaufman uses the term “image/concept” to describe linguistic items (the products of imaginative construction), in order to indicate the close relation between language (images) and ideas (concepts). The central “images/concepts” unite the network of language, by unifying the relationships of the symbolic network. The most central of these symbols, in Kaufman’s view, are metaphysical symbols, since they are the most abstract, but also the most important. At times, he calls them presuppositions, since they are conditions for language to be meaningful. Eventually, Kaufman uses a more specifically Kantian formulation, calling them categorial ideas, or regulative ideas. These ideas form our experience by uniting the linguistic framework into a whole. In this view of language, however, symbols do not refer to anything experienced, but rather to the cognitive experience of something (that is, an image). Language then becomes self-referential (not necessarily referring only to other linguistic items, but always to the self’s experience, which is expressed in language).
Religious language, for Kaufman, is thus made up of metaphysical symbols, which act to unite the system of language. He thus analyzes the framework of Christian doctrines, delineating the relations between these ideas. The idea of God, he argues, is the most central, and is the “ultimate point of reference” for all thinking. This idea is unique, since it contains within itself a paradox (Kaufman does not use this word). Kaufman divides the idea of God into two meanings: the available God and the real God. The available God consists of all of our ideas about God, while the real God cannot be identified as any particular thing or corresponding idea, since the idea of God transcends every finite idea. This definition of God divides the idea of God along the lines of sense and reference, yet the word “God” has no reference in this view, since a referent can never be pointed out. He proposes that, since the word “God” does not ostensively refer (to an object), but points us back towards our language about God, its primary function (read “purpose”) is to orient our lives and thought to the world.

Kaufman considers the word “God” to be an imaginative construct, that is, a highly abstract concept that is built up out of a multitude of experiences. It is a generalization of many perceptions, as it must be in order to unite them all into a cohesive conceptual framework. However, the concept of God unites all of language by having a rather strange and unique construction. It combines two ideas into one: the notion that reality is ultimately “other” (and thus in principle unknowable in the strict sense), and the notion that we must nevertheless attempt to portray reality using what material is available to us, namely, our human experience and language.

Since Kaufman sees language as a structure of symbols, he regards meaning as the relations between those symbols. Analysis of thinking becomes analysis of the structure of language. Kaufman comes to see language as a frame of reference, a grid through which one sees reality (through a glass darkly). Coherence becomes the primary criterion by which judgment of linguistic items is done. In this view, religious language comes to be seen as a categorial scheme, with the idea of God as the focal point of the network. In effect, experience has been defined as something that happens only within language. If Kaufman were
to characterize knowledge as interpretation, then he could view experience as not simply experience of the self, but by the self, connected to the world.

Every form has a function, and language is no exception. Kaufman views language as a rule, a form which guides the experience of people. Language is used by people primarily for orientation, in order to situate themselves in the cosmos. Kaufman sees language as embedded in the practices and behaviours of people. This means that religious language is interpreted on a practical level, as a way of enabling human beings to achieve their full potential, etc. It would be interesting to ask if Kaufman follows the structural anthropologists in their dictum that “form follows function.” Does his analysis of the form result from a conviction about the function that language plays in life? At times, this seems to be the case. Or does his analysis of the formal structure of language lead him to conclude that language functions in the way he sees? My thesis argues the latter (although at the point at which language intersects with reality, the distinction between form and function is difficult to hold).

In the third chapter, the relation between language and the world in Kaufman’s view will be discussed. Since he has defined meaning as the relation between linguistic elements, the reference of these elements is to other linguistic items. He argues that all of our language necessarily “misrepresents,” since it abstracts from the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of reality as it comes to our sense perceptors. However, he continues to think that language can be a map of reality, although since it cannot be Borges’ map (which produces a full-size duplicate of reality), he thinks that a cartographer does not depict reality adequately. This is an odd position, since a map points out features of the world that are actually there, and although it pictures them with some approximation, the map can profitably compared with the world it pictures. If Kaufman were to reject external reference completely, his view would be more consistent. Then he could argue that reference is accomplished by the differences within the linguistic system, and engage in analysis of signifiers rather than signs.

Instead of calling language a depiction of reality, Kaufman tends to regard it as a worldview. This definition implies a perspectival manner of knowing, which renders knowledge and meaning relative to the viewpoint of the observer. According to this theory, religious language is seen as a plurality of interpretations of the world, none with any special
authority or truth. All have their contributions, and we should interact with other religions in order to see reality more clearly. Kaufman thus develops an inter-textual method for dialogue between religions, in which his criteria of "humanization" plays a large role. He criticizes other religions for presenting paradoxical language, yet also argues that all religious languages point towards the mystery of God.

It is important to note that in this analysis, Kaufman considers religious language to be a subset of language in general, and thus uses a general theory of language to analyze religion. Theological language, being reflection on religious language, is a subset of religious language (in his case, Christian), but is not restricted to that sphere, since it uses general theories of language and critical reflection to analyze religion. However, theology has a special and unique task over and above these general theoretical inquiries, since theology is a religious activity, taking part in the piety of the religious experience, even as it is reflecting upon language in an analytical way.

Kaufman fails to make an adequate distinction between his arguments about religious language and language in general. It appears that he intends any argument about language to apply to religious language, since he sees the latter as simply a subset of language. However, when he intends arguments about religious language to apply to language in general, he loses the ability to identify the distinctive characteristics of religious language which make it a subset. In addition, Kaufman sometimes uses the terms "religion" and "theology" interchangeably. For the most part, the former term applies to the concrete rites, beliefs and actions of the religious person, whereas the latter term refers to reflection on religious behaviour (including the originary writings of the movement). However, theological reflection is also a religious act, or at least a moral act, especially if it is construction.

The knowledge associated with religious language is viewed by Kaufman as pragmatic: religious beliefs that allow human beings to flourish are seen as true. His reduction of religious language to historical verities is based, then, upon his argument that language is historical, or rather, that human beings are historical in that they exist in language. This linguistic existence defines human nature, as well as existence, and so Kaufman attempts to translate theological insights into the contemporary language of human beings, which in his
view is epitomized in the modern credo of rationality relative to historical context. He even thinks that Christian theology contains within itself the best insights of an historicist approach to existence, namely, that human beings are constituted by their creativity, set within an order of meaning that precedes them and even grounds their judgments.

However, there are two main problems with Kaufman’s view of language. The first is that he sees language as a whole in a state of flux, instead of identifying those parts of language that are fixed, and those that fluctuate. The second is that Kaufman reasons incorrectly from the fact that language is constructed to the inference that it is therefore inadequate to its referent. It is incorrect to argue from the proposition that language is constructed and conventional, to the conclusion that it should all be considered equally reviseable. Language is a semantic structure which has a range of shapes and uses in its delineation of the world.
Kaufman lays great stress on the nature of the mind's interaction with its environment, a process which he sees as enveloped in the web of language, "the very fabric of which consciousness is made." In his theory of cognition, language is intimately involved in every level of the thinking process. Although his theory of language changes in some respects, he holds fast to two central assumptions: first, that language is the medium in which thinking is conducted, and second, that language is a structure which shapes and forms those thoughts.

This chapter will examine Kaufman's emphasis on the imagination and the role it plays in thinking, especially theology. Three aspects of his view of language will be discussed: its role as the medium of thought, its historical relativity, and its judgment. Kaufman views language not only as a form that reflects consciousness, but also as the medium in which consciousness happens. Language allows people to become conscious of the fact that they have thoughts, and it is only in language that those thoughts are expressed. Thinking is thus seen as a historical process, formulated with respect to particular contexts, and expressed in relative form in language. This model of language is preserved throughout Kaufman's career, although he expresses it less subjectively in the later stages of his thinking.

Kaufman argues that theology should revise its traditional concepts, since each generation must construct its own unified system, based on its experience. I will show that he sees theology as the unification of the system of language, the thread that ties the web of language together. He emphasizes, however, present experience over the traditional record of religious experience, sometimes giving the impression that the present is the definitive historical moment, taking precedence over the past. I will argue that paying attention to the historical nature of religious language implies that past theological language needs to be

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1 Kaufman, Relativism, 60.
integrated into contemporary experience (in much the same way as memory has to be integrated with the imagination’s reception of experience and construction of a present worldview).

I.A. The medium of language

In this section, Kaufman’s view of language as an imaginative construction will be examined, with an eye to the sorts of theological conclusions he gains from this analysis. Language is seen as a compendium of images, united by the imagination into an ordered system. However, since language also records the relations between images, it guides the thinking process. There is a tension between experience and language in Kaufman’s cognitive theory, since both shape thought (and both are cognitive activities). Language does not determine experience, for there are mental capacities that operate independently of language. However, I will argue that Kaufman overemphasizes the active side of the imagination, thus downplaying the comparison of images to the mind’s environment.

In his early writings, Kaufman has a rather subjective theory of language, since language expresses internal mental states. However, even at this early stage of his thinking, language has reference not only internally within the system of language, but also externally, to existing states of affairs. Our experience of those external affairs is factored through language’s interpenetration with experience, and so is mediated through language. Kaufman thus focuses on the system of language, through which some common and even universal agreements can be formed about meaning.

Religious language, in Kaufman’s view, also expresses inner states of consciousness. The vocabulary of religion refers to human states, and theology aims to integrate these states into a unity. I will show that his early view of religious language is quite subjective, since religion emerges from the interaction of the self with its environment. Kaufman attempts to solve this problem by arguing that since language is common to a group, the self is primarily social. However, I will argue that he limits this commonality to a group, and does not present an adequate notion of a common world that is independent of our perception of it.
I.A.1. The imaginative construction of language

Kaufman’s most extensive analysis of language occurs in his first book, and it is worth looking at in detail. He analyzes the development of language out of the primordial unity of the self and its environment. There is a complicated interchange between the mind and reality, in which human beings act upon their environment and are affected by that environment. This process, Kaufman argues, sets in motion a cascading series of mental processes, which culminates in cognitive acts integrating these mentalities into a system.

In Kaufman’s epistemology, experiences are integrated by the imagination into units of language. This integration is achieved by the terms which focus our attention on particular aspects of reality. At each level of consciousness, “the power of selective attention is at work, . . . [and] there is deliberate selection out of that field of certain elements to which attention will be paid, with other aspects of the field disregarded.” A cognitive deliberation is performed, thus transforming an undifferentiated field of sensations into a named experience.

Language is thus the organization of experience: the classification of sensations and the creation of ordered relations between them. Kaufman describes this process as “the imaginative construction of elements and links . . . which bring the Erlebnis [experience] into relation with other similarly constructed elements drawn from memory, and ultimately into relation with an over-all (implicit or explicit) view of the cosmos.” The interaction of images (constructed by the imagination and retained in memory) thus allows the mind to develop an integrated view of the world, internally ordered and related to experiences of that world.

Kaufman describes how sensations are collected together by the mind. He suggests that “through the dual activity of attention and imagination they become a complex product, a

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2 Ibid., 42. Collingwood makes the same point in his discussion of imagination and experience in Principles of Art, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 207.

3 Ibid., 43. Erlebnis is a term from Dilthey, which Kaufman is using here as a pre- or sub-conscious input to the mind (Kaufman defines it as pre-conscious on page 39). See Rickman’s introduction to Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings, ed. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1976), 29, for a discussion of how to translate Dilthey’s term.
sensum conjoined and fused with the memory of previous sensa by the constructive power of the imagination.\textsuperscript{4} Thinking consists, then, of the activities of the imagination (which constructs images and links them together) and the attention (which picks out features which might serve as links). The results of thinking are stored in the memory, which records imaginative constructions in the medium of language.

This model of the way the mind works is the basis for Kaufman's view of language. Kaufman's theory of imaginative construction is depicted in the following figure:

Experience enters the mind, is constructed into images by the imagination (with the help of attention) and then stored in memory. This allows the imagination to also construct links between images. Kaufman remarks that "to imagine is to relate by means of an image. Thinking, then, is a process of moving back and forth from one item of experience to another."\textsuperscript{5} This is a rather confusing way of putting it. I think it would be more accurate to

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{5} Kaufman, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 118. Kaufman's focus on the imagination's act of
say that thinking moves back and forth between images of experience, since we cannot move back in time to compare this experience to a past one (only its image). Kaufman does not distinguish sufficiently between images and the experiences they collect together. Nor does he delve into questions about how the mind represents something, but rather assumes that images are stored in the memory in some fashion, and proceeds from that assumption.

As thought develops out of its encounter with the external world, it presents that world to itself as a mental construct. However, Kaufman argues that "each level of consciousness, as it emerges through expression from the level below it, represents the previous level, though it does not simply reproduce it." In this respect, language refers to itself, and in so doing creates higher levels of language. By expressing ever more complex images and relating those images in new presentations to the mind, language expresses our thoughts by generating concepts. It is odd, however, to speak of language representing itself, since representation is usually thought of as a depiction of something else. Does Kaufman think that images represent our experience of something, or that thing itself?

In Kaufman's view, language also plays an active role in the formation of experience. This activity is pictured in the diagram as the memory articulating the form of attention which is brought to bear upon the world. Kaufman argues that language is "a vast network of interpretive categories which exists prior to the individual." This contention is supported producing images is reminiscent of Mary Warnock's analysis of this same topic in her excellent book entitled Imagination (London: Faber and Faber, 1976). Warnock, however, focuses on images as products of the imagination, rather than emphasizing the imagination's role in creating links between images, as Kaufman does.

6 Kaufman, Relativism, 70. Compare this statement to Kant's claim that "no concept is ever related to an object immediately, but to some other representation of it, be that other representation an intuition, or itself a concept. Judgment is therefore the mediate knowledge of an object, that is, a representation of a representation of it" (Critique of Pure Reason, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1963), 105). Kaufman generally follows Kant's argument that thought contains concepts that are synthetic a priori (organizations of experience that are nevertheless logically prior to sensation), although Kaufman makes much of the fact that such ideas are simply linguistic representations, constructed by people and therefore reviseable.

7 Ibid., 51.
with reference to Benjamin Whorf, who argued that the grammar of a linguistic system leads people to interpret the world in a certain way.\(^8\) Kaufman does not go so far as to say that our grammar should be changed, but he does think that the system of language shapes our thoughts.

Like Kant, Kaufman thinks that the imagination constructs language.\(^9\) As well, Kaufman agrees that we are too rarely conscious of the constructive activity of the imagination, allowing our thoughts to be guided by currently accepted integrations of language. There are two major implications of this principle: first, that language emerges out of the self's interaction with its environment; second, that language develops historically and is thus relative to its time and place. Kaufman thus argues that the imagination constructs a framework within which experiences, perceptions and insights are organized.

At times, it seems that Kaufman virtually identifies thought with language. In his later writing, Kaufman maintains that "Every dimension and region of consciousness and experience is in this way permeated with and structured by language."\(^10\) This sentence illustrates the tension in his theory between thought and language. All cognitive activities, it would seem, are linguistic in nature. Kaufman’s analysis of thought then becomes an analysis of language, since the connection of thought to the world becomes difficult to ascertain according to his proposed epistemology.

It would be more accurate to say that the imagination receives experience, and combines it into images, which are then refined into concepts by comparing these images to our sensations and perceptions. Kaufman’s theory does not adequately describe the mimetic role of the imagination in thinking, that is, the intention of the image to conform to that which it images. Garrett Green argues that "imagination . . . is not simply constructive but also

\(^8\) Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality* (New York: Wiley, 1956). The quality of Whorf’s research, as well as the conclusions drawn from it, has been criticized in Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1994).

\(^9\) Kaufman has a more elevated view of the imagination than Kant, who saw it as “a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 112).

\(^10\) Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 166.
receptive. It is the ability to construct images, yes—but also the ability to perceive them.” However, in Kaufman’s theory, the task of perception is also included in the role of the imagination. Our perceptions are formed by the system of language, since the imagination is immersed in language. Kaufman acknowledges that something is given to the imagination in this process, but he could distinguish more clearly between the role of perception and that of imagination in the formation of concepts.

Kaufman’s emphasis on the active imagination leads also to a view of the self as an individual agent. Delwin Brown argues that “Kaufman’s attention is given almost exclusively to the activity side of relationality—the agent grasps, the agent shapes, the agent creates, the agent forms.” If the self is seen as interacting with its environment, both receiving information and giving form to the world, the self can be seen as connected to reality. The self is still individual, yet by forming relationships, it integrates itself into the web of society.

By concentrating on the role of the active imagination, rather than the results of that activity, Kaufman begs the question of the validity of the productions of the imagination. Sallie McFague puts it this way: “I do not believe that recognition of, even celebration of, the constructive character of theology necessarily involves the admission that all construction is merely play and that hence one construction is no better than another.” It is a truism to say that all language is created by human beings; it is a leap in logic to say that all language is thus created equal.

Kaufman’s view of language, and the social network within which it is embedded, suffers from a one-sided emphasis on the active side of the self and the imagination. His focus on the self as agent causes him to develop an epistemology that misrepresents the give and take of human interaction with the environment. A more adequate theory would define more


precisely the difference between language and thought. Language is obviously a cognitive activity, but thinking is a broader activity than language: to think is also to sense, perceive, feel, express, analyze, and so on. Thoughts are expressed or represented in language, of course, but thought uses the material of language in order to communicate and understand other people, and to manipulate the world. Kaufman is correct that language shapes those activities, by providing structures through which those activities take place. However, thinking also transcends the structures of language by projecting itself towards its environment.

I.A.2. Theology integrates imaginative constructions

The system of images constructed by the imagination is unified, in Kaufman’s view, by our most general modes of thinking. He argues that “Philosophy and theology are simply attempts to bring the thinking going on in the cultural process to over-all unity from a definite point of view.” Theological language (which is a reflective analysis of religious images and language) is a subset of religious language (in his case, Christian), but is not restricted to that sphere, since it uses general theories of language and critical reflection to analyze religion. However, theology has a special and unique task over and above these general theoretical inquiries, since theology is a religious activity, taking part in the piety of the religious experience, even as it is reflecting upon language in an analytical way.

Theology’s task is then to construct a system of religious language, by which to transform ordinary perception of the world into a sacred view. He submits that “every philosophy or theology, insofar as it seeks to penetrate into ‘reality’ and bring unity into our thinking, is a systematic construction.” He views the rituals and practices of religion as expressions of an inner meaning found within the religious self. Revelation is seen as the re-organization of the structuring of human meaning.

14 Kaufman, Relativism, 90.
15 Ibid., 92.
Kaufman identifies religious language as the centre of that network. He argues that theology (along with metaphysics) "seeks to make explicit the (implicit) meaningfulness which life has for each of us." Not only does theology seek to express the inner relations of our thought-world, but it also seeks to unify the meanings expressed in the web of language.

Meaning thus unites the network of language. Kaufman thinks that "the very nature of meaning thus drives us toward a final unity of meaning, in which every particular meaning in our experience is comprehended but not dissolved away." The constructions of theology unify the network of language, thus synthesizing our representation of the world into an ordered form, through which we view the world.

Kaufman’s view of language as imaginative construction leads him to argue that theology is an interpretation of experience, rather than a metaphysical speculation about supernatural reality. He argues that "the meaning of the theological term will become clear as we discover its utility for interpreting ordinary experience." Because language is an imaginative distillation of experience into constructed concepts, it interprets experience, drawing it into a unity.

It is true that, since language is a form which represents the world, it can be examined by the mind, and formed into an ordered system, articulating the connections between ideas and experience. Scott Holland notes that the German word for imagination is *Einbildungskraft*, which means "to form into one." By representing experience, however, language also forms experience, in Kaufman’s view. Experience is therefore mediated by language, since language has already been involved in the generation of consciousness.

However, if all theological language is constructed by the imagination, then none of it is independent of the religious thinker. Green argues that "however much of the theologian’s

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16 Ibid., 99.
17 Ibid., 100.
19 Scott Holland, "Einbildungskraft: 1. Imagination 2. The Power to Form into One" in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity*. 
work is constructive, it depends finally on something that is not constructed but given; or, in theological language, it responds to grace. The classical word for that which is given to the theologian by grace is *revelation.* The religious imagination is receptive as well as constructive. Kaufman’s linguistic theory causes him to question the notion of revelation as something given externally to human cognition.

William Dean gives a different evaluation of Kaufman’s position. Dean argues that “of overriding importance in his earlier work was Kaufman’s claim that revelation, unlike other knowledge, includes an element beyond imaginative construction; for revelation is the process whereby the self receives a positive self-disclosure from a personal God who is beyond human history.” Dean is correct that Kaufman’s early view stressed that revelation must come from outside the bounds of human thinking. However, Kaufman rejected the application of the personal model of communication to the notion of revelation insofar as it implies that a specific message can be given. If any “positive self-disclosure” is given in revelation, Kaufman thinks that it is in the form of concepts, but these are generated by human beings, synthesized out of the human encounter with the mystery of the world.

If theology integrates experience, then it is produced inductively, and is a synthesis of observations of God’s acts in the world. Kaufman’s view contrasts with a deductive view of revelation, in which a message is given (in Scripture or direct experience of God), and people simply listen to it, or interpret it. An inductive view need not deny that revelation has content, since information about God is gleaned from the study of experience and history. The constructed concepts of revelation, however, are not given directly by God, although they are “given” in the sense that they are constitutive parts of the cosmos, in Kaufman’s view.

\[\text{Green, 221.}\]

Kaufman proposes that at the deepest level, language and thought are tied together in an intimate dialectical dance. He engages in a “discussion of the anthropological bases underlying human knowledge,” and seeks to show “the emergence of consciousness, at the very lowest levels, to the point at which it becomes possible for knowledge to emerge.” In other words, consciousness emerges organically, that is, by growing out of a process of interaction. Language forms the experience of the self, not only by the public standard of meaning, but also by the ordering and organizing of experience within the self. In other words, the self is brought into being by language, since language allows the self to represent not only things other than itself, but also itself.

Kaufman argues that language plays a vital role in generating thought. He thinks that “it is in and through the very act of expression that we become conscious of what it is we are trying to express.” Language serves to objectify thoughts (even inside the mind). He argues that “we become conscious of an inner state, whether feeling, volition, or thought, through expressing it (perhaps only in the ‘silent speech’ of conscious thought) in such a way that we can ‘see’ it or ‘examine’ it and are enabled to reflect upon it.” The objectification of “inner states” provokes an internal relation within the self, since those states are now seen as internal yet objective.

In his later writing, Kaufman’s view of language becomes more nuanced. He claims that the process of creating linguistic units allows us to become aware of our own activity in this process, by perceiving that these units are possessed by us. He argues that “certain of our words enable us to focus attention on our subjective states as such; and this in turn makes it

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22 Kaufman, Relativism, 63.

23 Ibid., 59. It would be interesting to compare Kaufman’s view to Leslie Dewart’s in Religion, Language and Truth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), where he develops “a functional, syntactic interpretation of language [which] would conceive language as the means whereby man can situate himself in the world and create his self- hood out of his relation to reality. Language is expressive and creative of the human self” (95).

24 Collingwood, Principles of Art, p. 247.
possible for us to compare and contrast them with one another, to discern that they are ours." 25 Rather than focusing on the inner states as objects, Kaufman focuses on the feeling of possession which is generated by the representative character of language.

The ability of language to refer to itself, and thus overlap successive layers of meaning, is of primary importance throughout Kaufman's work. In fact, it is the precondition for consciousness. Kaufman argues that consciousness "emerges only for the linguistic animal—the human person—who is able to objectify for herself or himself these 'inner states' by means of words which name them." 26 In his later work, this power of the imagination to create images upon which the mind can consider and reflect is described by Kaufman as a cybernetic capability, the ability of the mind to provide feedback to itself.

However, Kaufman also argues that language creates our subjectivity. He argues that "if we English-language speakers did not have words like 'I' or 'we,' we would not have the sort of self-consciousness we do... In languages which do not employ first-person pronouns in the way English does (along with other Indo-European languages), significantly different sorts of 'self-awareness' emerge." 27 Kaufman's analysis of the word "I" faults it for fostering a dangerous sort of individualism, which to his mind ignores the social relatedness of the human being. He points to other cultures in which "a sense of relatedness to others, of 'we,' has seemed more primordial than 'I.'" 28 This relationality is formed by the grammar which we use, according to Kaufman's theory. Rather than suggesting a different grammar, though, his solution is to shift the emphasis from first-person singular to first-person plural. This does

25 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 164. This idea is quite similar to Collingwood's discussion in Principles of Art, where he says that "speech is a function of self-consciousness; ... a speaker is conscious of himself as speaking, and is thus a listener to himself" (247).

26 Ibid.


28 Ibid., 151.
not seem sufficient to overcome the fundamental subjectivity of his view of the self (which is embedded in Western grammar, according to his analysis).

It is difficult to see from Kaufman’s rather subjective analysis of self-consciousness how group-consciousness could be more primary than self-consciousness (unless this is added later by social conditioning). Cultures with a stronger sense of “relatedness to others” also have a stronger sense of the past (their ancestors, and their authority) than modern western culture. A more adequate view of the relation of language and the self would emphasize how language arises as a result of social interactions. This placement of language in the context of a social world would also locate meaning in the social realm, rather than in the grammatical structure of words.

Later, Kaufman rejects the inwardness of meaning. He uses the insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein to argue that there is “no ‘originary’ inwardness in human beings; we naturally respond in external and visible ways to what is happening to us.”29 This response begins in children as an automatic response to external stimuli, and develops into a mediated response, enabling “a range of possibilities of action and speech that become open to the self.”30 Kaufman views “inwardness” as a misinterpretation of the relationship between language and the world.

Kaufman is correct that the system of language, since it expresses the internal states of the speaker, is contingent upon the construction of meaning by the self. It is thus relative to each individual who speaks, and by speaking, creates meaning anew. However, the public system of language provides continuity through time and across space, and also constructs meaning in the individual self, by imposing its structure upon the speaker. Wayne Proudfoot argues “that all of our concepts are human constructions does not imply that they are subject to self-conscious choice and alteration in the way that Kaufman suggests.”31 Language, and

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30 Ibid., 13.

also thinking, are thus set within the history of the self's interaction with his or her environment.

Thomas Finger characterizes Kaufman’s analysis as laying bare the formative building blocks of thinking and knowledge, out of which complicated forms arise. Finger accurately describes the levels of the cognitive process posited by Kaufman, noting that “these levels become stabilized as each individual’s experience progresses, and all individual experience is shaped by solidified cultural experience, communicated through language.”32 The stability of experience (as codified in language) is seen positively by Finger, since it contains a tendency towards a more accurate presentation of the world, whereas Kaufman tends to evaluate the solidity of language negatively, since he thinks that the historical process of the world through time demands that language change so as to accurately fit with that process.

Finger does not give enough credence to the important role of language in generating thought as it progresses upwards through these levels (the way genetic codes generate organisms). Kaufman’s epistemology gives language a crucial role in the development of levels of consciousness, since our representations at the lower levels guide the development of our organization of images and ideas. In this process, sense-data are processed by the mind into increasingly complex representations of the world. There are empirical inputs to the mental process, but once these inputs are made into images, it is the symbols which are the material upon which the mind works. Kaufman does acknowledge that a pragmatic judgment of language requires some empirical evidence for or against such a judgment, but he claims that this judgment is only done from within language.

Kaufman’s theory underplays the similarities between linguistic systems: there are common features exhibited in different cultural imaginations, such as the persistence of objects through time and the stability of matter. Finger points out that Kaufman’s theory rests on the assumption that “no one ever perceives a common, objective world directly, apart from imagination's constructive activity.”33 Finger critiques this view by drawing upon recent

32 Thomas Finger, “Relativity, Normativity and Imagination” in Weaver, Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity, 209.

33 Ibid., 212.
psychological research on differentiation theory, which suggests that the "perceiver's task is to detect differences that are present all the time." According to this theory, the imagination works with some rather obdurate material in its constructions. The imagination must account for those enduring differences which we encounter, which are commonly present in views of the world. If imagination were as constructive as Kaufman thinks, different imaginations would not construct such standard pictures of the world.

Finger critiques Kaufman for presenting "an epistemology which makes no room for a somewhat common world being more or less directly accessible, even at the earliest stages, to different persons in different cultures." Although the criticism is muted by the qualified way in which he states it, Finger thinks that the world impinges on all human beings in much the same way (although cultures and individuals will appropriate and interpret it differently).

The problem here lies in Kaufman's theory of language. If language forms thought, then how can we think independently? Are we not captive to the structure and system of language? Kaufman proposes that creative restructuring of the language changes its meaning, and thus our thinking. However, this position presumes that thinking is independent in some sense, not completely determined by language. Or perhaps thinking is dependent on other things besides language, such as action. I think that this is the route Kaufman takes, seeing language itself as action, and then judging it by pragmatic and ethical tests. If he thinks, however, that all thinking (and acting) is determined by language, then these judgments are also within language, thus rendering his argument circular. It is important to note that Kaufman argues that language generates consciousness (that is, the possibility of thought, or even the structures in which thought operates), not that language generates particular thoughts and ideas. The latter form of argument would imply that language actually determines what we think, in addition to forming the possible boundaries of our thinking.

34 Ibid., 211. He cites Carol Sigelman and David Shaffer, Life-Span Human Development 2nd ed. (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole, 1995), 146, contra Kaufman's dependence on Piaget.

35 Ibid., 209.
When Kaufman applies his view of language to religion, a subjective model of language is used in his revision of the doctrine of revelation. He defines religious language as a set of symbols which reflect the inner dispositions of human beings. The meaning of religious symbols would seem to be originally private, since it is the “source out of which the external symbols, acts and artifacts emerge.” Since religion is thus subjective, Kaufman suggests that only pragmatic judgments can be made about the efficacy of religious expressions of that ground (“some kind of determination of the sufficiency with which the problems of meaninglessness, guilt, . . . were overcome”). This notion of a practical judgment of religious language is retained throughout Kaufman’s changing theory of language, although for different reasons.

Kaufman thus seeks to discover “an adequate ground for our existence” which relieves the “problems and tensions which lie deep within man’s subjectivity.” He thinks that we can construct universal symbols which point to the logical ground of the unification of language. This ground is not a private experiential ground, differing for every person. It is, rather, the set of linguistic presuppositions which are the conditions for meaningful experience, especially those presuppositions which foster an integrated experience universal to all speakers of that language. In his later work, Kaufman sees the concept of God as the “vehicle of divine revelation.” This definition places revelation in the public realm of meaning, which requires Kaufman to develop his notion of the system of language, which will be examined in the second chapter.

37 Ibid., 69-70.
38 Ibid., 65.
39 Kaufman, Essay, 82.
Kaufman’s early expressive view of language led him to a subjective theory of thought, in which the inner meaning of language was private to the self. Michael McLain criticizes this formulation, arguing that Kaufman’s view “implies that the observable dimension of the self is a mere sign of the ‘real’ or ‘inner’ self.” According to this view, language merely represents an inner hidden reality. McLain criticizes Kaufman’s model of the self, suggesting that Kaufman “has described persons as a type of reality that is hidden unless self-disclosed, ... a type of reality unknowable from the observer’s perspective.” This model of the self is closely linked to Kaufman’s formulation of his theory of language as expression, in which meaning is internal to the self. Because the self can choose not to express its inner states, in Kaufman’s theory, the division between public and private is bridged only by language. There are, however, other aspects of interpersonal communication which do not require language.

Kaufman argues that revelation is like communication, but that it is not a message expressed by a speaker, a set of signs which depict an inner mental state (such as the mind of God). Instead, Kaufman uses a model of language in which the structure of religious language creates the inner mental states of the believer (the entire human structure of language is subverted by divine revelation, in effect changing the meaning of our ordinary language). Since language, in Kaufman’s view, orders and organizes our experience, theology is then the task of analyzing the ideas which form our religious thinking (their semantic relations and historical reference). Although the self is indeed private in this conception, language is public, and can be examined by common procedures. Kaufman emphasizes the public role of language later in his thinking, as we will see in the next chapter.

The emergent aspect of language allows us to see thinking as proceeding from a material and social base. A. James Reimer describes Kaufman’s first book as a “phenomenological analysis of the evolution of the human self. ... The norms and criteria by

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41 Ibid., 166.
which we distinguish between truth and error gradually emerge together with the
development of the structure of the self and the world." Because the norms of truth are
developed as the mind apprehends its environment, these norms are relative to the self's
placement in that environment. Reimer critiques Kaufman for buying into a modern
technological view of knowledge, which has lost the ancient view of eternal structures of
being, instead seeing existence itself (or at least experience of it) as a creation of the
autonomous self.

Religious language, which Kaufman sees as a subset of language in general, is thus
categorized as an external representation of internal religious experiences. These
experiences, however are already articulated by language, and so are not a pure, unmediated
access to religious objects. Theology has the task of ensuring that religious language is
coherent, as well as connected to genuinely transcendent reality, given as completely other
than human imagining (Kaufman sees revelation as a transmutation of our entire system of
meaning, not a supernatural meaning-complex fallen from heaven). The best way for theology
to adjudicate the legitimacy and authenticity of religious language, Kaufman thinks, is to
connect it to concrete historical events (this is the given), and to evaluate the type of lived
experience that this language promotes. By defining historical existence as linguistic, however,
Kaufman sets up a potentially circular form of reasoning about experience: it is both formed
by language and expressed in language, and one wonders whether it is anything but language.

We have seen in this section that Kaufman characterizes language as an expression of
internal mental states. However, Kaufman does not simply view language as an external
representation of inner feelings or ideas. Language is not simply a copy of mental acts, a
device for exteriorizing those mysterious things called ideas. Instead, language is seen as
expressing inner states in ever more complex fashion, in a progression of levels. In this
process, language plays the role of generating the consciousness of the individual, by
representing experience in symbolic form. By forming images of the world, the mind becomes

42 A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," The
aware of itself as a subject distinct from the world. I have shown that language, then, distances the mind from direct contact with the world, through the very act of representing it as an object within the mind. Experience is not a direct appropriation of the world, since it is already filtered through the web of language. Kaufman cannot then appeal to experience, although there is something given to the mind from its environment.

By focusing so exclusively on the originary effects of the imagination, Kaufman gives short shrift to the actual causes of those effects. Granted, the causes of sensations and perceptions can produce different effects on different people. This leads Kaufman to conclude that these causes are unknowable. But if they are causes, and at least partially independent of a perceiver, then they must be treated as possessing their own meaning, independently of an observer. The acts of perception and conceptualization codify our sensations in language, ordering them into a common sense. Language then becomes the bridge between mind and reality, and does not separate us from reality by imposing itself between self and object, but reaches right out to it.

The subject is constituted by language, according to Kaufman. Language not only forms the way we think about ourself (as an individual or a group), but also forms our subjectivity, since it expresses meanings interior to our self. As long as Kaufman considers the location of meaning to be inside the speaker, however, his theory of language is subjective. The only public meanings would be those agreed to be so, and one could never be sure that another person had exactly the same meaning in mind when coming to such an agreement. In order to have a public theory of meaning, Kaufman considers the system of language as more fundamental than individual speakers, a position which will be examined in the next chapter.

Instead of trying to eliminate the passive role of the imagination, many critics happily integrate that mental function into the process of cognition. Language, as a common convention of conceptual organization of perceptions, nevertheless articulates the reality to which it refers. The passive imagination does receive something from its environment, and records a pattern discerned in the multitude of sensations. This pattern is not indubitable, since the active imagination can also reform its conceptions about that pattern, even to the point of consciously altering its perception of that pattern. Kaufman's attempt to avoid the role of the
passive imagination skews his theory into a perceptual relativism, with all the paradoxes which that position entails (these will be examined in the third section of this chapter).

I.B. The particularity of language

Since the form of language shapes our thinking, it also makes knowledge relative, in Kaufman’s view. Experience is not original; it is codified and classified by language. If the very logic by which we judge our thought (including Kaufman’s logic) is not eternal, but relative to our historical context, there is no way to judge our thought, including our logic, except by its effectiveness through successive historical periods. Final judgments on these grounds could never be made within history, he recognizes, since history could only prove a certain perspective complete and effective at the end of history. He concludes that “all thought, then, and the criteria of all thought are ultimately subjective.” While Kaufman never repudiates this assumption, in his later work he focuses on the orienting task of language as a way of providing a truly public language for people to think in common.

Kaufman argues that language arises from each self’s independent interaction with its environment (using a common system adapted by each individual). If taken to its logical conclusion, this position would imply that each thinker’s thought is relative to his or her individual context. In order to counteract this perception, Kaufman argues that language is formed also within a society.

A society’s language, however, changes over time. Kaufman thus argues that thinking is a present act, which takes up past and present experiences and language, integrating them into constructed knowledge. I will argue that this proposal does not mean that all thoughts are equal. Although language is relative to its historical and social context, and thus is not objectively true in any ultimate sense, it can be a compendium of our best syntheses of our experience, taking into account how language shapes that process.

Kaufman argues that religious language is historical, in the sense that it is constructed by individuals within a cultural tradition (representing an interpretation of the meaning of

43 Kaufman, Relativism, 84.
existence for that group or individual). Kaufman argues that theology, by reflecting on the
efficacy of religious language, should construct new systems whereby people are brought to
some practical resolution of their perplexity when faced with this strange existence. I will
argue that attention to the historicity of language should result in the retrieval of past religious
language into the present, not on practical grounds, but because of the quality of the images
(their ability to render the glory of God into human reality).

I.B.1. The relativity of language

Kaufman begins his analysis of the judgment of language by noting the pluralism of
claims to truth in the modern world. This situation arises, he thinks, because "the conception
of truth with which one operates, the criteria in terms of which it is applied, and the very
application of those criteria are all functions of the over-all position—the Weltanschauung—
of the philosopher involved."44 This position implies that there is no standard of truth external
to all thinkers, but that truth itself is a function of thinking, since it is dependent on the way
that concept is used by a thinker. He claims that "so-called 'facts' themselves are actually
perceived differently and understood to have differing degrees and kinds of significance from
each of the different vantage points; they are really functions of the point of view from which
they are apprehended."45 Therefore, he thinks that "it is no longer adequate to frame
philosophical thought within the perspective of the relatively simple truth-error dichotomy."46
To Kaufman, truth and error are relative to historical context, since these concepts develop
their meaning within cultures, and there is no universal agreement about what constitutes the
essence of these ideas.

Since language is constructed, Kaufman concludes that it is relative to each culture.
He even thinks that "The fundamental laws of logic—identity, contradiction, and excluded

44 Ibid., 18. The term Weltanschauung is used by Dilthey to indicate the thought-world of a particular person or society, relative to its historical context.


46 Ibid., 19.
middle—are finally nothing but abstract descriptions of the structure of the finished product of this unifying activity as it is carried on in the West."47 Kaufman takes as proven Benjamin Whorf’s claim that “even the subject-predicate form of thinking is a function of Indo-European languages and is by no means universal.”48 This claim is disputed by Noam Chomsky, who argues that although the surface structures of languages are different, they all rely on similar deep grammatical structures.49 Even if Whorf is correct, it would be possible for different languages to describe the same world. Grammars do not describe the world, they set up systems for people to think. Then the question would be whether comparable thought-patterns exist in these different languages.

Kaufman argues that since language is historical, it is relative to its particular time and place. He acknowledges the claim that relativists “can give no adequate account, in their own terms, of their own standpoint.” In other words, the relativist criterion for truth, that “thought and value are relative to the concrete situation,”50 results in a self-contradiction when applied to the relativist’s own position. Kaufman attempts to solve this problem by making a distinction between external and internal relativism. The first type is subject to the relativist paradox, he says, because it fails to make the above distinction: it pretends to describe the nature of thought, but “is itself based on certain norms or criteria of validity—of what ought to be the case in logical and scientific discourse—and not on descriptive analyses at all.” Internal relativism, he claims, “is not based on this kind of ‘objective’ description,” but instead is the attempt to “get inside” another viewpoint in another context.51 This attempt does not solve the problem, since it assumes the very point which it tries to prove, namely, that the

47 Ibid., 78.

48 Ibid., note 8, page 9. Leslie Dewart, in Evolution and Consciousness, also argues that Indo-European languages display a fundamentally unique grammatical structure.


50 Kaufman, Relativism, 13.

51 Ibid., 14–15.
viewpoint is dependent upon its context. In other words, a description of that viewpoint and context requires some sort of sympathetic participation in the context in order to understand the viewpoint.

Kaufman’s formulation of the relativist thesis (as internal relativism) does not imply that all statements are thus equal, for he includes a norm for judgment of statements. This norm is the norm of history, in that truth constantly supersedes itself over time, through the present construction of truth. Thus, Kaufman’s thesis is not about the relativity of truth, but about the history of truth. Kaufman’s ‘natural history’ of truth conceals an absolute claim: namely, a claim about the nature of truth.

The idea that all language is constructed does not tell us anything about how to judge which formulations of language are better than others. Kevin Sharpe claims that “We can admit that our objective descriptions are inadequate without going to the extreme of saying there can be no objective description at all.”52 Although language is a human construction, it is a construction which is made for human purposes, such as coping with the world, in which case it would seem necessary for language to conform in some way to that world.

Some critics have maintained that Kaufman does not escape the internal paradox of relativism. David Schindler questions Kaufman’s claim that “all truth claims are relative to their times,”53 since this statement is itself non-relative. Schindler argues that Kaufman does not deal adequately with the paradox of the relativity thesis: that “either relativism is itself relative, in which case it can make no trans-relative claim upon others, or else relativism is itself non-relative (i.e. absolute), in which case it contradicts itself.”54 Kaufman’s position, it would seem, is based on a non-relative claim about the nature of history (a claim which would have to be true for all time, in order for Kaufman to be correct).

54 Ibid., 89.
Hugh Jones defends Kaufman’s epistemology, but calls it a developmental view of truth.55 This appellation is more to the point than calling it relativist, since in Kaufman’s view there is a progression towards a greater knowledge of the truth. It should be noted that Kaufman is referring primarily to the truth of our overall perspectives, not to the mundane development of scientific knowledge, as it seeks to increase our understanding of the sensory world. Jones correctly points out that “the relativity involved in perspectival language poses problems for speaking about how things ‘really are.’”56 Kaufman apparently does not think that the perspectival nature of language undermines its truthful ability.

Kaufman defends his notion of the relativity of language from a Darwinian perspective, not an Einsteinian one. Language is a system that evolves, he claims (or perhaps a set of systems within one overall system). Time modifies the system by a process of natural selection; those organisms (ideas) that are fittest to survive will replicate themselves more successfully than others. The fittest ideas would then be those that could adapt most successfully to their environment, being modified by their pragmatic experience (or perhaps simply by accident). These modifications are serendipitous; they happen by chance, but they can have fortunate outcomes, since they allow for better functioning in the environment. Kaufman argues that moral modifications, those that contribute to the good of the context of an organism, will benefit the organism. Language, then, being a context of the organism, created by the organism, should be modified to orient its users towards the universal good of that language’s context, that is, its social and its material location. Language becomes a tool for the genetic engineering of the moral code.

Kaufman emphasizes the normative character of thought, that it strives towards truth. Rather than see the norms of thought as embedded in its structure (as a teleological form), it would be more satisfactory to see the norms of thought as intentions (eschatological visions). Finger states it thus: “Thought is a dynamism guided by intentions towards universal norms, norms so fundamental that without them the actual process of thinking, even though it never


56 Ibid., 94.
definitively reaches them, would not even occur.” He acknowledges that “since there will always be more to discover and know, no one can be sure of stating their ultimate(s) or norm(s) in absolutely adequate final form.”57 Finger, though, thinks that this normative character of thought generates a “dynamism towards ever more precise formulations.”58 If we can become more precise, there must be devices by which we can achieve that goal (and the relative norms for guiding that process should not be confused with the absolute character of the ideal toward which thought strives).

Since language is seen as an articulation of experience within the self, Kaufman views religious language as an expression of inner religious states. This view of religion is critiqued for its private character. In his later work, Kaufman alters his view of the self, suggesting that the development of consciousness arises as a result of the feedback of information to the mind. This suggestion is potentially revolutionary, since it views the mind as a network of interacting processes, rather than governed by a transcendental ego. If consciousness is simply an event arising from the interaction of a couple of cognitive procedures (such as the imagination, attention and memory), then there is no one cognitive faculty organizing all mental activity.59 The identity of the self would then be constructed by the relations between mental events and interaction with the world. Kaufman seems to suggest just such a description of religious language in his proposal that theology be seen as a conversational enterprise.

I would agree with Kaufman that language is relative to its context, for language is indeed constructed as an image of its context. But this does not mean that language is parochial, and should be universalized from its particular, material roots. I would argue that language is a common convention, or more precisely, that it is a convention that language is common. This means that the conventions of language are constructed with reference to its

57 Finger, 222.

58 Ibid., 216.

59 Marvin Minsky proposes a similar model in The Society of Mind (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986), in which he argues that a number of mental functions interact in order to produce the cognitive activities which we ascribe to the ego.
context. Language is formed by common consensus, if it is conventional. But this is a consensus of judgment, a judgment that language does really tell it like it is.

Perhaps Kaufman’s theory of perception draws more from Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle than Einstein’s relativity model. Kaufman seems to be saying that the act of perception affects the thing perceived (or at least does not allow us to describe with certainty all characteristics of the object—i.e. both its position and velocity). Does the act of imaginative construction in some way create the reality which is perceived by the speaker of a language? Perhaps only at the lowest level, in the sub-semantic level of the deep structure of the mind. In his early writing, he does intimate that subject and object (self and thing) are not distinguished at the lowest level of experience. Although he does not state this assumption in his later thinking, he does continue to stress that language generates the self, and perhaps also the distinction between self and world.

If Kaufman is working from an Einsteinian model of relativity, in which perceptions are dependent upon the frame of reference of the perceiver, then his introduction of an ultimate point of reference hearkens back to an earlier worldview. Although he argues that no human being could perceive from this God’s-eye-view, positing a Copernican point from which absolute evaluations could be made of every perception is quite different from a model of the universe in which any frame of reference is as good as any other. Perhaps the idea of God functions for Kaufman like the speed of light in Einstein’s model, as a constant which is perceived to be the same from every reference point (although two distinct theoretical models are required in order to account for all experimental situations). In some ways, Kaufman’s treatment of the world’s religions seeks to find a Grand Unified Theory (at the quantum-symbolic level?) for all religious experience.

I.B.2. The historicity of language

Kaufman seeks to ameliorate the subjective aspect of his theory of language by setting language within the overall course of human history. He sees language as enveloped in social history. He argues that “thought emerges from, and is guided by, the mass of distinctions and relations conventional in the language and available to the thinker. Consciousness always
begins in, and is a further development of, previous consciousness and thought.\textsuperscript{60} Thinking is both shaped by the past and guided by present historical realities, although Kaufman tends to emphasize the present moment in the process of thinking. He also emphasizes the historical vantage point from which each individual interprets the world. Because that vantage point is within language, though, language also interprets our experience.

Kaufman thinks that knowledge is always historical, since "we are always in a position which transcends all previous positions and which therefore can analyze them and see their relativity."\textsuperscript{61} Knowledge, then, is temporary, and must be re-constructed in each new moment. It is not clear to me how Kaufman accounts for the continuity of knowledge: some things remain known over a period of time. To define experience in historical terms does not mean to define it as fleeting; memory, for example, is precisely that sort of experience that maintains itself over time. Language, as well, maintains knowledge over time, by representing it in a public form.

Because our imagination is always integrating our experiences into a structure of knowledge, Kaufman claims that "it is from the standpoint of the present, a position which always transcends the past and takes it up into itself, that this structuring of experience into a unified whole is accomplished."\textsuperscript{62} Each act of knowing, then, is new, since it is constructed out of past events of knowing, as well as the present moment of imaginative construction. Each act of knowing would seem to be inherently unique, then, since it is the confluence of a historical stream in a particular individual. If Kaufman implies that knowledge is relative to one's vantage point, that is one thing, but he seems to be implying that knowledge is relative to language, because language forms our thoughts through the historical overlapping of ever-new versions of knowledge of the world. In his later work, Kaufman will identify the relativity of language (and thought) as its relation to a particular historical context, although his

\textsuperscript{60} Kaufman, \textit{Relativism}, 89.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 120.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 118.
in the inductive method of imaginative synthesis will allow him to claim that language can be universal as well.

History has two aspects for Kaufman: the present element of decision and action (we could call this history-making), and the past element of actions (history-happening), which are causes having effects upon the present ("in a historical process the past is always alive and active in the present.")\(^6^3\) Kaufman also emphasizes history as writing (history-telling), the articulation of events in human language. If all of our experience is formed by language, this latter aspect of history would seem to be all-important, since all of the events of history would be filtered through the linguistic structures which organize that history into a sensible whole.

Kaufman’s theory of language as imaginative construction relies heavily upon the depth to which language and culture are immersed in human history, a continuous process of change brought about because human beings are inveterate culture-builders. Sheila Greeve Davaney is one critic who lauds Kaufman’s attention to the particular contexts in which ideas arise. History acts as an overarching scheme for Kaufman, she argues, subsuming culture and language under its more general rubric, interpreting culture and language as aspects of historicity. Nevertheless, Davaney has some distinct disagreements with his notion of historicity. She argues that “Kaufman appears to make a rather ahistorical appeal to the intrinsic nature of historicity.”\(^6^4\) He implies that this character of human existence has been constant throughout time, and will continue to be. To be sure, he does indicate that his concept of historicity as the human awareness of the historical nature of existence is quite recent (since human beings have only recently recognized their own nature). But this means that the historical existence of human beings was quite different when they did not consider themselves to be historical beings (in Kaufman’s sense). Kaufman claims that human beings have always been historical in the same way, and yet have come into a new sort of historical

\(^6^3\) Kaufman, “The Imago Dei as Man’s Historicity,” *Journal of Religion* 36 (1956): 161. This article was revised as chapter 23 in *Systematic Theology*, but this phrase does not appear in the book.

experience by realizing that they are historical (i.e. creating history). This seems contradictory, since that past experiences of being historical meant not so much creating history, but experiencing the effects of the past in the present. Kaufman’s definition of history is ahistorical because it replaces earlier definitions, rather than allowing them to shape his own.

Davaney concludes that Kaufman’s preoccupation is not with history as such, but with the historical moment of the present. She argues that in Kaufman’s work, “the past, at least for this moment in history, most often appears to be something to be transcended, overcome or transformed.”65 Perhaps we could read Kaufman as using the word “history” in the active sense, that is, in the writing of history. Is he arguing that we constantly rewrite history, or in more extreme terms, that since history is always written, it is always subject to revision? Is history in the active sense not also rewriting in order to get it right, to unearth the real history? Kaufman seems to argue that history in the active sense is living so as to make history turn out right, even to the point of rewriting history so that it turns out to have been right. To be fair, Kaufman has a larger sense of history, which incorporates the whole progress of the universe through time, and does not limit history simply to the writing of it.

History is not just language for Kaufman, though. The present aspect of history-making, that is, the construction of meaning by human beings through their actions, is every bit as important as the constructions by the imagination. The historicity of human existence is unique, since human beings alone are conscious that they are historical. Human beings were “created the kind of being[s] who had the possibility of transforming [their] own existence and nature in the course of history, who could in some sense re-create [themselves].”66 This transformation of existence is made possible by history-telling, the construction of a vantage point from which human beings can survey their historical existence. Language is thus meta-history, a reflection upon historical existence, or better yet, an objectification of it.

If Kaufman thinks that the events of history actually prove ideas correct or incorrect, then his method should involve investigating the concrete political, economic and cultural

65 Ibid., 173.

66 Kaufman, “The Imago Dei as Man’s Historicity,” 160.
histories in which ideas survive or die. McCormack asks the rhetorical question: “Can history as the Reality over against us, allow us to hope for a more humane future?”

Kaufman includes very little analysis of concrete historical realities, instead offering methodological principles by which to construct religious language. His method looks very much like that of the narrative theologians, who consider stories and other linguistic forms to structure a world for their readers and speakers. Kaufman’s invocation of history as an epistemological principle is similar to the narrativists, since it is history-telling that is vital to Kaufman, that is, the interpretation of history, or more precisely, the construction of a story which integrates historical events into a unity, preferably a universally acceptable one.

Kaufman’s definition of the form of human existence conveniently avoids the difficult questions of the content of any cultural form which humans might create. McCormack argues that “to say that humanity is by nature culture-creating does not guarantee any particular conception of the human.” Kaufman’s arguments that language is an imaginative construction similarly do not guarantee any particular linguistic formulation. The principles by which good culture-creations or imaginative constructions are above and beyond such vague generalizations about the capacities of human beings. Questions arise when we consider what makes an imaginative construction worthwhile, and the norms by which we judge our constructions occupy a distinct intellectual realm, although they may also be constructed. That they are constructed is irrelevant to the actual shape of the criteria by which we judge constructions.

David Schindler offers a different definition of history, that it is “a principle of difference,” and thus claims to truth must appeal to “some shared structures of experience amid our different histories.” The driving force of evolution is differentiation, yet the main impulse behind Kaufman’s thinking is towards common and public agreements. However, if


68 Ibid., 443.

69 Schindler, 96.
our thinking is relative to the context in which it arises, then local and particular truths are all that we have. Yet Kaufman thinks that some sort of agreement about truth can be constructed. The point is not only that an evolutionary theory of language could be much richer than Kaufman’s monoculture approach to meaning, but that it may actually conflict with the humanist ethical utopia which seems to drive his thinking.

I.B.3. Religious language as historical

Language develops as a historical process, in Kaufman’s view. He writes that “we forget that the whole structure of meanings with which we are working is dependent upon the experience through which we have lived and out of which, with the aid of attention and imagination, the structure of meanings itself has gradually emerged. . . . we easily forget that our understanding of these meanings, their very meaningfulness for us, is dependent on our history.”70 Since we cannot rely on past formulations of language to interpret our present experience, Kaufman concludes that we must construct meaning out of what we are given in the present (in memory as well as through sensation), as we progress through time.

Kaufman argues that every philosophy is a sort of Christology, since the “particular historical source . . . [of] his values, meanings and definitions of reality”71 acts as a sort of Christ, that is, a centre of interpretation analogous to the role of Christ in Christian thought. The analogy breaks down if these values and meanings are drawn from a historical event rather than from an identifiable person, since there is no need to identify a person as the centre of history (it could be an earthquake, or an untimely death, etc.). Christology, as well, is considerably more complex than Kaufman suggests here, as it is not only central to Christian thought, but expresses the main themes of that thought in Christ’s character, actions and words. However, I contend that no historical event can play that role in the same way as this singular story does. Kaufman’s definition of the meaning of religious language as historical

70 Kaufman, Relativism, 106.

reduces religious language to the meaning of an event (that is, our interpretations of it), rather than allowing the symbolism of religious language to signify infinitely more than its historical location.

At times, it seems that Kaufman views history as a cause of meaning. He argues that revelation consists in events, not words: “certain high points around which other events arrange themselves and in which they focus. It is these moments, filled with special meaning for us . . . that have decisively formed us into what we are.”72 God’s communication is then an event, rather than a message. It is a historical integration of history, an experience that integrates other experiences. Yet it is still our imaginative construction of a categorial concept, a realization of an idea that holds other ideas together.

Since language shapes all of our thinking, and since our very self is a product of the historical process of thinking within language, Kaufman thinks that “the ontological foundations of our deepest convictions are in history.” Thinking is based not only on the historical apprehension of the world, but on historical happenings: “certain crucial events . . . are the ontological ground of our values and norms.”73 This implies that our values are relative to the historical events upon which they are based (and thus pertinent to the people those events affect).

Although Kaufman thinks that all of our thinking is historical, he does not hold that it is completely in flux, not giving any stability for people awash in the seas of time. Kaufman argues that an “event (or process) which has given the self its fundamental orientation or structure of meaning, and in terms of which all other experience is apprehended and appreciated, will be of *supreme* significance to the self.”74 The system of meaning is internally held together by a key idea, which interprets and integrates all of the experience of the self.

The force of Kaufman’s thesis (that theology is an imaginative construction) is that such language is a convention. If all language is constructed by humans, then it is formulated

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73 Ibid., 25.
74 Ibid., 28.
by common agreements about the signs which publicly represent states of affairs, and the
relations between those signs. If language is a convention, though, it has a history, and any
revision of that convention needs to take into account the tradition of conventional use of
language. An important convention in religious language has to do with the way in which the
religious tradition is used. Harry Huebner argues that Kaufman’s thesis, that religious
language is constructed, implies that we must use the religious tradition to form our present
religious thoughts. Huebner argues that “without imagination tradition would be dead and
without tradition imagination would be contentless.” This premise brings a needed depth to
Kaufman’s view that our present thoughts should construct religious tradition ever anew.

Delwin Brown agrees with Huebner, submitting that “in the development of a tradition
the symbolic and mythic content of its past must play a constitutive role in reconstructions of
that tradition if they are to endure.” Brown argues that the imagination can shape the
content of the past tradition, but that the symbols of the tradition should be a “material
resource” for the imaginative reconstruction of the tradition. Kaufman’s work in fact displays
this creative use of the symbols of the tradition (although we can question how he creatively
reconstructs them), but his methodological proposals do not acknowledge the constitutive
nature of traditional symbols (because he wishes to deny any authority they have over our
creativity).

As he became more preoccupied with the system of theological language, Kaufman
examined the whole range of Christian doctrines, re-interpreting each one “within the limits of
history alone.” The task of the theologian is to interpret the traditional Christian concepts in
ways that will be understandable to the modern person. Theology is the interpretation of
Christian experience, in this view, whether that be experience of God recorded in the Bible, or
contemporary experience of the world, in its ongoing history with God. As in his first book,
the job of the theologian is to “present a coherent and full interpretation of life and the world

75 Harry Huebner, “Imagination/Tradition: Disjunction or Conjunction?” Mennonite
Theology in Face of Modernity, 74.

76 Brown, 1215.

77 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, x.
from the Christian point of view," taking into account other points of view, and always being self-critical of the ways in which language is being used.

Although his methodological emphasis on construction may seem to imply that everything is new, in fact Kaufman does use the resources of the tradition, although he sometimes radically redefines them. Linell Cady suggests that "the position Kaufman develops, however, reveals a more extensive appropriation of tradition than his labels convey." Cady calls Kaufman's theological method "extensional theology," and supports it as a model for a public theology which "selectively appropriate[s] and reinterpret[s] the symbolic and doctrinal resources of a tradition." Kaufman's methodological concerns should not distract the reader's attention from the concrete theological proposals which he makes. His analysis of the content of Christian doctrine can be examined aside from his epistemological pronouncements.

It is important to note that Kaufman does not disregard past formulations built up by people imaginatively constructing linguistic representations of their world. Dean argues that "for Kaufman theological knowledge now is based entirely on imagination and tests of imagined images. Theological knowledge is a function of the present imaginative construction in interaction with the heritage of imaginative constructions and pragmatic tests of those constructions." Imagination does not mean fantasizing, or dreaming up new images based upon speculation or dreams of how people wish the world would be. Because Kaufman emphasizes the role of the imagination in integrating conceptual formulations, though, Dean thinks that Kaufman separates the imagination from its role in the integration of experience, and instead focuses too much on the images themselves.

78 Ibid., xiii.
History is not simply a compendium of events for Kaufman, but a process in which human beings live. What does it mean that experience is historical? Does this imply that experience has a history? If this is true, then individual experiences, and even group experiences (cultures), are radically different, perhaps irreducibly so. If experiences (even contemporary ones) are incommensurable, then there is no way to communicate. Kaufman argues that since language is public, experience is always expressed in common terms. But do not people use public terms privately? Some would argue that when one learns a second language, they can never fully participate in the culture, in the same way as a child who has learned it as a mother tongue. I do not think that this is the case, because I think that our imagination (let me stress, my private imagination) is what allows us to translate ourselves into another culture. This may be done incompletely, but I think it can be done authentically, that genuine insight and participation into another culture (or another person) is possible. Language is certainly the vehicle for this process, but it only lays the groundwork. The private contribution of the individual imagination does the translation, enlivening the words and ideas of the cultural forms.

In this section, we have seen that Kaufman’s foundational claim (that experience is shaped by language and culture) leads him to conclude that language is thus relative to particular cultures (he calls this the historicity of language). He contends that thought is nurtured in the linguistic culture of memory and imagination. Thus, any absolute language is constructed, and therefore temporal; one can never go back to previously formulated expressions of the absolute. The only true formulation of the absolute, he thinks, is one corresponding to the blank open-endedness of the future, a mysterious cipher that is perhaps hypothetically predictable, but never known until it becomes present in the moment of dialogue between self and other.

Kaufman’s view of language contributes to an awareness of the contingency of theological language. However, his focus on the active side of the imagination renders language too dependent on the individual self, constructing links between its many and varied experiences. A more historical view of language would include the receptive side of the self,
not only taking hints from the public code of interpretation (which Kaufman does integrate into his thinking), but also interpreting clues existing in the speaker’s physical environment.

If Kaufman thinks that the events of history actually prove theological ideas correct or incorrect, then his method should involve investigating the concrete political, economic and cultural histories in which Christian ideas survive or die. This sort of materialist method (a quasi-Marxist method) would take the actual events of history (especially as understood by those on the underside) and apply them as a judgment on religious language. But Kaufman’s method is not materialist, for he includes very little analysis of concrete historical realities, instead offering methodological principles by which to construct religious language. His method looks very much like that of the narrative theologians, who consider stories and other linguistic forms to structure a world for their readers and speakers. Kaufman’s invocation of history as an epistemological principle is similar to the narrativists, since it is history-telling that is vital to Kaufman, that is, the interpretation of history, or more precisely, the construction of a story which integrates historical events into a unity, preferably a universally acceptable one.

I.C. Judgment of language

Kaufman views language as dynamic, that is, changing with time. He maintains that “man is a thoroughly historical being: all that we experience and understand is shaped by the ideas and language that structure our consciousness, and this speech and thought are themselves in continuous historical process.” This position implies that our language is relative to the society in which we grow and learn. Judgment of imaginative constructions is then pragmatic, depending on how well language functions through a period of time. To say that our language is relative, however, does not imply that our experience is subjective, in Kaufman’s view. Since knowledge is constantly being revised, it is not certain, but instead tentative, always incomplete. Language is judged according to the criteria of givenness, consistency and coherence. All of these criteria, however, are internal to the system of

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82 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, 14.
language. I will argue that Kaufman’s appeal to pragmatic criteria is inconsistent with his view that experience is formed by language.

Religious language has a unique logical status in Kaufman’s view, since it integrates the meaning of language. Theology is then an imaginative construction of religious language, on the basis of our historical experiences, judged by its practical effectiveness. Imaginative construction of theological ideas then would mean the refinement of traditional doctrines, as well as the invention of new ways of talking about those ideas in the current idiom. I will argue that this position implies that we need to take the traditions of religion as a primary source for theological thinking, as well as present experience.

I.C.1. Judgment of imaginative constructions

Kaufman bases his argument on an analysis of how thought develops in the human organism. Language is not a direct appropriation of the environment, but a complicated process, learned by infants as they develop into adults. He argues that “The reality of the external world is neither ‘given’ to us immediately as a reality or truth which simply presents itself to consciousness, nor is it an implication directly derived from the facts of consciousness by mere thought processes.”83 He thinks that language emerges from an interaction with its environment, this context presenting limits to thought, but not directly appropriated by thinking.

Nevertheless, Kaufman gives three criteria for judging the validity of imaginative constructions: “objectivity (givenness), . . . universality, and . . . unity (logical interconnectedness).”84 He notes that any imaginative constructions run up against the givenness of the world, and so that factor has the final say. It would seem that for Kaufman, the givenness of the world impinges on our mental constructions only at the beginning and end

83 Kaufman, Relativism, 32.
84 Ibid., 79. This list expands upon an earlier set of criteria for truth: “canons of logical consistency, agreement with experience” (“Philosophy of Religion and Christian Theology,” The Journal of Religion 37, no. 4: 236).
of that process. He argues that "thought can be judged from within only on the basis of coherence, its adequacy is finally judged not by coherence but by its ability to survive and interpret and become a significant factor in the historical process."85 While constructing our thoughts, coherence and consistency are the criteria which Kaufman suggests are used to judge the accuracy of those forms.

Kaufman argues that history judges our language. He holds that "its [language's] final justification must be its 'pragmatic' power in the historical process, made possible by its 'correspondence' with the realities of that process."86 Final judgments on these grounds could never be made within history, he recognizes, since history could only prove a certain perspective complete and effective at the end of history. While Kaufman never repudiates this assumption, in his later work he focuses on the orienting task of language as a way of providing a truly public language for people to think in common.

Kaufman argues that truth changes with the passage of time, and also varies from place to place. Language is an event, which occurs in the context of a succession of events. History is thus an epistemological principle for Kaufman. Time alters knowledge by superseding it, by rendering it past knowledge. Knowledge is ever new, in the sense that it is always constructed in the present, out of past knowledge and present experience. This situation renders knowing into an active process, thus temporally (and temporarily) true. As well, knowledge is historically limited to its societal context. Kaufman thinks that different local knowledges spring up in various places, constructed by groups of people intent on knowing their world. He argues that "the only truth we can know, . . . is the structure of our 'experience,' i.e., of our past, as qualified by, and interpreted with the aid of, the historically evolved and relative system of concepts available to us through language."87 Kaufman is right to put the word "experience" in quotes, since his epistemological theory has rendered experience relative to the language by which it is generated. Truth is then a highly qualified...

85 Ibid., 94.
86 Ibid., 94.
87 Ibid., 120.
term indeed, since the structure of our language interprets the world for us, as our
consciousness evolves through the environment of history.

Kaufman often writes in reaction to theories of cognition which posit the individual’s
experience as a pure, unmediated connection to reality, expressed (or reflected) in language.
However, although Kaufman sees language as generating consciousness, he does not think
that this characteristic makes it arbitrary. He writes: “The structure of meaning(s) in which we
live cannot be conceived as something simply subjective, a world of mere fantasy. On the
contrary, it is nothing else than our picture of our world, of reality.”\footnote{88} Kaufman
acknowledges that we must check our imaginative constructions with “every conceivable
experiential or experimental test.”\footnote{89} So Kaufman does not deny the existence of an external
world. This picture, though, is not directly related to the world, since it is mediated through
the imaginative construction of language.

Kaufman does not include a sufficient analysis of the role of the external world in the
formation of consciousness. Kevin Sharpe argues that “there is an independent reality which
molds our experience and this in turn leads us to search for new language or forms of
expression for this experience.”\footnote{90} Kaufman’s emphasis on the constructed character of
concepts leaves the judgment of concepts until after their construction. However, if the
criteria by which to judge concepts are themselves constructed, there is something
independent to which these criteria appeal, from the very beginning of the cognitive process.
Although Kaufman acknowledges the givenness of the world, this givenness acts only as a
limit to knowledge, not a source of concepts.

In his later work, Kaufman responds to such criticisms by clarifying that “experience
can disconfirm features of our most comprehensive images and concepts.” According to this
view, one can judge the truth of concepts by their effects. He maintains that “experience is

\footnote{88} Ibid., 100.
\footnote{89} Ibid., 93.
\footnote{90} Sharpe, 184.
not, however, their direct source and ground."\textsuperscript{91} He retains his earlier model of cognition as ruled by the active imagination, which is shaped by the system of language which links images together into an ordered whole.

While many applaud such a careful attention to language in theology, Kaufman’s extreme dedication to the principle of linguistic construction has brought his theory under some attack. Sheila Greeve Davaney critiques Kaufman for not specifying how language is connected to the real world. She argues that although he “acknowledges that we receive physical input from our world, his position continues to have difficulty explaining how such input influences our eventual linguistic constructions, or, in the end, judges them.”\textsuperscript{92} By elevating the role of the imagination to so lofty a position, Kaufman fails to adequately address the role of the object in experience. In particular, he does not sufficiently analyze how images are to be compared to objects. One would think that in the model pictured above, attention could note the similarities or differences between images and objects, and pass this information on to the imagination, which could then refine the images.

Kaufman would protest that he does include the object’s ability to judge our perceptions, except that this role comes at the end of the cognitive process of perception. Only after we have realized that our initial imaginative integrations of our field of experience are formed by our language and culture can we reformulate them in order to see if they work any better. But how can we make this judgment, if all of our perceptions are coloured by our language? Even Kaufman’s method of judgment (seeing how language works) is formed by his culture. What counts as pragmatic is embedded in our language, and forms our judgments about the practical utility of language. Kaufman’s pragmatic judgment turns out to be more about coherence than about experience.

\textsuperscript{91} Kaufman, \textit{In Face of Mystery}, 344.

Kaufman argues that our judgment of religious language differs from our judgment of language about ordinary objects. He suggests that revelation is "the mode of our knowledge of persons and should be contrasted with discovery, which is the mode of our knowledge of things." Communication acts as a model for revelation in his method. The mode of revelation, that is, the means by which it gives knowledge, is different than other modes of knowledge. He rejects the idea, however, that God reveals a distinct message to human beings. He argues that revelation is the transmutation of the entire web of human meaning. It is difficult to see how such a process could be judged to be true, except by trying out the resultant web of meaning, and Kaufman ultimately rests his judgment of religious language on pragmatic grounds.

In an early article, Kaufman describes unifying concepts as the "value- and meaning-presuppositions" that theologians (as historians) bring to their work. These presuppositions are the "historian's fundamental orientation—his faith." They unite the web of language into a whole. By the very absoluteness of its nature, revelation calls into question human cognition, and forces believers to base their thinking on God's self-communication, to make that an "absolute presupposition" of their lives. Perhaps these axioms, these presuppositions, are simply unprovable, yet necessary for a speaker to posit, in order to function within the world. Kaufman claims that these absolute presuppositions are real, and yet only perceivable by faith: "Faith lives from a belief in, a confidence that, there is indeed a cosmic and vital movement—grounded in what is ultimately real—toward humaneness, that our being conscious and purposive and thirsting for love and freedom is no mere accident but

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95 Ibid., 279.

is undergirded somehow in the very nature of things."\textsuperscript{97} Is it in the nature of things or in
the nature of humans? His analysis of epistemology leaves him open to the charge of
anthropocentrism (if not solipsism), since he stresses so forcefully that our cognitive
frameworks are constructed.

Later, Kaufman distinguishes between ordinary concepts and religious concepts, and
the ways the two are judged. He maintains that the terms which bring to fruition the themes
inherent in a linguistic framework have a unique logical status. He argues that “concepts or
images of God and the world are imaginative constructs, created by the mind for certain intra-
mental functions and, thus, of a different logical order than the concepts and images which we
have of the objects of experience.”\textsuperscript{98} These ideas organize language, and so not only are they
intramental concepts, they are intra-linguistic. They do not refer to anything outside of the
mind, but only function so as to order experience by placing it within the grid of language.
They construct experience, rather than recording it.

He thus claims that “criteria of correspondence cannot be applied: only criteria of
coherence and pragmatic usefulness to human life are relevant and applicable.”\textsuperscript{99} Since God is
not an object of perception, nor even a simple representational concept, it has a unique
epistemological status. Kaufman maintains that “it is the peculiar logical standing of the idea
of God which enables it to raise the concrete (finite) images in which that idea is ordinarily
expressed to a level where they can bear such profound religious meaning.”\textsuperscript{100} The very
nature of the idea of God is such that it enables religious reflection and experience (this view
is in direct contrast to theories that religious experience founds and produces the idea of
God—again we see Kaufman’s assumption that language forms thought, not the other way
around).

\textsuperscript{97} Kaufman, \textit{Theological Imagination}, 49-50.

\textsuperscript{98} Kaufman, \textit{Essay}, 30.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{100} Kaufman, \textit{Theological Imagination}, 83-4.
Kaufman argues that "God' does not (cannot) function like any other noun or name. . . . Without such unique logical status, God would be conceived as of the same order as the many things which need to be grounded beyond themselves, rather than as the ground or source of them all."101 However, he also wishes to identify a reference for this idea, although one wonders if this is merely an intra-linguistic reference.

Sharpe acknowledges that we must practice an epistemological agnosticism: "we cannot know whether or not our theories correspond to what they purport to describe (their percepts)." However, "even though we can never know whether what we know of God is true of God, we need to claim that some things are true (or more true than others) for there to be authority and moral conviction. It is a matter of choosing the most correct concept."102 Not only in religious language, but in all of our thinking, our concepts are subject to normative criteria (standards of truth). The criteria can be absolute without giving us complete assurance that our current knowledge conforms to what is out there. The criteria can even change through history, and still require definitive grounds for a reasonable assurance that what we claim to know actually obtains in reality.

Kaufman's insistence on the constructed character of thought diminishes the importance of inputs to the mind. Dean argues that "Kaufman refuses to trace theological ideas to empirical sources or to ask how religious experiences might provide at least weak indicators to guide the formation of theological ideas. For Kaufman theological ideas are cobbled without experience in the workshop of the imagination as it communicates only with a tradition that itself was cobbled in the workshop of the imagination. The effect is to make the imaginative construction itself a surd, and its truth a matter of chance."103 Dean thinks that if the imagination constructs concepts out of inputs to the mind, then the inputs should be studied in order to examine how experience is converted into general ideas. This process

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101 Ibid., 81.
102 Sharpe, 185.
would involve examining inputs to the mind independently from the imagination’s creative activity.

To be fair, Kaufman is arguing against thinkers who treat sense-data as a surd, an incontestable given. Dean ignores Kaufman’s detailed treatment of the imagination’s activity, combining sensations and perceptions into conceptual groups, in levels of increasing complexity. However, by claiming that the products of the imagination are judged on empirical grounds at the end of this integration leaves the activity of the imagination an inscrutable mystery.

I.C.3. Judgment of religious language

Kaufman contrasts revelation and knowledge in his early writing, arguing not that the content of revelation is outside the bounds of knowledge, but that the very epistemological mode of encountering revelation is different than our ordinary methods of acquiring knowledge. He argues that revelation must be represented in finite human terms, thus distinguishing between the inadequate language with which we represent revelation and the object of that revelation. He defines revelation to “fall without the bounds of the circle of knowledge as defined in any and every epistemology.”104 However, he does not define religion as non-cognitive, since he attempts to construct an epistemology in which faith is an important (even the most important) cognitive function.105 This means to him that human appropriation of revelation is done by faith, rather than the normal means of acquiring knowledge.

This definition of revelation makes it appear subjective, although even at this early stage Kaufman saw religion as public, a potentially universal form. Kaufman takes the extreme view that God’s revelation cannot partake of any ordinary or penultimate human cognitive


105 Kaufman’s approach should thus be distinguished from non-cognitive theorists of religion, such as R. B. Braithwaite, who defines religion as a disposition, a decision to act in a certain way, in An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief (Cambridge: University Press, 1955).
patterns, and cannot even be validated by human criteria, but must be “self-confirmatory or self-validating.” This would seem to be a logical conclusion, if language is completely historically conditioned. The system of language would have no external foundations, aside from the completely contingent relation to a particular historical context. Revelation, if it is thought of as absolute knowledge transcending all local contexts, could have no place in such an epistemological theory. If, however, it is the truth that judges our knowledge, it could be seen as absolute, but not independent of human cognition.

Since religious concepts are seen by Kaufman as constructions, he concludes that pragmatic means are the most appropriate way to judge them. He argues, for example, that “the ultimate arbiter of theological validity is not reason or experience or the Bible or the church, but the movement of history itself—understood theologically: the providence of God. It is this movement which in actual fact sorts out the valid from the invalid, the significant from the insignificant.” History is a creator of meaning, in this formulation, since it sorts out our linguistic constructions. But history is inherently interpretable, and surely mere survival does not indicate significance. Kaufman comes close to identifying God with the process of history, because he confuses history-happening with history-telling. The history of ideas is a history of human judgments, not an independent arbiter.

Despite the abstract appeal to history, Kaufman emphasizes the task of theology to relate to its historical antecedents. He argues that “theological work involves a double reference: to meanings in the present situation, and to a historical norm.” He sees history as inherent to Christian thinking: “built into the very logical structure of Christian theological language is reference to the historical Christ as normative.” In his Systematic Theology, Kaufman examines the contributions gained from traditional reflections about Christ, as well as offering suggestions about new interpretations.

107 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, xi.
108 Ibid., 10.
109 Ibid., 11.
An appeal to history, though, is not an appeal to facts. Kaufman argues that “the concepts of God and world must be assessed and reconstructed in consideration of the kinds of activity and forms of experience they make possible, rather than with reference to some objects to which they are supposed to ‘correspond.’” Religious ideas, in his view, can be judged only on the effects they have. He argues that “experience thus has the last word with theology but not the first word. . . . Experience will sit in judgment on that tradition and history to see whether these can still make sense of our lives.” While it is true that current experience should be factored into theological reflection, Kaufman’s epistemology does not even allow that experience to be used in constructing theological ideas. According to his view of language, theological symbols are constructed by the imagination out of material in the mind (or the collective memory), and can only then be tested. This procedure does not coincide with Kaufman’s earlier cognitive model, in which experience was used to construct images.

In my view, linguistic constructions do not work simply by chance, but because they connect to something external to the human mind which constructed them. Dean suggests that “the imaginative construction one places on God had better have something to do with at least minimal knowledge of God or at least of the world, or the construction is simply a wild guess and is no more likely to work out pragmatically than any other wild guess.” It is true that Kaufman does not deny the importance of the mental process of perception, by which the mind appropriates a reality which exists in objective independence, but he argues that the imagination forms these scattered and fragmented insights into a unified whole, a perspective by which the world is viewed. Surely the process of this synthesis can be examined (if only after the fact), in order to evaluate the adequacy of the integration of experience into concepts.

110 Kaufman, Essay, 39.
111 Ibid., 10.
112 Dean, “The Persistence of Experience,” 73.
In this section, we have seen that Kaufman emphasizes the criteria of coherence and pragmatic consideration in his theory of the judgment of imaginative constructions. There is an element of givenness to the mind’s creations, since history is an external force upon the mind’s activity. However, when judging the validity of imaginative constructions, Kaufman thinks we must look to the effects of our ideas, and evaluate pragmatically whether our ideas are contributing to a humane world. Since he emphasizes the role of the active imagination, images can only be compared to the world after the fact of their construction. I do not see how this rules out checking whether images correspond to what they represent, if they do indeed depict things in the world.

Religious symbols, in Kaufman’s view, have a unique logical status, since they synthesize experience into a meaningful unity. Thus, they are even more removed from direct contact with the world. Since he has defined these symbols as intra-linguistic, they can not be compared to that which they represent, and so pragmatic judgments take precedence. These judgments, however, are within Kaufman’s framework, and so do not partake of experience either, but must cohere with the rest of the linguistic system. This position renders imaginative constructions as the given, rather than anything external to the religious language system.

In this chapter, we have seen that Kaufman’s theory of language is presented as a theory of cognition, a theory of how the mind works. He emphasizes the historical nature of the process of thinking, in its several stages of development. Language is involved at every stage in the formation of ideas and knowledge. Even elementary acts of cognition are seen as complicated processes by Kaufman, integrated by the imagination into the systematic framework of language. The acts of sensation and perception are not simple inputs of information from the external world, but are coloured by language, that mental construction which has already labeled and categorized the world for our conscious perception of it.

The articulation of experience by language occurs not only in the individual self, but also in the public at large. The ordered system of language defines and influences people’s thinking, by dictating the possible relations between objects mediated to minds through the public grid of language. Language makes thought relative, for Kaufman, since different language systems lay out distinct and unique thought-patterns. These sets of inter-related
concepts are not arbitrary, since there is a givenness to reality that remains obdurate to our wishful thinking and speaking. The criteria for the truth to which language-systems aspire include not only authentic relation to that which is given, but also the coherency of the system, and its historical efficacy.

This characterization of language is rather weak. Kaufman downplays the role of the receptive imagination, that is, the ability of the imagination to receive impressions from the environment. He also disregards the representational character of images, that is, their capacity to be compared to the elements in the environment which they image. Of course, the question of how images correspond to reality must come into play here. But Kaufman does not even consider this question, in fact, he denies that images correspond in any direct way to that which they picture. It is not hard to see why he considers language to be relative to its historical location (that is, a particular speaker). This strategy does not seem to solve the religious problems that he raises, however. If religious language is relative to a particular person or group, it is difficult to see how it can be absolute (unless he takes a radically subjective position like Kierkegaard).

Kaufman characterizes language as expressive, echoing the internal states of the speaker. Language, in his view, not only exteriorizes these inner states, but also generates thought within the mind, by articulating experience. Language is not merely a copy of inner experience, since the meaning of language is also public. Language shapes the way that people experience, by expressing experience in ordered ways. Religion is thus viewed as a set of symbols which forms the experience of the individual even as it is also expressing that experience. Theology is a reflection on the system of religious symbols, and the attempt to unify them by means of an ultimate point of reference.

This point of reference, however, has only a linguistic function. It serves to unite the network of language. God, however, transcends not only our language, but also our universe. This claim seems to me to be an ontological one, not an epistemological denial of our human capacities of knowledge. To say that we cannot know the God’s ultimate nature is not a claim about our intellectual capacities, but rather a claim about the nature of God. Yet this kind of knowledge about God would be impossible in Kaufman’s system, since the idea of God has only intra-linguistic meaning, as a linguistic point of reference.
Kaufman's principle of imaginative construction relies too heavily on the active side of the imagination, therefore depriving his theory of the receptive capabilities which the mind can focus on its environment, as well as what is recorded historically. We have also seen that Kaufman’s emphasis on the constructed character of concepts (their abstract nature), as well as their role in the generation of consciousness, distances his epistemology from the world external to the self. His view of religion, then, becomes trapped in the private self which he constructs. In the next chapter, we will examine Kaufman’s solution to this problem, his attempt to construct a public theory of religious language. He will maintain the relativity of language, since the communal structures of language continue to change through time, and language continues to form the self, but this process is theorized by Kaufman as a more public procedure. The question will remain as to whether religious meaning is still local, only relevant to the linguistic groups in which it is constructed. In the third chapter, we will see how Kaufman attempts to deal with that question.
CHAPTER II
THE FORM OF LANGUAGE

Kaufman argues that "our experience and appreciation of what is supposedly primary and obvious . . . are all shaped and ordered by the language we have learned and the patterns of social interaction we have acquired." As illustrated in the previous chapter, Kaufman considers language to be a compendium of images and relations between those images. The relations between images are not themselves directly connected to the world, since this level of language overlays the primary contact with the world. Meaning is constructed by the mind as it links images together into an overall system. A number of key images unify the system of language, providing an overall structure of meaning. I will argue in this chapter that Kaufman characterizes language as symbolic, that is, an abstract generalization of experience.

A significant change in his thinking is identified by Kaufman after the publication of his Systematic Theology. After this work, Kaufman stresses the formal aspect of the system of language. Kaufman thinks that the grid of language guides the mind's sensation of the environment by providing a semantic mapping for the world. He thus analyzes the system of symbols contained in language, regarding meaning as intra-linguistic. I will show that this view of language alters his view of experience, making experience dependent on language, rather than the other way around. Language then becomes a rule for organizing experience, rather than a simple generalization.

Religious language is analyzed by Kaufman as a system of meanings which structures the experience of the believer. The task of theology is to reflect upon this system of religious meanings, and unify them into a coherent whole which will organize and articulate the world.

1 Kaufman, God the Problem, 89.

2 See the introduction to the second edition of Systematic Theology, or the introduction to God the Problem.
effectively. These metaphysical ideas regulate the network of language, guiding the
construction of meaning and providing criteria for judging the validity of imaginative
constructions. Kaufman thus seeks to delineate the method of theology according to formal
procedures. I will argue that he does not distinguish sufficiently between the abstract and
concrete elements of language, defining both as symbols which unify experience. He thus
characterizes all religious language as regulative, which does not adequately describe what
believers are doing when they talk about God.

II.A. The symbolic nature of language

Since Kaufman argues that language is an imaginative construction, he analyzes the
images, or symbols, that people have created. Kaufman argues that "man is an animal who has
learned how to use symbols. This enables him to deal with realities not immediately present to
himself and to put questions to himself."3 The constructed character of language allows
human beings to retain their experiences in memory, and reflect upon them. Symbols are the
form of meaning, which express the content of mental states. Since symbols are expressed in
language, as seen in the previous chapter, Kaufman thinks that they do not directly refer to
reality, only indirectly through the system of language. We saw that images double for reality
in Kaufman’s thought. I will show that the indirect nature of symbols produces a tension
within Kaufman’s view of language, since people form symbols, but symbols also form our
thinking.

Kaufman often uses the phrase “image/concept” to indicate central ideas, especially
metaphysical ones. These constructions of the imagination derive meaning from their
placement within a semantic system, as well as through their relation to experience. As we
have seen already, Kaufman thinks that experience is formed by the linguistic grid (the store of
images in memory, as well as the links constructed between them). He identifies concepts that
organize the system as symbols, characterizing them as abstract and removed from experience
(although judged pragmatically). I will show that, in Kaufman’s view, symbols are not directly

3 Kaufman, Relativism, 96.
descriptive of reality since they are imaginatively constructed syntheses of language.

Religious language, thus, is intra-linguistic, since its meaning is formed by metaphorical links between concepts. It creates a focus for the system of language, which Kaufman thinks allows us to orient ourselves to the world. The question for Kaufman then becomes how religious symbols are related to the world.

II.A.1. Symbols express inner states

In Kaufman’s early view, the fundamental source of language is internal to a speaker. In an early article, he writes that meanings “exist nowhere else than in the subjects who are communicating.” Communication of meaning is described by Kaufman as “somehow experiencing in my own subjectivity (perhaps imaginatively) the meanings to which his [the speaker’s] terms refer.” The reception of communication is, of course, only half of the process. Kaufman does not here speak of the manner in which meanings are projected from a speaker to a hearer. Nor does he advert to the act of referring to external things (often accomplished by pointing or picturing), which aids the process of communication. As long as Kaufman pictures meaning as internal to the speaker, though, the subjective quality of language seems unavoidable.

In Kaufman’s view, language does not represent things directly: the first reference of language is to ideas. In one of his early articles, he divides language into two aspects: “inner states of consciousness and external expressions.” This definition is much like Aristotle’s description of the relation between word and idea: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words.”

4 Kaufman, “Philosophy of Religion: Subjective or Objective,” 60.

5 Ibid., 61. This notion echoes Collingwood’s discussion in Principles of Art, where he writes that on hearing someone speak, the hearer “constructs in himself the idea which those words express” (Principles of Art, 250).

6 Ibid., 64.

This model of language is a familiar one, and can be pictured as follows:

word ———> idea ———> thing

Aristotle thinks that "the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images." However, Kaufman does not agree that all of our mental experiences are the same. He defines mental experience as linguistic through and through, such that language and thought interpenetrate to a great extent. For Kaufman, the meaning of a word is not only the idea to which it refers, but also the symbolic structure which expresses that reference.

Kaufman makes a distinction between the form and content of meaning, and suggests that symbols express ideas (inner states). He puts it this way: "When we become conscious of our own activity of expressing our inner states of consciousness, we become enabled to distinguish what we express from that which expresses it, and in this moment symbols are born and it becomes possible to regularize and standardize their meanings." In his doctoral dissertation, Kaufman derives this formulation from Collingwood's distinction between 'what we say' and 'what we mean.' This formulation suggests that the content of symbols is hidden, and not always expressed adequately.

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8 See C. K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1923). They give a similar tripartite analysis of the relation of symbol, thought and referent (p. 11) which emphasizes the adequacy of the thought to its referent and the use of correct symbols for thoughts. A satisfactory combination of these two relations assures the truth of the relation between symbol and referent.


10 Kaufman, Relativism, 62.

Kaufman later uses Wittgenstein to reject this dualism between the form and content of meaning. Kaufman rejects "a certain doubleness in our use of signs, a distinguishing between the sign itself and what we call its meaning." This doubleness can be misinterpreted as an "inner world" of meanings, which gives rise to philosophical misconceptions, since it suggests that the content is hidden inside the mind. Reading Wittgenstein has transformed Kaufman's view of language from that of an expression of subjective, inner states, to a public, external activity. In his later work, Kaufman follows Wittgenstein's turn to seeing meaning as use, as we will see in the last section of this chapter.

Symbols generalize experience, Kaufman argues, not only by presenting experience in the code of language, but also by linking that symbol to its linguistic context. He argues that "The source of our concepts, rules and principles is nothing else than the creativity involved in this very symbolizing activity itself: the activity of abstracting an element from the immediately given (through representing it symbolically) while simultaneously significantly transforming this symbolical abstraction through generalizing it to wider contexts." The act of symbolizing refers to something external to language, although a symbol necessarily abstracts the confusing welter of experience, perhaps not representing all the glorious details of the immediate and particular reality.

Kaufman takes this separation of symbol from its given context to mean that the mind cannot know anything directly. The imagination, as Kaufman describes it, works with what it is given, and constructs unifying images in order to make sense of sensations and perceptions. Those imaginative constructs, being abstract, do not themselves correspond to reality, but rather depict reality at arms-length, so to speak. But if they depict reality, then we should be able to determine if they do so adequately, if necessary, by checking how accurate our imagination has constructed concepts. Kaufman cannot escape the necessity to provide a theory of judgment, by which the truth (or adequacy) of imaginative constructions is determined.

12 Kaufman, "Reading Wittgenstein," 10. Note that Kaufman had made exactly this distinction in Relativism, 62.

13 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 193.
There is a tension here between the form and content of symbols. If the content of symbols (their meaning) is internal to a speaker, then it is difficult to see how that meaning can be transmitted to another person. By defining meaning as the idea to which a symbol refers, Kaufman develops a theory of private language. As his thinking progresses, he comes to define meaning as the public system of relations in language. Symbols gain their meaning then by their relations within that system (as we will see further on in this section). In the last section of this chapter, we will see that Kaufman uses Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning as use in order to develop a view of language in which meaning derives also from the human practices with which it is associated.

II.A.2. Metaphysical symbols

Are all symbols of equal value? Kaufman views the system of symbols as a hierarchy of levels. He argues that “the web of meaning is structured hierarchically, lower-level conceptions and values depending upon and being legitimated by weightier and more comprehensive symbols, myths and views of life and the world.”14 Instead of basing meaning on sensations and perceptions, Kaufman has developed a view of language in which meaning is dependent on the most abstract elements of language. Unfortunately, by running the lines of dependence upwards to the most abstract symbols of the system, Kaufman effectively cuts off language from its roots in the referents of its images. There is a tension in Kaufman’s view between metaphysical symbols (which unite the system of language) and ordinary symbols (which are images of experience). However, it is not clear how different these two types of symbols are, since Kaufman thinks that the latter also unifies a bundle of perceptions into a concept.

In Kaufman’s view, metaphysical concepts are symbolic, rather than directly descriptive of states of affairs. He writes: “All metaphysical concepts must be regarded as symbols, for they are used to express something which transcends their proper denotative

meanings. The metaphysical object transcends all specifiable meanings as their ground."\(^{15}\)

This phrase is difficult to interpret. A symbol, it would seem, is not simply denotative, since it refers to something that grounds meaning (not simply an object). What does it mean for an object to transcend its meaning? Does this mean that our meanings can never completely capture the essence of an object (especially a metaphysical one)?

Does Kaufman mean to make a distinction between symbols and signs? He does not mention Paul Tillich’s analysis, in which signs merely represent something other than themselves (whether that be internal or external to the mind), whereas a symbol “participates in that to which it points.”\(^{16}\) Kaufman does not follow Tillich’s depth psychology, in which language is an expression of an individual or group unconscious. For Kaufman, religious language does not express a hidden depth within the human person, but rather is the expression of the human drive towards ultimacy. Religious language itself unifies and integrates language, generating experience of the transcendent.

Words that encapsulate the meaning of our language are called “metaphysical symbols” by Kaufman in his earliest book. He argues that “a metaphysician is simply one who attempts to see and portray and create explicitly the unity that is implicit in, and necessary to, all of our meaningful experience.”\(^{17}\) Different syntheses of experience are possible, since a variety of languages can be constructed, which in turn shape our experience.

Kaufman specifies that “the highest and most fundamental concepts of metaphysics must always be symbolic; they can never be understood literally because, when understood literally, they refer to conditional objects, not to that which is the ground of all conditioned objects. As we have seen, our concepts are always imaginative constructs, which hold

\(^{15}\) Kaufman, *Relativism*, 102.

\(^{16}\) Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (New York, Harper, 1957), 42. Tillich repeats the major points of his earlier essay in this volume. His earlier essay was then re-published in a collection entitled *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). Tillich not only argues that language and thought are inter-related, but also language and reality. He claims that a symbol “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us” (60).

\(^{17}\) Kaufman, *Relativism*, 100.
together many *Erlebnisse* in unified patterns."\(^{18}\) Symbols, then, refer to an unconditioned
ground, but Kaufman refuses to indulge in metaphysical speculation. He puts a linguistic spin
on metaphysics, since symbols are linguistic constructs, unifying the system of concepts.

Since metaphysical symbols are not directly referential, they must be taken on faith.
Kaufman argues that "we can affirm the truth of such formulations only through a kind of free
decision, taken in faith . . . which recognizes the tentativeness of our every formulation."\(^{19}\)
Why is this a decision of faith? Can we not check our procedure for unifying the system of
constructed images? Or is he arguing that all symbols are tentative in the way that
metaphysical symbols are? Kaufman should make a distinction between the ordinary symbols
that ground his interpretations of the world and the symbols which unify the system.

Sharpe suggests that people do not in fact possess the unifying concepts that Kaufman
claims they do. Sharpe asks, rhetorically, "if the majority of modern westerners commonly
have a unifier in their lives, and if so is this God?"\(^{20}\) This question points out the underlying
assumption in Kaufman’s theory, that there must necessarily be a unifying thought underneath
the common use of language. Certainly, there are conventional agreements to use words in a
certain way, but it is not clear that all words are linked in some necessary order. Indeed, there
is no logical need for language to be unified in the way that Kaufman suggests; it could
function within this variegated world as well, perhaps better, if it were disorganized and
disjunct (different tools for different uses). In his later work, Kaufman does not insist on the
necessity of positing the unifying concept of God, but instead suggests that it is an attractive
idea approached by "steps of faith."\(^{21}\) If one is convinced by his analysis that language is a
spiralling network of ever more unified concepts, then one might be convinced by his
argument. This is not the place to examine his metaphysics in detail, for I am only concerned

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 102.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 115.

\(^{20}\) Sharpe, 178.

\(^{21}\) See Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*. For a cogent criticism of Kaufman’s argument,
see Frederick Ferré, “Unfazed by Mystery: Review of *In Face of Mystery*” in *Zygon* 29, no. 3
with the way in which his theory of language grounds his method of arguing in favour of metaphysical concepts.

II.A.3. Concepts and symbols

In his latest book, Kaufman provides a more detailed analysis of the nature of symbols. He argues that concepts are essentially relationships of cognitive elements, which unite a set of particulars. Language combines perceptions and locates them within the network of symbolized experience: “It is through creating synoptic foci that our minds grasp the various qualities and dimensions of experience in usable ways: this is how concepts work.”\(^{22}\) The twin activities of attention and imagination provide focal images by which our experiences are gathered together. Concepts are images which collect experiences together, but this means that the mind can work on them independently of experience.

In a discussion of how humans decide to act, he argues that “deeds are present to our minds symbolically though not actually. By means of images, words, and other signs we ‘hold’ the projected deeds ‘before our minds,’ thus enabling us to consider their significant features.”\(^{23}\) Symbols enable us to reflect upon the external world, by allowing us to ponder the images of that world in our minds. Kaufman maintains that it would be a mistake to consider the images as a replacement of reality, but insists that since symbols act as a proxy for that reality, they are the material upon which the mind works in order to act within the context of the mind’s environment (both social and physical).

Symbols help us to focus our attention on the world, and “perceive, attend to, to focus on certain features of our environment while ignoring others that do not bear directly on what we are attempting to do.”\(^{24}\) This is both a blessing and a curse, in Kaufman’s view. On the one hand, symbols help us to sort out the welter of sensations received from the external

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 307 (footnote).

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 143.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 144-5.
world. On the other hand, once they are established, symbols guide us in habitual patterns, and can prevent us from seeing the world in a new way.

Kaufman argues that "ordinary perceptual concepts" allow us to "distinguish certain objects (percepts) from others, instantly discerning the meaning they have for us and their usefulness to us." Concepts identify something in our experience, but it is not clear if the meaning of concepts is tied to a reference to an actual object or to our perception of it. In an earlier work, he had implied the former, in saying that "With a perceivable object, we put together our concept on the basis of abstraction and generalization from percepts." He acknowledges that we can examine how "one item in our conceptual scheme relates to and represents one item in what we call (also in our conceptual scheme) experience or the world." However, concepts do not simply describe, but also prescribe the meaning to which they refer. He writes, "Concepts of this sort function normatively as well as descriptively," by organizing perceptions into a conceptual unity. This unity imposes itself on the world to which the concept refers, by suggesting ready-made containers into which perceptions can be placed (concepts).

There is a tension here between the descriptive and prescriptive functions of symbols. Note that Kaufman does not delegate these two roles to two different types of symbols. A clear distinction between concepts and symbols is not given by Kaufman, since even words with ostensive definitions are not simply descriptions, but also prescriptions which guide our perceptions. Since the conceptual framework interprets the world by organizing perceptions, Kaufman argues that symbols supersede the world. He claims that "Humans have produced a whole new order of reality—culture, the symbolical world, the order of meaning—which they have superimposed on the natural order into which they were born, and they have made this

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25 Ibid., 188.
26 Kaufman, Essay, 28.
27 Ibid., 87.
28 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 188.
artificial world their home.” 29 Although Kaufman wishes to see the artificial world of culture and language as deeply connected to the natural world (this is what his biohistorical emphasis is all about), his theory of symbols separates language from the world, by framing all of language within the conceptual, symbolic realm.

Ronald Thiemann agrees with Kaufman’s contention that language is a system that interprets the world. Thiemann thinks that “Concept formation in everyday experience and in disciplines like the sciences does not depend on any simple correspondence of those concepts with percepts. Perception is not independent of but depends upon a conceptual framework.” 30 Thiemann agrees with Kaufman that perceptions are not directly representative of the objects to which they refer, because they are filtered through a conceptual apparatus. Thiemann would even state this principle more strongly than Kaufman: “Once it is recognized that all concept formation is the result of imaginative construction, then his attempt to distinguish theological concepts from ‘concepts of ordinary objects’ by an appeal to the imaginative character of the former collapses.” 31 However, if perception is dependent on the conceptual framework, it is difficult to see how thinking could progress. Kaufman allows for some extra-linguistic factors within the cognitive process, in order to check our imaginative constructions (although he allows this only at the end of the procedure).

In my view, Kaufman could make a greater distinction between concepts and percepts. Concepts could be seen as interpretations of perceptions and sensations, but this does not deny the capacity of language to represent the world through the process of constructing images out of sense-data (however that is done by the mind, stored in whatever coded structure). That concepts are syntheses of experience means that they are based on sensation,

29 Ibid., 105.

30 Ronald Thiemann “Revelation and Imaginative Construction,” Journal of Religion 61 (July 1981): 252. Thiemann relies on Wilfred Sellars’ analysis of “the myth of the given, [which] in its simplest form claims that the intelligibility of a conceptual framework is established by the direct correlation of certain basic ‘observational terms’ within that framework with the language-independent world” (250).

31 Ibid., 249.
but it does not mean that they are determined by it. Kaufman could also make a distinction between words and sentences. Further, experience could be seen as synthesized into a discourse, with a theoretical structure and poetic interventions. Language is a complicated form, with various ways of expressing and articulating experience. Not all symbols play the same role in language. Syntactic connectors like “and” and “not” do not refer to anything, but function as linguistic qualifiers. In addition, symbols are not true or false, but rather more or less adequate renderings of their referent. Statements about states of affairs which involve the referents of symbols can be judged true or false, but this is only done by decoding the meaning of the language in which such a statement is set. In my view, Kaufman’s theory of language would be improved if he would distinguish between concrete and abstract concepts, the former identifying things and the latter gathering empirical data into theoretical structures.

II.A.4. Symbols and analogies in theology

In his *Systematic Theology*, Kaufman regards “certain terms as proper or defining symbols or paradigms for our speech about God.”32 Where do these terms come from? Throughout his theological career, Kaufman has relied on several classical methods of reasoning about the idea of God, although revising them in his own inimitable way. The *via negativa*, a way loved by the mystics, emphasized that God is not like our ordinary, mundane reality, but instead radically “other.” Kaufman introduces two understandings of this way of talking about God. The first, in which “the only way to speak of God is systematically to deny various predicates as applicable to him,” generates attributes of God such as “infinite” and “immutable.” The second, considered by Kaufman as virtually identical with the first, asserts that that “all our words apply literally only to finite experience and not to God.”33 This strand implies that no talk about God can be taken literally, since the literal meaning of any of our terms could not be identified with the divine. This way does not yield any knowledge of God, Kaufman argues, since it simply denies that any predicate can be applied to God.

33 Ibid., 121.
Kaufman does not distinguish sufficiently between the two negative modes of knowledge of God, the *via negativa* and negative (apophatic) theology. The words “infinite” and “immutable” and others like them have a meaning: to say that God is not like us (in some carefully chosen respects) is to say something meaningful about God. The *via negativa* is not iconoclastic, but iconic, picturing God with symbols of transcendence. Negative theology also gives some knowledge of God, but only that God is completely other than us. This axiom would only be the beginning of an examination of God, and would need to be accompanied by some other method of gaining knowledge about God’s nature.

Kaufman allows that negative theology can provide knowledge of God, but considers this process to be a part of the *via eminentiæ*. He remarks that “these negative words have acquired their own positive meaning.”\(^{34}\) He regards this as outside the bounds of pure negation, which to him is simply an iconoclastic impulse, a denial of the tendency of idolatry. The positive meaning that these words have, he claims, results from an intensification achieved by the negation: this strategy is “an effort to raise concepts to [their] highest power possible when speaking of God; they are attempts to extrapolate beyond everything finite and limited.”\(^ {35}\) Kaufman misunderstands the *via negativa*: it defines God as opposite to our finitude and mutability, yes, but this is not an extrapolation beyond our reality, but a definition of reality itself (a reality containing God and humans, infinite and finite; it is to say that reality has two distinct dimensions).

The *via eminentiæ*, as Kaufman describes it, begins “with the finite (rather than negating its limitations) and extrapolating its positive significance and value to an eminent degree or power.” I have already shown that the technique of negating limitations does claim to provide positive knowledge of God. Kaufman argues that the *via eminentiæ* can only provide “an analogy or symbol for what God is, not a literal description.” He concludes that “our language about him [God] will all be symbolical or analogical.”\(^ {36}\) Here Kaufman is already moving into the third classical way of talking about God, the way of analogy. But even in his discussion of the *via eminentiæ*, he

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 121-122.
misperceives its central impulse. Its contribution to theological reasoning is the tendency to think of God as an ideal, the original perfection of which all of our values are merely copies. This admittedly Platonic notion may be incorrect, but it is a theory of language which claims that the meaning of such talk about God is precisely that ideal. Analogies and symbols provide real knowledge of God according to this theory, although they are but poor copies of the reality of God. Kaufman misuses the *via eminencia* in support of an iconoclastic theory of religious language, one which states that symbols and analogies do not reflect God in any real way.

Since Kaufman thinks that all language about God is symbolic, he relies on an analogical theory to explain the meaning of religious language. The primary metaphor in Kaufman's *analogia Christi* is the personal metaphor of Christ, rather than abstract being. At this stage, Kaufman locates revelation in the "person-event" of Christ, which acts as a this-worldly referent for God-talk. Later, Kaufman will consider Christ to be a categorical idea, rather than a metaphor which gives analogical knowledge of God. This shift results from a reconsideration of the way in which language forms thought.

Kaufman argues that the historical dimension of human experience is the best analogue of the nature of God. He claims that "all knowledge of God is analogical or symbolical, and the symbols or analogies in terms of which he is thought and spoken are inevitably drawn from some realm of human experience." This implies that "one realm of existence is given preferred status over others; it is (consciously or unconsciously) regarded as possessing special power or facility to furnish symbols of the transcendent."37 Since he has defined experience as inherently historical, though, this means that our linguistic mode of being is the primary analogue for God. Knowledge of God is seen as a process, then, rather than a body of truths. Since language forms our experience, Kaufman cannot claim any pure source for such a body of knowledge. He can only argue that language contains knowledge of God as presuppositions, but this hardly deserves the term knowledge, since these presuppositions are the historically relative conditions for knowledge.

In his latest book, Kaufman argues that "the concept of God is built up in our minds by playing off one metaphor against another, by criticizing and qualifying this image through

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37 Ibid., 176.
juxtaposing it with that concept, by carefully selecting finite models that will enable us to gain some sense of that which is beyond and behind everything finite." 38 Analysis of theological ideas seems to happen within language, in this proposal. A model of God is constructed by linking together metaphors and concepts which are used in the general society. However, this model is finite, and cannot be compared to the infinite reality to which it refers.

Kaufman argues that Christ is present "in a symbolic mode, rather than, for example, as some sort of immediate physical presence. That is, Christ is a reality within the Christian symbolical world." 39 Kaufman moves in two directions: towards a stronger emphasis on the possibility of universal language, yet also speaking more forcibly against views of language which see it as adequate to some sort of reality. The particularity of contexts of language is recognized by Kaufman. However, since all of our thinking is done within the framework of language, Kaufman argues that "we must find ways of relativizing and opening up our basic symbol-system." 40 Despite the existential locatedness of language and thought, Kaufman stresses that we do live in one world, and so our particular frameworks should attempt to transcend their local origins.

Kaufman argues that "our diverse religious ideas and practices—including our deepest and most firmly held convictions—are all products of the creativity of the human spirit, as it has developed symbolic articulations in terms of which it could understand itself, could orient itself in the world, and could find some ('ultimate?') meaning for human life, in the many diverse historical and cultural settings in which humans have lived." 41 The reference of religious images is bracketed out, as it were, in order to analyze what sort of life these images engender.

Since Kaufman focuses so much on the linguistic role of the word "God," the reader may infer that the reality of God is denied. Indeed, in a later article, Kaufman argues that

38 Kaufman, God—Mystery—Diversity, 46.
39 Ibid., 111.
40 Ibid., 56.
41 Ibid., 173.
religious symbols “should be interpreted as essentially poetic metaphors not ontological models or concepts.” However, Kaufman also seeks to identify concrete instances of acts of God within our history and in our experience. He is careful, however, to distinguish our perceptions of God from the actual reality of God (which is ultimately mysterious, and therefore unspeakable in our language and thoughts). He maintains that “God in Godself is never directly available within this world as an object of experience and knowledge; what is available are memories of what (it is believed that) the creator/lord/father has done in the past, and hopes of what the creator/lord/father shall yet do (given the faith, the confidence that God continues to work in the world).” This distinction may appear paradoxical (containing contrary assertions about God) or even dualistic (separating the reality of God from our experience). Kaufman strenuously opposes both of these interpretations of “God.” He concentrates exclusively on our experience of God in historical ways, in order to deny an other-worldly God. Rather than presenting a paradoxical view of God, in which God’s mystery is evoked by linguistic oppositions intended to stretch the mind, Kaufman intends to make the idea of God make sense.

Kevin Sharpe argues that there is a more complex interdependence between the real God and the available God. He agrees that “we do not experience the real God, but rather if we do experience God it is the available God we experience.” However, Sharpe does not conclude that the real God is absolutely unknowable. He argues that “it is also apparent that there is an independent reality which molds our experience and this in turn leads us to search for new language or forms of expression for this experience.” To acknowledge the independent reality of God (the real God) is to assert something about the existence of such a reality (although one might want to clarify that it is not a being). To say that we cannot know


43 Ibid., 96.

44 Sharpe, 184.
that our concepts of God adequately describe the reality of God does not mean that there is no such reality. Then the question becomes what sort of reality God is, and Kaufman makes some concrete suggestions in this regard (which will be examined in the third chapter).

II.A.5. God as focus

Kaufman uses the theory of symbols to discuss religious language. His analysis of the word “God” is the prime example of his view of theological symbols. In *God the Problem*, Kaufman argues that “God is the anchor-symbol for a whole way of life and worldview.”45 However, this central categorial idea, which structures the entire theological vocabulary and its semantics, is placed within a context, to which it ultimately refers (although the completion of that reference may not be available to humans). The complicated structure of this idea has preoccupied Kaufman throughout his career, and there is a definite development in his analysis of the meaning of God. Although there is a progression in Kaufman’s view of the referent of “God,” he is consistent in his view of the use of the term: God is a categorial concept, a linguistic term that operates at the highest level of language, unifying all those terms within its grasp.

Language about God, Kaufman claims, causes the world to make sense, and to allow us to sense the presence of an ultimate ground of existence. We have no certain knowledge of God, but must continue to talk about God, since “the symbol of God claims to represent to us a focus for orientation which will bring true fulfillment and meaning to human life. It sums up, unifies, and represents in a personification what are taken to be the highest and most indispensable human ideals and values, making them a visible standard for measuring human realization, and simultaneously enabling them to be attractive of loyalty and devotion which can order and continuously transform individuals and societies towards fulfillment (i.e., bring ‘salvation’).”46 This definition of God, Kaufman argues, is the true meaning of the term, previously misunderstood as some sort of supernatural object, now realized to be a projection

45 Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 100.

of human ideals. His notion of God predicates human ideals and values to this mysterious concept of "God," a word which is simply the "ultimate point of reference" of all language, a word which nonetheless acts so as to unify all of language and cause people to behave better.

Don Stoesz argues that in Kaufman's view, "the abstract nature of the word 'God' renders theology as a synthetic frame of reference instead of a discipline committed to the 'straightforward' description of religious experience." Why should this view preclude a discussion of religious experience, though? While theology may be a frame of reference, religion is a concrete activity through which believers experience God. Kaufman's analysis would be aided by a consistent distinction between abstract and concrete concepts, that is, those which gather up empirical data into general ideas and ideas which refer to particular objects.

This centre of orientation need not be interpreted metaphysically as an existent supernatural object. Kaufman warns against reifying the concept of God, that is, making it into a thing (he is unclear about whether he objects to making God into a thing, or the word "God" into a thing which functions in people's lives). McCormack suggests that, in Kaufman's view, "'World' is a heuristic device by which the mind organizes and orders the concepts derived from its experiences into a unified whole. Likewise, 'God' and 'I' are also heuristic devices." The notion of God, then, is simply a cognitive device which allows us to focus our thoughts.

Although Kaufman stresses that the word "God" derives its meaning within language, this strange sort of existence does not preclude God from acting. Dean thinks that "While God may be a chain of signs always interpreted into being in the course of nature and history, this does not necessarily make God utterly dependent; for God the signified can become a signifier with the world as its signified, a creator with the world, in part, as its creation." In other words, within the structure of language, the idea of God can be a creative force, linking ideas

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48 McCormack, 438.

49 Dean, "The Persistence of Experience," 81.
together and acting as a focal point. The question remains, though, whether we can talk about God without the quotation marks intervening between God’s existence and our knowledge of God.

This view of religious language (as central to language in general) presents religious symbols as the unifiers of our complex and fragmented experience. The drive towards integration of meaning into an over-arching framework is needed in an age of apathy and impotence. As the global culture stumbles into a new millennium, changing more and more rapidly, some sorts of constants help to amalgamate the diverse threads of our lives. This essentially conservative impulse (which Kaufman is loathe to admit) need not be tied to rigid formulations of religious doctrine, but instead requires a re-thinking of the religious symbol-system, so that it can actually function to integrate a multitude of cultural facets. In an age of technology, which tends to mass produce and uniformly engineer according to impersonal techniques, the humanizing symbols and concepts of religion can interpret our increasingly artificial existence with organic metaphors tied to the practice of language in life.

In this section, we have seen that Kaufman uses the phrase “image/concept” to characterize how the symbols of language, with their abstract reach, weave themselves through the web of language, forming a pattern which allows us to make sense of our environment. In his later work, Kaufman describes these important words as categorial, organizing language (and therefore thought) into a framework or worldview. Although he thinks that the active imagination (an organ of thought) produces language, and so is logically fundamental, it is also formed by language, since language is a public convention as to how the world should be perceived. Past formulations of reality, however, are simply a record of how people have thought. Since the active imagination is logically primary, it is the duty of thinkers to revise the public code, transforming language into new and creative ways of describing the world.

The question to be asked of Kaufman is as follows: does he really mean these “ideas/symbols” as analogies (thus providing some descriptive content, however attenuated) or does he view them only as ethical guides? If the latter, then language is a tool, to be used by various people in different situations, in the service of an ethical demand. Even then,
language would conform to the end which it serves, and so would develop recognizable patterns of use. Kaufman’s use of the notion of mystery in his later writing indicates that he thinks that religious language relies on some external reference, but that we cannot know what the referent outside of our language is like.

Kaufman’s proposals for the definition of theological terms are illuminating, despite the problems with the method which he espouses. The distinction between the real and the available God can be seen as a distinction between the transcendence and immanence of God, although in Kaufman’s formulation the only logical relation between the two is the judgment of the latter by the former (and it seems to be a wholly negative judgment). Kaufman’s analysis of the intra-linguistic function of the word “God” seems quite acceptable, but to limit the function of God in people’s lives to a symbolic one seems to confuse the function of the word with the meaning of the word. Kaufman is correct to argue that “God” does not refer to a contingent being, but many theologians have denied that without concluding that “God” has only intra-linguistic reference (and we will see in the third chapter that Kaufman does wish to identify an extra-linguistic referent as God).

II.B. The structure of language

Throughout his career, Kaufman argues that “thinking is inseparably connected with the language in which the thinking proceeds and which is used to express it.”\textsuperscript{50} He thus expends considerable energy analyzing the structure of language, in order to understand how thinking works. Language provides a structure for our thoughts, a world of inter-related meanings, in which the mind roves to and fro. Meaning is then the synthesis of our experiences into an ordered totality. Because language is the medium of thought, the form of language shapes the thinking which occurs in that medium. I will argue that there is a tension in Kaufman’s view of language between knowledge and meaning. He argues that both of them unify the system of language. Making a distinction between these two dimensions of language would help Kaufman to be more consistent.

\textsuperscript{50} Kaufman, \textit{Relativism}, 48.
Language, in Kaufman's view, has two main functions: the expression of subjective states (ideas, feelings, etc.), and the articulation of those states in the subject. According to this view, language is intimately involved in the development of conscious thought. In effect, he argues that language enables consciousness to arise, by representing subjective states in language. Eventually, Kaufman came to view language as also forming thought. His analysis became pre-occupied with the function of words within language, as well as within the world. This latter focus results in an ethical analysis of language and its effects.

I will show in this section that Kaufman's emphasis on the structure of relations between ideas in the network of language gives rise to an emphasis on coherence as the primary measure of truth. Theology becomes the analysis of links between ideas, and the careful guarding against inconsistency. Since Kaufman views experience as formed by the system of language, he argues that theology is not the analysis of religious experience, but of the structure of religious language. I will show that he then defines the meaning of the word "God" as primarily intra-textual, that is, deriving its meaning from the relations within a linguistic system. I will argue that Kaufman cannot then appeal to historical experience in order to judge religious language.

II.B.1. Meaning as relation

In his analysis of symbols, Kaufman focuses his attention on the elements of the system of language. Although he argues that symbols derive their meaning primarily from their relations to other elements of the linguistic system, he is reluctant to isolate symbols as a unique mode of language. Kaufman argues that "all our words gain their meanings through their reference to some point or dimension of experience, on the one hand, and through their peculiar connections and relations to other words, controlled by the locus of each in the whole fabric of meaning, on the other."51 Rather than divide language into two realms (one for

51 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, 17-18. In his first book, Kaufman had phrased this definition of meaning as follows: "relationship to an overall interpretive system of meaning and to an immediate context of meaning" (Kaufman, Relativism, 98-99). As discussed in the first chapter, experience is identified as this immediate context of meaning, although this
metaphysics and another for ordinary concepts), he develops a general theory of language applicable to both. Unfortunately, this definition of concepts does not allow Kaufman to distinguish between various types of language (such as abstract and concrete).

Kaufman argues that through the system of language, "we become enabled consciously to compare and contrast and distinguish various aspects of our experience and to communicate those distinctions to others." He develops a two-dimensional theory of language, plotting meaning along the axes of sense and reference (intra- and extra-linguistic relations). The former relates words to each other, and relies on the inter-connections of language to produce meaning; the latter aspect of language is denotative, and points to specifiable objects and events. Denotative language, however, also has reference to other elements in the system of language, by its connotations and exclusions (synonyms and antonyms).

Kaufman argues that sense is previous to reference, since "these relationships and overtones must become the first meanings which such terms have, and it is only later that the denotations are understood." I disagree with this contention, since elements of a system must be present before relations in that system (in fact, a system does not even exist until experience is already interpreted by the structure of language (hence the circularity of the definition).

52 Kaufman, Relativism, 62. These insights about language are formulated by structuralist theorists as the synchronic (simultaneous) and diachronic (historical) axes of language. Meaning, for the structuralists, arises because of a word’s relation to the present system of language, as well as the changes that system has gone through in the past. Kaufman also uses the structuralists’ distinction between langue and parole (although not by those names), the code of language and the act of speaking. Structuralists insist that language consists of both of these aspects, the creative play of speech and the code underlying the generation of meaning. See Greenwood, Structuralism and the Biblical Text, for an excellent summary of the main tenets of structuralism.


54 Kaufman, Relativism, p. 62.

55 Ibid., 49.
relations between elements are formed). Even when a system is in place already, understanding a relation is dependent on understanding the meaning of the terms within that relation. The differences in language are as important as the similarities in meaning, since it is by the nuances engendered by overlapping semantic structures that complex thoughts are created.

Kaufman argues that the system of relationships formed by reference to other elements affects our thinking, since we are inclined to think along the lines of relationships already established. He suggests that “the total system of meanings carried in language has a kind of relationship to the individual not unlike the Kantian a priori categories. . . . In many important respects, therefore, the language structures and defines the world which the individual comes to know.”56 Linguistic elements refer to each other, and in this way a network of meaning is built up, which structures our experience of the world.

Kaufman argues that language structures experience by expressing and articulating the inner states of human beings. The structure of language provides a public standard, a fixed universe of meaning. Knowledge is marked by careful, accurate definition (clear and distinct ideas!). However, the only access we have to our environment is through the mental process of imaginative construction: in this process, the symbols that are produced must be intended to be truthful about reality, but they are removed from reality by precisely the operation that aims to render them true, that is, the imaginative synthesis of experience in language.

The tension between sense and reference is thus resolved on the side of the former. Kaufman argues that meaning derives from the relations of sense within language. This structure takes precedence over the reference that each of the elements of language has. By learning language, people come to identify things in their world according to how they fit into the linguistic system. This may be an adequate explanation of how people learn language (and Kaufman does not engage in extensive discussions of the mechanics of this process), but it

56 Ibid., 51. In his doctoral thesis, Kaufman used the stronger phrase “determines and structures the world” (“The Problem of Relativism and the Possibility of Metaphysics,” 142). Kaufman uses the linguistic research by Benjamin Whorf in support of his view that language structures experience. Whorf’s research has been shown to be suspect, as Steven Pinker points out in The Language Instinct (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994), 59-65.
does not necessarily mean that people are destined to use language as they have learned it. The creativity of language lies in its capacity to be refined and revised, according to publicly accepted procedures. Without discussing how the referents of language can be used to modify language, Kaufman’s theory leaves speakers with little recourse except to examine their language from within, presumably judging the relations between symbols, to see if they make sense. It would be more satisfactory to integrate the forms of sense (relations) with the inputs of sense (reference), in a view of language that encompasses both of those cognitive activities.

II.B.2. Coherence in theology and metaphysics

Since thinking is so enveloped in language, Kaufman argues that “philosophy and theology thus always make ‘coherence’ the ultimate criterion of their truth.”57 This coherence, however, must be thought in the most universal way: “Coherence is not an adequate criterion for any system less than the system of the whole.” Kaufman does not mean that a different criterion is necessary for sub-systems of language. Coherence is necessary in any system, no matter how small or large. Because language encompasses all of our thinking, the only test of the adequacy of our thought is that “which unifies, relates, holds together, and connects the totality of the contents of my consciousness.” 58 His point here is that, for a sub-system of language, coherence is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion (another criterion being comparison with other sub-systems). For the whole, however, coherence is the only possible criterion for judgment of the entire system of language.

Metaphysics is seen as the act of “attempting more and more inclusive syntheses of experience and, finally, toward attempting an over-all unification.”59 Kaufman identifies this process as a task of theology as well. However, since theology deals with faith, “its mode of

57 Ibid., 92.
58 Ibid., 93.
59 Ibid., 101.
analysis and the language appropriate to it” are unique. This special mode of thought is historical, at least for Christian theology. Christian thinkers have the special task of “attempt[ing] to understand metaphysically what it means to regard one particular event as the source of meaning for all events, as the veritable center of history.” This historical point acts as the centre of Kaufman’s Christian epistemology, making the meaning of Christ like a concrete universal, a particular which can stand for the unity of the entire linguistic system.

If experience is entirely within language, then coherence is the only possible judgment of a system of language. Jones notes that “one may critically argue for or against a particular way of looking at things in terms of its inner coherence, its ability to communicate intelligibly with other perspectives using more or less the same categories, its usefulness in dealing with real states of affair (including that of radical plurality, as Kaufman rightly points out) and its fruitfulness in anticipating and planning for whatever may lie in the future.” Is coherence the only possible type of judgment, though? If language is intended to function in a world which is in some respects independent, then surely some criteria exist by means of which one can evaluate how well language compares with the world, not only with itself or other languages.

Is faith in a system of language not also tied up with faith in the elements of that system? Surely one of the ways in which we would test such a system would be to test each of its parts. Another test would certainly be the coherence of the system, that is, how well the parts fit into the whole, but Kaufman seems to suggest that this is the only test, or at least the most important one. At the least, Kaufman’s view is unbalanced, since he places such emphasis on the relations in the system. At what point does this view become more than unbalanced, and actually misleading or incorrect? If Kaufman denies that the individual elements of the system of language are connected through experience to something existing in the world, then his epistemology is solipsistic. Although he suggests that language-systems are judged by their staying-power through history, this criteria is simply not close enough to be of

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60 Ibid., 105.
61 Ibid., 109.
62 Jones, 97.
much use. If we cannot judge our language except by offering it up to the forces of history, of what use is it in trying to cope with the present?

II.B.3. The system of language

Kaufman argues that the structure of language carries with it an entire apparatus for encountering the world. He stresses that not only the names we give to things, but also the grammars in which we embed those names, form our thinking. He writes that "language provides categories by means of which the self perceives the world (nouns, verbs); it supplies a ready-made system of possible kinds of relationship between those realities (pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, verbs); and it furnishes interpretations of significance and value (adjectives, adverbs, interjections)."63 The most basic syntactical structures in which we place words affect the way we think about things. Our syntactical categories carve up the world into substantive objects, qualitative attributes, and events caused by independent agents.

Kaufman’s theory of language places great stress on the semantic grammar of language (the relationships between words), and how this system forms our thought. His early view of language is synthetic, in that the structure of language knits ideas together into a meaningful whole. However, he confuses the issue by using the terms “knowledge” and “meaning” interchangeably. He argues that “knowledge is nothing else than the successful relating of parts of our experience to the whole of our experience.”64 Kaufman derives the importance of the part-whole relation from Wilhelm Dilthey, who argues, though, that “the category of meaning designates the relationship, inherent in life, of parts of a life to the whole.”65 Kaufman is not completely consistent on this point, at times giving both meaning and knowledge the role of unifying the system of language. The structure of language can be depicted as follows:

63 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, 24.
64 Kaufman, Relativism, 104.
65 Dilthey, Selected Writings, 235.
At the highest level of thought, language is unified, integrated into an inter-related system of knowledge by the category of meaning. In an early article, he contends that “as words are defined with increasing precision and univocity, a kind of ‘universality’ of knowledge develops within a wide community.” Knowledge is thus a result of careful development of the system of language. It is a compendium of images (and relations between images) which are true because they cohere with the rest of language.

In order to guard against the absolutizing of the system of language, however, Kaufman argues that it must be judged according to an external point of reference. He argues that it is necessary to posit an “ultimate norm or standard in terms of which every given cultural situation or complex of fact, value and meaning can be criticized, transcended and transformed. Without such a point of reference, we become trapped within the scheme of

66 Kaufman, *Relativism*, 72
value and meaning that constitutes precisely our perspective.”67 He identifies certain aspects of human behaviour and society that he thinks are objectively good (or at least inter-subjectively). Kaufman’s point of reference, however, is also within language. He would say that all our points of reference are our imaginative constructions, relative to our culture. These are not known to be good a priori, instead being judged by human experience, or, as Kaufman puts it, pragmatically.

It seems to me that Kaufman confuses the category of knowledge with that of truth. To know something is true means that one has judged it according to some set of criteria. Knowledge is then the compendium of all true statements. Meaning is a precondition for a statement to be judged (a statement needs to be meaningful in order for its adequacy to be determined). In Kaufman’s view, meaning becomes the unification of language, in which knowledge is formed and constructed. Knowledge becomes dependent on the framework of interpretation underlying the system of language. Unfortunately, this solution destroys the independence of knowledge, as well as the access of meaning to experience. The tension between meaning and knowledge is not solved by Kaufman. I am not suggesting that he separate them by delegating different realms of language to their respective roles. In my view, a more satisfactory view of language would see meaning and knowledge as distinct activities, but active in every domain of language. The criteria for the judgment of meaning and knowledge can be constant throughout human cognitive activity without determining the content of that knowledge, for there are many different things to know.

II.B.4. Theology as linguistic study

In the introductory chapters to Systematic Theology, Kaufman explains the procedure by which he will conduct his “study and refinement of the use of certain words,”68 especially “God.” He acknowledges that a historical investigation of how the word’s meaning developed would be in order, but he aims instead to investigate “its logical structure; with the various

67 Kaufman, God the Problem, 33.
68 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, 5.
layers and levels of meaning in it and its connections with and implications for the meanings of other words." In other words, he intends to do a synchronic (simultaneous) analysis of what the word means in the linguistic structure which we now use, rather than a diachronic (historical) study of what it has meant. Kaufman does not use these technical terms from the linguistic structuralists, but the structural character of theological language is clearly of prime importance.

The task of systematic theology, Kaufman argues, is a "constructive analysis of the structure and terminology of Christian language, [which] provides us with both a Christian world-view and an understanding of the meaning and significance of 'God.'" The meaning of the word "God," then, is understood mainly by examining its relation to other words in the language, especially those in the common language of people beyond the circle of the church. Kaufman claims that "God" is not a word whose meaning is defined by theology, but that theology must discover the usage of "God" in ordinary settings, and find out what it actually means to people. This does not mean that usage completely defines the meaning of the word: Kaufman claims that the meaning of "God" is regulated by "what is given in and through a particular historical event of two thousand years ago," namely Jesus' life and death (and resurrection? Kaufman radically re-interprets this event, since he sets himself historical limits to thinking about these things).

This view of language implies a unique view of revelation, since religious experience is portrayed by Kaufman as inside the circle of language. In his early work, Kaufman did not view any language as directly communicated from God; God's act of revelation was a linguistic event, not a message. This event "was a radical transmutation of the web of meaning in which the men to whom it occurred had their existence and their orientation." The structure of language was modified by God's breaking into human history. Kaufman conceives

69 Ibid., 6.
70 Ibid., 11.
71 Ibid., 10.
72 Ibid., 51.
of the act of revelation by analogy with ordinary acts of communication: something is given to us from beyond our imagining.

That language is a framework of meaning which encompasses knowledge means for Kaufman that it is taken on faith. He argues that “the supposition that the future will have meaning of any kind at all, and that such meaning will be related to the center which now gives one’s life meaning, involves an act of faith, and not, strictly speaking, of knowledge.”

Kaufman argues that this faith is like the Christian doctrine of providence, the belief that God sustains the universe throughout time, continuing the act of creation. From the epistemological standpoint by which Kaufman makes his argument, he can only show that our present knowledge requires an idea of providence, in other words, a claim that our current presuppositions about the world will continue to be valid. He does claim, however, in addition, that the meaning which is contained in our presuppositions is “nothing else than the Lord of history.” This hurried leap to a doctrinal conclusion appears to be a rhetorical flourish, since Kaufman provides a disclaimer that he has not proven the existence of God.

It is not clear to me how God might transmute the entire web of meaning, or how this might be perceived as a communication. Obviously, Kaufman wants to get away from the idea that God speaks directly to people, but is it necessary to back away so far, so that God merely injects something new into the linguistic system? This seems especially odd because Kaufman seems to view the event of Christ’s life and death as the central locus of God’s intervention into history. The teachings of Jesus, the stories about his miracles, and especially the witness to the saving power of his death all indicate rather more than a modification of the linguistic system. Even if Kaufman interprets the divinity of Christ as the Logos (the centre of meaning), the construction of this meaning would seem to be more than a linguistic contribution. It is more than metaphor to say that God speaks through the life and death of Jesus (and especially through the resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit).

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73 Kaufman, Relativism, 111.

74 Ibid., 112.
Kaufman would seem to agree with Thiemann that denying "the myth of the given... offers resources for a fruitful reconsideration and reformulation of a doctrine of revelation." However, Thiemann draws different conclusions. He argues that our views of the world are shaped by the texts that we read. Theology's task, then, is not to reconstruct these texts (or the ideas contained therein), but to read ourselves into the Biblical narrative, and let it shape our lives. Implied in this position is the assumption that Biblical language does in fact correspond to God's nature (Thiemann calls this sort of revelation "narrated promise," a term which is intended to characterize the nature of revelation). Kaufman shares the assumption that the conceptual framework of our language does connect with reality, although he rejects Thiemann's formulation of the nature (and content) of revelation.

Kaufman does deny the "myth of the given," not only in his early emphasis on relativism, but also in his later critiques of the reification of language. It is difficult, then, to see why Kaufman does not take Thiemann's route. If no language is actually descriptive, then all we have to go on are the constructions we make (and then the Biblical constructions are as good as any). However, Kaufman attempts to retain a qualified representative role for language. He does this by delineating two roles for language: connection to experience and relation to other words. This distinction does not correspond to different types of language; referential words also have relations within the linguistic system (by their connotations and oppositions). Categorial symbols also have external reference, to some aspect of the world. Although this is not a direct correspondence, Kaufman clearly thinks that some symbols fit the world better than others.

In my view, it is not necessary to deny the descriptive aspect of language in order to defend the categorial aspect (they should simply be distinguished). By focusing so much on construction, Kaufman's view of language downplays the very important aspects of representation and articulation. Of course all of our language is constructed, but some of it is constructed to be descriptive. What is more, the categorial and symbolic aspects of language are dependent upon the descriptive: something must be named before language can be categorized. Language is an interpretation of the world, formed by combining our impressions

75 Thiemann, "Revelation and Imaginative Construction," 250.
of the world into images and ideas. It is a construction of images, which can be compared
to that which causes us to have those images inside our heads. Language is not an arbitrary
construction, but a construction with a purpose, namely, communication. It is the bridge
between minds, which enables us to compare our various images, and establish some sort of
agreement about the structure of our ideas, and also of the world.

II.B.5. Language as frame of reference

For Kaufman, the philosopher brings order to language, both in its internal and
external aspects (although it is unclear how the internal aspect is open to public inspection).
The reflective thinker must interpret linguistic symbols "in terms of a broad frame of reference
which enables understanding of their full meaning and significance."76 This procedure would
require, in my view, an examination of as many expressions of symbols as possible (so as to
fling the net of language as far as possible). It would require as well a clear indication of when
theological ideas are acting as regulative concepts, and when as descriptive (or characteristic).

This hierarchical system of language, from the most elemental experience up to the
loftiest conceptual unifier, is turned upside-down after the Systematic Theology. Previously,
the imagination had integrated experiences into more compact bundles, with the aid of the
attention and memory. Now, the system of language provides the basis for even our most
primitive experience, since it lays out the terms in which we can understand that experience.
That language is a form implies for Kaufman that language shapes experience. He writes that
"the language in which we think . . . articulate[s] certain connections between concepts and
certain relations between words and ideas; and it is in terms of these connections and
valuations and interpretations that we focus our attention in experience, divide it up the way
we do, and see in it what we can."77 The inter-relations of language are seen as its most
important feature, since they guide our attention to the world.

76 Kaufman, "Philosophy of Religion: Subjective or Objective," 64.
77 Kaufman, Essay, 7.
Because he views thought as formed by language, he considers the semantic relations between words to reveal the pattern of thought in a culture or an individual. This activity can be pictured as follows:

In this diagram, I have placed experience inside the circle of language, since Kaufman suggests that the system of language already interprets our experience for us, by guiding the way in which we perceive the world, according to the grammar which we use.

In his ground-breaking *An Essay on Theological Method*, Kaufman realizes the implications of the axiom that language forms our thought. If thought is formed by language, then experience does not ground our conceptions about the world (it might even imply that there is no direct experience, but that all experience is filtered through the linguistic structure developed in our culture). He argues that “it would be truer to say that the language we speak provides a principal foundation for our religious experience than to hold that some pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic raw experience is the foundation of our theological language and
Since language is the medium of thought, all of our perceptions and sensations are formed by language at every level. He expresses more clearly his central assumption that all of our thinking is conducted in language. Two assumptions are hidden in this reasoning: that revising language is a form of thinking that is not itself formed by language, and that there is no experience (i.e. thinking) that is direct and can provide an external point by which to judge language.

A focus on the structure of language results in a shift away from seeing language as an interpretation of the world, towards viewing language as a form which interprets the world for its speakers. Kaufman argues that not only past language, but also the system of present language shapes our thinking. Experience, he claims, is “heavily dependent for its form and qualities on the learned terms and concepts which give it particular flavour and shape.”

Kaufman sees language as the necessary context for action: “in order to live and act it is necessary to have some conception or picture of the overall context, the fundamental order, within which human life falls.” The system of language orients us to the world, he thinks, by providing a framework within which we interact with the world. It is not clear, however, if Kaufman thinks that all of life occurs within this framework. He continues to speak of human life as if it is the context within which we use the instrument of language. Even his analysis of “regulative ideas” seems to assume that there is some foundational experiential material which these ideas organize and synthesize into imaginative constructions.

In his later writing, Kaufman stresses the context of language, arguing that the system of language provides a cognitive framework which serves to situate the speaker in the world.

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78 Ibid., 8.

79 Ibid., 6. In a footnote to this comment, Kaufman cites Kant, Hegel and Wittgenstein as philosophers who have contributed to the realization of the “heavy dependence of all experience on language and thought” (p. 23, n. 5). It is not clear how Kaufman combines the ideas of such disparate thinkers. Part of the problem lies in the fact that he does little analysis of any of these philosophers, instead importing their ideas into his own thinking, and entwining them in his own idiosyncratic way.

80 Ibid., 38.
Kaufman continues to speak of experience as a foundational input to the mental process, but his exploration of the ways in which language forms thought brings him to view language as a form containing experience. He views language as an imaginative construction which “is to be lived in: it is the very form and meaning of human life which is here being constructed and reconstructed.”81 Kaufman begins to view language as not only a form in itself, that is, a structure, but also as a “form of life” (a phrase borrowed from Wittgenstein).82 Language is thus intimately tied not only to the processes of thinking, but also to action.

However, Wittgenstein thought that “religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s belief, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.”83 Apparently, he could not commit himself to a particular interpretation, since his questioning mind always burst the bounds of language. However, it also points to Wittgenstein’s view that life is lived through language, and that once you have a language (whether it is chosen or not), you have to reason through its terms and grammatical rules.

If Kaufman really thinks that language shapes all of our thinking, he cannot appeal to any experience outside of language (including historical or pragmatic experience). McCormack acknowledges that Kaufman “rejects the attempt to ground meaningfulness in any form of ‘religious experience.’”84 In Kaufman’s later work, he travels some distance along this epistemological road, although he continues to advert to practical experience as a non-linguistic faculty of judgment.

It seems to me that Kaufman’s analysis of the formal aspects of language would be improved by a greater attention to the social aspects of language acquisition and behaviour. This would have the effect of locating his abstract proposals in their concrete historical

81 Ibid., 41.

82 Ibid., xx. Wittgenstein’s remark that language is a “form of life” is found in *Philosophical Investigations*, 8e.


84 McCormack, 435.
locations. To examine the actual uses of religious language would provide more insight than general pronouncements about the putative use of God-talk in western culture. Sociolinguistics could provide a rich source for Kaufman’s thinking about the function of language in human interactions. The pragmatics of language does not only have to do with the consequences of speech, but with the cultural assumptions which underlie speech (such elementary things as turn-taking, or generating sequence in conversation or argument by making reference to another’s ideas, or references to the purpose or value of speech itself). Utility is not the only consideration in examining the function of language: aesthetic value, political ramifications, emotional implication all are important in determining the cultural meaning of language.

II.B.6. Religion as categorial scheme

That the system of language is constructed means for Kaufman that “the ‘knowledge of God’ is not given . . . as is our knowledge of the ordinary objects of experience; it is given, rather in the form of certain basic presuppositions (faith) about life and the world, with which experience is approached, apprehended and interpreted.”85 Experience of God is redefined in this theory, since all human experience is shaped by human language. Kaufman insists that human experience of God must be analyzed in the terms of human language.

Since he focuses on the structure of religious language, Kaufman defines metaphysics as “the formal analysis and clarification of an understanding of reality or the world, and the ultimate point of reference for that understanding.”86 He thus attempts to ascertain the formal structure of the system of language. Kaufman presents an articulated design for theological thinking, with the four categorial concepts of human, world, God and Christ as the backbones of a structured view. Rather than being a physical model of a state of affairs, it is a sketch of the relations between ideas, intended to disclose something about the underlying structure of the world. Kaufman argues that “monotheistic language articulates a world-picture structured

85 Kaufman, God the Problem, 254.
86 Kaufman, Essay, 19.
by three principal categories (God, the world, and humanity). These three concepts unify the language of monotheistic believers, and shape the world that they come to know. He argues that “All that we know or experience or can imagine can be given a place within this threefold categorial scheme; and what we ordinarily call ‘faith in God’ is simply human life lived within the terms it prescribes: all experiencing and reflecting, all imagining and thinking, all deciding and acting take place within this threefold pattern.” The system of religious language has come to be the world in which the believer lives, according to Kaufman’s view.

In his later work, Kaufman defines “Christ” as a category, and modifies the monotheistic categorial scheme. He argues that “introducing the symbol of Christ not only decisively affects the concepts of God and humanity; it also has powerful effects on the notion of the universe, the context of our experience and life.” In effect, he argues that not only must we change the meaning-content of the word “Christ,” but we must also view Christology as the reconciling force in our lives, this doctrine being a framework by which we live.

Ferré argues that “The so-called category of Christ requires a sixth step of faith . . . although since it is optional for non-Christians it is hard to know why the term category (normally implying universality) is used for it.” If it is not a category, then what is it? Hans Frei argues that the story of Christ yields an understanding of the identity of Christ. The narrative structure of the life, death and resurrection of Christ does not yield much historical information about the man Jesus, since the aim of the story is to describe the identity of Jesus as the Christ. Kaufman’s portrayal of the idea of Christ is less convincing to me, since the story carries the particularity of a person interacting with his surrounding society, his religious tradition, as well as with God.

87 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 81.
88 Ibid., 74.
89 Ibid., 90.
90 Ferré, 368.
Kaufman’s insistence that language completely envelops thinking can result in a view of language as a self-enclosed system. Jones argues that “Kaufman’s theology depends on a form of perspectival language which isolates it from fundamental questioning.” It is true that religion, for Kaufman, is a cultural creation, formed by the historical character of human existence, the penchant for constructing forms by which to explicate the strange conundrum of life. Theology is the task of unifying the cultural forms, especially language, in order to provide an integrated experience, making sense of the eddying currents of history. It is an intra-textual operation, acting upon the material of language, reflecting upon its internal relations and external connections. Unfortunately, Kaufman’s qualification of experience (that it is historical through and through) has the effect of distancing his theological proposals from the very history in which they are embedded. If religious language is a synthesis of experience, especially if those terms are intra-textual, and only unify and integrate the system of language, then the conventional constructions of religious speakers are purely artificial, and only arbitrarily connected to their historical context.

As well, Kaufman’s theory of language suffers from a focus on words rather than on sentences. His criteria for judgment of the truth of language are oriented to the pragmatic use of words, rather than the judgment of sentences in which words describe something. He also ignores other uses of sentences, such as narratives and other genres of language, which need to be judged by other criteria. A more adequate theory would illuminate the many uses and forms of language which are inextricably linked with the actions of people.

In this section, we have seen that Kaufman focuses on the public structure of language. He argues that language depended on thought, and is produced by the algorithm of language, an identifiable and analyzable code. Religion then is viewed as an over-arching set of symbols which directs the whole set of language towards the context of the self (its environment: social and physical), and to the ultimate point of reference of the system of language.

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92 Jones, 95.
Language articulates experience, by ordering and organizing it through its categories and grammar. Thus, language not only expresses experience (externalizes it), but also generates different sorts of experience (by carving up the world into different word-sized packages, inter-related by different grammatical structures). In addition, language also allows the mind to become conscious of its own construction of reality. By expressing mental experience (of the world), and representing that which is given in experience, language allows the mind to become conscious of itself.

Our knowledge is shaped by the meaning of its system, according to Kaufman; what we know is formed by the internal relations of the language that we use. Note that meaning has now migrated to the upper echelons of the linguistic system. Previously, meanings had been relegated to the internal sphere of the self, private and subjective. Now Kaufman has defined meanings as public, structured into the external network of language. Meanings are made public by their expression through the form of language. This theoretical structure produces a tension between knowledge and meaning. Knowledge, if it is seen as justified true belief, is dependent on meaning (a statement has to be meaningful before it can be judged true or false). I have argued that Kaufman would be more consistent if he clearly distinguished between knowledge and meaning, giving them clear epistemological roles. Meaning can still unite the system of language, but if meaning unites the system of language, how can we know that our meanings are true? Different criteria must then be used for judging the truth of knowledge and meaning. Kaufman provides only one set of criteria, to be used for the whole of language. This procedure does not sufficiently differentiate the various roles of language in thought.

By factoring language into the lowest levels of thinking, Kaufman has brought meaning out of the self into the public forum. However, this has been done by virtually identifying thought with language. Language is the form of thought, so much so that thinking is essentially speaking (perhaps silently, in the mind). According to this view, language is not only the result of thinking, it is itself thinking in process (consciousness), and thus language shapes our thoughts. I would argue that language is an element of thinking, along with other cognitive activities. Doubtlessly, language has an effect on thought, but there are other mental
acts that affect our thinking as well. Kaufman has pointed some of these out, especially the attention.

II.C. Language as a form of life

Kaufman insists, even in his later work, that "it is in the terms provided by the language we learn that all our conscious experience is formed." He defines experience as completely constructed by humans, and encoded in language which shapes that experience (although he leaves open the possibility that unconscious experience is directly in contact with an external world). Language is used by the mind in order to manipulate and re-order experience (and thus the world). Since the instrument of language is public, it also shapes the very experience which it is used to organize.

Language is thus a rule by which experience is governed. Our ordinary sensations of the world are guided by the ways in which people have named the world before us. When we think, the connections we make between ideas are laid down in the structures of our semantic system. In particular, Kaufman argues that there are certain ideas which structure the entire system of language. These "regulative ideas" organize the system into a meaningful whole. I will argue that although our thoughts are guided by past formulations, this does not mean that they are determined for us. The structure of language gives us a medium through which to experience the world, but it also gives us a form in which to make new connections, and construct new ideas out of what is given to us from the past. This change then affects his view of theology, in that religious language is seen as "regulative ideas," categories that structure the experience of the believer. I will question this characterization of religious

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93 Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 33.

94 It might be useful to think of the form of language as similar to a musical form. Music does not represent things in the world directly, but through the imaginative construction developed in a rule-governed medium. Through its complicated interconnections, music expresses ideas and emotions, articulating for us something we could not otherwise conceptualize.
language, arguing that it does not adequately describe what believers are doing when they speak about God.

Religious language is governed by a few central concepts, Kaufman thinks. These abstract symbols do not refer to anything directly, but instead organize the network of religious ideas and rituals. Kaufman’s examination of the idea of language as a rule occurs primarily in the third chapter of *An Essay on Theological Method*, where he outlines the three moments of theological construction. It must be stressed that these steps in theological thinking are set in a logical order, not a chronological one. Kaufman is talking about how the theological ideas function logically, that is, what they lead people to think. He argues that this procedure is one which religious people have unconsciously undergone; if theologians have not done so, then they have misrepresented the reality of religious thinking and experiencing. I will argue that this characterization of religious language does not do justice to what believers are actually doing when they pray, worship and act.

II.C.1. Symbols as regulative ideas

Since Kaufman sees language as a structure, he emphasizes the concepts which unify and integrate the system of language. He argues that “‘regulative ideas’ function at a remove from direct perception or experience: they are used for ordering and organizing our conceptions or knowledge.”95 These ideas are especially important to analyze and critique, since they integrate the linguistic system. Like Kant’s transcendental categories, regulative ideas are preconditions for knowledge (concepts like “world” allow us to know things in the world, but Kaufman thinks that we cannot know the world as a whole—this idea ‘worlds’ for us, by organizing our experience into a whole). Unlike Kant, though, Kaufman thinks that a number of systems of regulative ideas are possible (he does not think that Kant’s list of categories is a necessary linguistic structure, the only possible language corresponding to the underlying structure of the world). Kaufman thinks that regulative ideas simply perform

"intra-mental functions,"96 namely integrating and organizing experience. Herein lies the paradox of Kaufman's theory of language: these ideas are constructed out of elements in our experience, but they also construct our experience for us.

Kaufman argues that theology deals with regulative concepts rather than concepts describing ordinary objects and states of affairs. He argues that "'world' and 'God' are not objects directly describable but are constructs or images by means of which men and women: (a) conceive or picture the multiplicity and plurality of experience and life as having some unity, order and wholeness (the concept or image of the world.)"97 These concepts are based upon the descriptions of our everyday world, but interpret and integrate those descriptions of ordinary experience into a meaningful whole. It would seem that Kaufman considers religious language to contain the highest concepts in the whole hierarchy of language, in contrast to Lindbeck, who sees theology as a grammar for a system of religious language which encompasses the whole world.

The first step in Kaufman's theological method is to "construct a notion of the context within which all experience falls, a concept of the world."98 Although he asserts that there is no pure experience unmediated by language, this definition does imply that there is a level of language which has extra-linguistic reference. The concept of the "world" functions at another level, a meta-linguistic level. It integrates and unifies all of our experiences into a meaningful whole. Although this concept is based on experience, it is "a construction for which there are no direct experiential correlates (a concept without a corresponding percept)."99 The whole (the world and everything in it, including the self and its perceptions of the world) is never directly experienced, it is instead a concept constructed by the mind, without which the kind of experience we have could not happen. He agrees with Kant, who suggests that "the absolute whole of all appearances ... is only an idea; since we can never represent it in

96 Ibid., 30.
97 Ibid., 34.
98 Ibid., 55.
99 Ibid., 53.
image, it remains a problem to which there is no solution."\textsuperscript{100} Kaufman still thinks that we can talk about the whole, however, although there is no ultimate certainty in this talk.

The first step of Kaufman's method is not explicitly theological; it requires no hypothesis of God (although Kaufman argues that it presupposes such a hypothesis, as we shall later see). The second step in theological thinking (again, logically speaking) is the construction of the concept of God, which "limits and relativizes this concept of the world."\textsuperscript{101} The idea of God modifies the concept of the world, by "destroying its absoluteness and finality by holding that the world and all that is in it can be properly understood only by reference to something other than and beyond the world."\textsuperscript{102} The concept of the world requires us to think of an ultimate point of reference upon which the world is grounded, Kaufman argues, but that grounding concept could not be generated before the idea of the world. The idea of God, he thinks, "functions in part as a corrective of, or check on, the overdetermination of our thinking which the concept of world permits and even encourages."\textsuperscript{103} If we simply functioned with the concept of the world, Kaufman suggests, we would be tempted to think that our ideas indeed encapsulate the whole of the world.

Kaufman's third moment of theological construction consists in interpreting the world in terms of its logical ground, God. The third step "returns again to experience and the world, thoroughly reconceiving them now in the light of this concept of God."\textsuperscript{104} It is important to note that Kaufman has outlined a formal procedure for thinking about God, that is, a logical order by which theological thinking should proceed. Note that the first step, and the prior unreflective experience of the world within language, are taken without recourse to specific theological vocabulary, and thus could be done by anyone; they are not specific to theology.

\textsuperscript{100} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 319.
\textsuperscript{101} Kaufman, \textit{Essay}, 55.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 56.
The second step introduces the idea of God, a notion which is claimed to be a necessary element of thinking, indeed presupposed by any thinking. This claim is subject to public argument, not made on the basis of a revelation private to a person or group. One can ask, however, why the second step is necessary; one could refrain from positing a ground to the world. If the ground can itself be self-grounded, not requiring another ground, then why cannot the world itself be self-grounded? This refusal to posit an external ground would have the happy consequence of reducing the number of elements in the theory, therefore simplifying it.

Many critics agree with Kaufman’s view of religious words as categorical ideas, without direct reference outside of language. Wayne Proudfoot argues that Kaufman’s “regulative ideas”¹⁰⁵ are not references to objects or how things are, but the presuppositions of all experience. Proudfoot thinks that Kaufman’s method implies that “we have no access to innate ideas or immediate impressions as a foundation for knowledge,” but that this does not imply that ideas are “subject to self-conscious choice and alteration.”¹⁰⁶ The regulative ideas, like Kant’s categories, “can never be employed in judgments that yield knowledge, but neither can they be dispensed with; they are required for orientation and presupposed by ordinary judgments.”¹⁰⁷ It is as if they operate sub-consciously so as to judge experience, to unify it into conceptual pieces which are then reasoned upon consciously.

Proudfoot argues that Kaufman’s revision of Kant lies in the former’s historical view of regulative ideas. Regulative ideas are historically contingent, and are examinable philosophically, as the presuppositions of a culture’s concepts are mined out of the raw ore of its thoughts, as displayed in language. Proudfoot disagrees, however, that one can “choose to adopt a certain set of symbols and concepts as a basis of trust or as an object of devotion.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 108
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 109.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 110.
Regulative ideas are not constructed; they act as linguistic rules largely beyond our control.

In my view, Kaufman does not revise Kant’s approach, but does repudiate the transcendental deduction which aims to prove that one particular cognitive structure corresponds to the actual structure of the universe. Kaufman retains Kant’s synthetic model of cognition (although he does not retain the synthetic a priori, instead considering categorial concepts to be constructed a posteriori, after or within experience). However, the categories are, for Kaufman, relative to particular cultures. This relativity to context poses some problems when Kaufman attempts to draw together a normative view of human existence. Meanings would seem to be generated by the different uses of language in different cultures.

When Kaufman focuses on the nature of language as a structure, he emphasizes that language forms our thought. However, in his view language does not simply describe the world, instead it prescribes to speakers how they will view the world. To say that language is prescriptive is to argue that language is a rule, not simply that language is guided by rules. It is to argue that language is itself a grammar (a system of guidelines for meaning), rather than to say that language has a grammar. His analysis of language looks a lot like Chomsky’s generative grammar, in which a deep structure of transformation rules operate on the symbols of the language, creating a sentence in a public form (although the public form is a surface hiding the complex calculations going on underneath). However, Chomsky’s linguistic theories attempt to explain how meaning is generated by sentences, by a universal linguistic capability of the human mind (which is not to say that we all have the same grammars). Language could be seen as similar to a mathematical algorithm, a formalized procedure which takes an input, performs an operation upon it, and produces an output. If all of language is seen as a rule, then the system of language becomes an internally regulated set. This analysis of grammar attempts to explain how meaning is generated, according to a capacity employed by human beings everywhere (although the surface structures, despite being generated by the same deep structures, are inevitably different).109

109 See Irene Lawrence, Linguistics and Theology: The Significance of Noam Chomsky for Theological Construction (London: Scarecrow Press, 1980) for a discussion of
Since Kaufman thinks that the relations within the set of language create meaning, the rules governing those relations must be important for any analysis of that meaning. Kaufman cites favourably Wittgenstein’s cryptic phrase: “Theology as grammar”\textsuperscript{110} (without Wittgenstein’s qualifying parentheses). We have already seen that Kaufman views syntax as a way of classifying words and putting them together, but Kaufman also thinks that there are rules for linking the meanings of words (we could call this semantic grammar). His analysis of the word “God” becomes more grammatical than phenomenological, since he focuses on the role of the word within the system of language. He deliberately eschews the phenomenological approach of looking for a unique sort of experience that is religious, instead taking the position that religious language forms religious experience.

The idea of grammar is taken by Kaufman to mean a set of rules for the formation of meaning (that is, the sort of meaning that is experienced). He sees the grammar of theology as a prescriptive guide to its proper use. Wittgenstein, it should be noted, prefaces his remark with the statements “essence is expressed by grammar,” and “grammar tells us what kind of object anything is.”\textsuperscript{111} It is difficult to tell whether Wittgenstein simply means that grammar classifies things into types (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.—although these are not all objects), or whether he means a grammar which classifies objects into genus and species (a sort of syntactical morphology: animal, vegetable, mineral, etc.). This sort of semantic grammar classifies words, but the basic function of grammar is to provide rules for the combination of words into sentences. Kaufman’s focus on the central concepts of religious language deprives his theory of the insights gained from the analysis of sentences, not to speak of complete texts.

Kaufman’s analysis of the task of theology, based on his new understanding of language, is modified from his earlier views. What is new in this work is that Kaufman sees


\textsuperscript{111} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, remark 373.
the task of theology primarily as a linguistic task. Kaufman proposes that theology be
construed as a grammatical analysis, setting out the proper rules of God-talk: “[theology] not
only attempts to describe how men and women in fact talk about God; it searches out the
rules governing the use of such talk so that it will be possible to see more clearly just what
that talk is intending to express. Thus, theological analysis aims to distinguish better from
worse forms of expression and seeks to define adequate or proper speech about God.”112
Since religious language is at some remove from direct encounter, Kaufman gives a
prescriptive analysis of theological language. Christian religious language is not seen as simply
descriptive, since it inhabits a form in which its meaning is generated. Since it is so difficult to
examine the religious realities to which religious language refers, Kaufman suggests that we
should start with formulating ruled procedures for talking about God. Kaufman proposes that
this use of the word God implies that our present talk about God should be revised according
to this ultimate limit. “God” becomes a prescriptive word, a linguistic norm, rather than
describing some reality.

Kaufman’s analysis is similar to George Lindbeck’s in The Nature of Doctrine
(published nine years after An Essay on Theological Method). Lindbeck also claims that
religious language “is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals
rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.”113 Kaufman, however,
draws different conclusions than Lindbeck, arguing that the latter uses this theory of religious
language in support of conservative theological positions.

Lindbeck argues that religion is like a language, in that “it comprises a vocabulary of
discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of
which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.”114 All of religion, its rituals and
activities, is viewed as a semiotic system by Lindbeck, a set of signs which structure the
experience of the religious speaker. Kaufman also sees all religious activities as signs, but he

112 Kaufman, Essay, 11.
114 Ibid., 33.
deliberately analyzes religious language as to its form and function, as a means of analyzing religion as a cultural system. Kaufman sees language as a subset of culture, a distinction which Lindbeck refuses (church is a subset of culture for him, religious language encompasses all of reality).

With respect to statements about God, in particular, Jones charges that Kaufman's redefinition of revelation means that it as "self-确认, as requiring participation in order to be seen for what it is."115 In other words, one must speak the Christian language in order to really understand it. Despite the fact that these words have a common use in the general public, a fact which Kaufman often points out, they have no meaning except in their relation to the central Christian concepts. They are defined by their internal relations to the rest of the Christian system, although they are related to words outside that system as well. It seems to me that the common meaning of religious words is parasitic upon their special use in specifically religious contexts (in the same way as scientific concepts find their way into the public discourse, but only by extension from, or by analogy to, their use in the laboratory or research program).

II.C.3. Meaning as use

Both Lindbeck and Kaufman follow Wittgenstein's famous dictum that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."116 There are two senses to this idea: that a word has meaning by virtue of its place in the system of language (internal use, or sense), and that a word has meaning by being used by people for various purposes (external use). In his early stage, Kaufman was already thinking about the use of words in a system of language. Now, he moves towards the second sense. From analyzing the function of words in the system of language, he moves to examine their function in society. The latter sense is a pragmatic one, dealing with the practicalities of how language fits into life. His theological method becomes an analysis of the rules guiding the use of religious language. However, Kaufman tends to

115 Jones, 95.
characterize the rules as formal procedures, prescribing the construction of relations within language, rather than analyzing ordinary usage of religious language, and constructing rules guiding the use of language in the world (i.e. as speech-acts, such as making a promise—J. L. Austin suggests this sort of rule of usage in his *How To Do Things With Words*).  

Kaufman critiques Lindbeck for using Wittgenstein’s dictum for conservative theological purposes. In a review of *The Nature of Doctrine*, Kaufman contends that “no linguistic grammar ever is unchanging in the way in which Lindbeck’s doctrinal ‘grammar’ is supposed to be.” Kaufman suggests that Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model for religious language opens up theology for a radical critique (especially by minority views), presumably since there are no foundations for religious language in the authority of the tradition or indubitable experience. Language is free-floating, on a sea of culture, and is constructed as the wind and waves prove necessary. Kaufman seems to think that the new currents and storms in this new historical situation render the traditional designs obsolete. Kaufman proposes new methods of boat-building which will result in more seaworthy vessels, capable of traversing the mysterious seas of the future. It seems to me that he could build better boats by augmenting the traditional methods, perhaps with some help from new materials.

Since language is seen as a self-contained system, Kaufman analyzes concepts by examining their relations to other elements in the inter-connected web of language. He aims to show that theological language is not a special and distinct subset of language, and thus not endowed with a unique authority. In *An Essay on Theological Method*, he argues that “it is this common language and these ordinary uses that theology always presupposes, and with which, therefore, it should begin, not with special or technical meanings alleged to be authoritative because ‘revealed’ by God.” He now aims to show that the language used in scripture is no different than any other language, since it is commonly used by the general public.

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populace. Kaufman’s analysis of ordinary Christian language now examines its use in any contexts of human behaviour in which it is found.

In his early work, Kaufman had argued that “What we say about the Christian God cannot be based simply on the notion of God found in ordinary discourse, or on vague ideas drawn from general human experience; rather, it must be inferred as carefully and strictly as possible from the revelatory history through which God has made himself known.” Kaufman’s analysis of religious language is now focused not on the religious text, but on the “wide experience and history of a whole culture.” The task of theology becomes the “analysis, interpretation, criticism and reconstruction of the concept and images of God, as found in the common language and traditions of the West.” The most general definitions of religious terms are examined, although Kaufman still adverts to Biblical texts to make his point. Surprisingly, these are the only texts Kaufman uses; one would think that works of literature or other philosophical views of religion would take precedence in his methodical reconstruction of the idea of God. This worldview, as he calls it, does form our thoughts about the world, but it is also used as a tool by our minds, to interact with the world.

Although he constantly refers to the diversity of history, Kaufman’s history acts as a philosophical principle uncontaminated by that diversity. He appeals to the possibilities for a common history, and the weight of his argument stands on the anthropological capacity for a common theological language. Victor Froese contends that “the very moral sensibility that he [Kaufman] wants to promote through theology, however, can only be adequately fostered within a specific community already committed to a theological understanding of reality nurtured by some sort of tradition, ritual, practice and reflection.” The sort of pragmatic effectiveness that Kaufman holds up as a standard is, in the end, a moral standard. He judges

120 Kaufman, Systematic Theology, 83.
121 Kaufman, Essay, 4.
122 Ibid., 51.
thought in terms of the kinds of ethical action it can induce. This view assumes that we can adequately describe the world, as well as what sort of human existence is desirable in this world.

Alain Epp Weaver agrees with this common criticism of Kaufman’s views: “Kaufman seems to be in the unenviable position of claiming that most of the ordinary usage of religious language occurs in extra-church contexts.”124 Kaufman not only claims that religious language occurs publicly, but that the general public can prescriptively define that use. I would argue that the public could only descriptively define what the church says theological language means, and that it is right and proper for the church to reserve the right to prescriptively define its language (not without regard to public language on topics of mutual interest, of course).

Kaufman’s stated reliance on ordinary language is somewhat misleading, since he equates usage with the general employment of words. Sharpe argues that “Kaufman suggests that to start with revelation or religious experience or dogma presupposes the concept God as used in common discourse. . . . [he] presupposes a linguistic functionalism which says that the meaning of a word is tied to its use in common language.”125 Sharpe suggests that “there may not necessarily be any use or meaning in common to all common uses and meanings of the word God.”126 The word “God” may not have a unified meaning. Kaufman is thus giving a prescriptive definition of the word, which attempts to impose an order upon linguistic usage, rather than a descriptive definition of common use.

Ronald Thiemann, in contrast, argues that “‘ordinary’ discourse in a Wittgensteinian sense is not to be equated with common or general usage.”127 Rather, the particular use of religious language as it is practiced in religious communities is the appropriate setting for


125 Sharpe, 175.

126 Sharpe, 177.

theological discourse. George Lindbeck concurs, in stating that "the ordinary-language meaning of theological terms is the meaning they have when employed for specifically religious purposes in prayer, preaching, and practice rather than something they acquire when used in philosophical, literary or civil contexts." 128 Although Kaufman makes a programmatic assertion that his analysis is concerned with the common meaning of religious language, his actual analysis tends to use rather abstract and academic formulations of God-talk (such as "ultimate point of reference" or "serendipitous creativity").

The idea of meaning as use invites the philosophical move towards the reader, which also involves the charge of subjectivity. Bruce McCormack charges that Kaufman thinks that "words have no meaning apart from that meaning with which they are invested by those who use them." 129 This position would seem to lead to an arbitrariness in theology limited only by the controls placed upon theological language by society. Kaufman is correct to note that theologians have always invested theological terms with new meanings, and have always worked with authorities which controlled their imagination. Systematic theology is a reflection upon exuberant originary religious language, delineating carefully the proper use of such highly charged symbols, examining carefully in which ways these complex metaphors may be used. However, although Kaufman seeks to dispense with the traditional controls of Scripture and tradition, he does not jettison the past meaning of theological language. The invention of new meanings for theological language must be controlled, but instead of tradition being the control, present pragmatic and experiential concerns are given arbitrating authority.

Does this characterization of religious language correspond to what believers think they are doing when they speak? Sharpe comments that Kaufman's depiction of religious language is "inadequate to my mind chiefly because it does not do justice (perhaps even does an injustice) to the believers' feeling for the objective existence of the God they believe in. The God they know—their available God—is really real, has objective existence, is the real


129 McCormack, 436-7.
Kaufman does not adequately analyze the meaning that believer's intend when they use religious language. I think that Kaufman effectively reduces religious statements to their orienting function, their ability to organize the world.

It seems to me that Kaufman's theory would benefit from the application of the ancient rule of *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the rule of prayer is the rule of faith. The primary use of Christian language is surely in the speech of the believer, which is embedded in a tradition of such uses. Both the private piety of the individual Christian and the common confession in the public liturgy are important to the development of the traditional use of Christian language. There is a certain conventional priority given to the originating texts of scripture, although questions of interpretation may arise. However, the use of scripture in the worship of the church is taken by the church as a rule of faith, and seems to me to be a starting point for theology's reflection upon that faith. Kaufman's regulative ideas need to be set in the context of a community which uses them for a public act of worship, directed towards the God who has called the church into being, and Christians into a renewed existence.

II.C.4. Theological language as a practice

Kaufman considers the realm of language as the totality of signs, that is, all actions of human beings which have meaning. He defines language in extremely broad terms, as "the total activity of the self in its relation to other selves (or to itself considered as another self over against itself)." This definition of language is a semiotic one, understanding all acts of the human being as signs which have meaning. Because Kaufman sees language as a formal system (a structure in which relationships between elements are more important than relations to anything outside the structure), he views theology as the analysis of religious discourse (its vocabulary and semantic relationships).

Kaufman's view of the word "God," and theological language in general, defines it mainly in terms of its use, that is, for humane purposes. Since all we know about God is

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130 Sharpe, 182.
131 Kaufman, *Relativism*, 60.
humanly constructed, “the meaning of this term [God] is to be found primarily in its practical import for life, its way of ordering society and the world and the demands it lays on selves and communities.” Thus, Kaufman finds the referent for God not in some metaphysical space, but in the ordinary lives of believers here on earth. The purpose of language is defined as usefulness, a pragmatic judgment of the way in which language fits into human life. If the practical purposes to which he adverts are as linguistically formed as any other language, then a pragmatic judgment is still an intra-linguistic one. In the application of this view of language to his theological method, Kaufman will come to see pragmatic considerations as a final step in a process of imaginative construction of religious language. These practical judgments will have a sort of heuristic value, pointing us towards a realization of the quality of our religious symbols, but not giving any final judgment of their ultimate truth (which Kaufman has already defined as unavailable).

Kaufman’s turn towards the practical dimension of language owes much to the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He cites Wittgenstein’s metaphor of “seeing-as” to support his view that language can provide differing interpretations of the same world. Pairing this contention with Wittgenstein’s argument against private language, Kaufman claims that language is a public form which structures our seeing of the world. In An Essay on Theological Method, Kaufman cites Wittgenstein’s comment that language is a “form of life,” in order to indicate that our lives are lived within language. Religious language, thus, forms our experience of God. Wittgenstein’s parenthetical conclusion that theology is like a grammar, the rules of the religious language-game, is adopted by Kaufman in his essay on theological method. In his later work, Kaufman uses Wittgenstein’s view of language to argue that religious language is a “worldview,” a device by which we orient ourselves to the world. Paradoxically, Kaufman also suggests that language helps us to draw a “world-picture,” a phrase uncannily like Wittgenstein’s early view of language as a picture.

The certainty with which we hold our knowledge, Kaufman argues, is given to us by the interlinked system of meanings, which we acquire at an early age. The network of

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132 Kaufman, God the Problem, 99.

133 See Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, remark 269, 94e and following.
knowledge which we have (such as “this is my hand”) is “grounded in our ‘practices’ which are themselves without further grounding.”

Kaufman emphasizes this view of language as a practice in order to avoid metaphysical speculation (which is something, interestingly, that Wittgenstein did not avoid).

Kaufman uses Wittgenstein’s thoughts on religion as a way of prodding reflection on religion today, and how we ought to think about God. Kaufman thinks that Wittgenstein, in his early as well as in his later writing, “rejects all claims that religions can provide us with any sort of absolute or metaphysical Truth.” This may be true, but I doubt that Wittgenstein thought that metaphysical truth did not then exist. Although Wittgenstein was a methodological atheist, he continued to have a sense of the mystical, a transcendent realm for which our language was simply inadequate. This position is evident not only in his early writings, but also in his later philosophical method, in which he constantly digs under the surface of our ordinary conceptions, searching for the way in which reality is not encompassed by our language, although reality bursts the bonds of language by burrowing like a parasite throughout the entire system of language, subverting it from within.

Everett Tarbox, Jr., argues that Kaufman, like Wittgenstein, viewed metaphysical language as illusion: “‘world-pictures’ or ‘mythologies’ which were originally projected by our linguistic usage and then internalized.” This is a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein, in my view. Wittgenstein viewed metaphysical conundrums as a phenomenon which occurred “when language is like an engine idling,” that is, when it was engaged in no practical use. The activity of picturing the world was by no means rejected by Wittgenstein, nor was the role


135 Ibid., 8.


137 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, remark 132, 51e.
of mythology. The early Wittgenstein consigned religious language to the realm of silence, since he thought it transcended the world. The later Wittgenstein by no means repudiated religion: he says "Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe!" 138 Tarbox misinterprets Wittgenstein by ignoring the flexible uses of language in the latter’s philosophy.

Kaufman’s analysis of the deep-lying structure of language can be seen as identifying the rules of a system by which people use language to give order to their reality. For the later Wittgenstein, language was very connected to “the actions into which it is woven.” 139 In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life,” 140 which implies that language as a form contains life within it. Kaufman’s theory of language wavers between viewing language as a self-sufficient system and locating a connection between language and an external world. The point, however, is not whether this form is open or closed, nor whether it is a form of actions or ideas. The form of language, in my view, is an aesthetic artifact which human beings construct for reasons of beauty as well as truth, neither of these being measured in terms of utility. Language is a form that affects us, it is true, but this function occurs by virtue of language being a double for our self, an intentional creation which, like an artistic work, has an internal integrity, and even a life of its own in its cultural reception and interpretation.

Phil Stoltzfus offers a more nuanced understanding of Kaufman’s use of Wittgenstein. Stoltzfus offers the metaphor of “performance practice” 141 (drawn from musicology) as a way of understanding the later Wittgenstein’s emphasis on language’s embodiment in forms of life. The measure of our use of language lies in the quality of the performance we give, like the interpretation of a musical score. Interestingly, Wittgenstein used the metaphor of music

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138 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 32e.
140 Ibid., 8e.
several times, even comparing language to a musical score,\textsuperscript{142} which is a system of signs representing sounds.

This view of Wittgenstein is similar to "speech-act" theories of language, especially as promulgated by J. L. Austin, although the latter focused on the effects of language in the social world, such as making promises, giving thanks, and so on.\textsuperscript{143} Wittgenstein called these activities "language-games," implying that they were activities in which human beings engaged as a matter of course, with some identifiable structure, but no clearly discernible commonality, other than that they were "played." It is important to note that Wittgenstein's language-games are not self-hermetically sealed worldviews, containers for thought. They are thought-experiments, which take a very limited subset of words and the actions in which they are placed. Often they are examinations of how language is learned, in order to understand how it is used. In this sense, Wittgenstein is examining the performance of language users, rather than the system of language which they implicitly know, but may be unable to articulate. By looking at the use of simple instances of language, Wittgenstein hoped to detect the rules upon which that use was based.

Stoltzfus is correct to connect language to the practices of the lives we lead. His use of the metaphor of performance reminds us that language is used in particular life-situations (although live performance is less common than recorded music intended for consumption, often for technological uses such as background "muzak" for soothing stressed shoppers). Life is lived within language, which is not to say that language forms thought, but that thought is conducted in the medium of language, as is life. Does this mean we live life like the characters in an opera? Thought is a function of language; without language it would not exist. But thoughts are different than language, and must be judged by different means. Language is an act that results in thought, and to confuse the originary act with the result is a serious mistake. Wittgenstein's later philosophy views language as a game, which is played in


a variety of life-situations, for distinct purposes. It is important to know the rules of the
game, but the game takes on a life of its own, as it is played (perhaps it is like living inside a
computer-generated “virtual” world).

The metaphor of performance for the practice of language is instructive, although
conversation is more like an “improv” jazz session than an orchestra concert. Intriguingly,
many religious rituals involve the performance of linguistic acts, often rehearsed and staged.
Kaufman’s theological method, though, is more like the composition of music than its
performance. Using the rules of the current style, he fashions imagistic scores which will
create humane performances. Kaufman also wishes to revise some of the fundamental theories
of composition, much like 20th century composers have constructed melodies with non-
traditional scales and tone rows. Or perhaps Kaufman is suggesting more radical experiments
in composition, like aleatory music (involving elements of chance). Perhaps he is simply
advocating a turn to composition for a popular audience, using elements drawn from folk
cultures to speak in the voice of the people (rock ‘n’ roll theology). My preference would be
for several current styles (along with the performance of classical Christian music), especially
the mixing of international sources into a sort of “world-beat” theology, as well as the
mystical minimalisms of composers who still use the classical tradition (such as John Tavener
or Henryk Gorecki). These styles do not require a radical reaction to previous methods of
music-making, although they do emphasize new aspects of the musical experience. The
metaphor of music illuminates the many aspects of language, including its diverse styles and
genres, its many social locations, as well as the many theoretical arguments about its structure
and meaning. To think of music as a practice reminds us that it, like language, has its home in
the lives of people who engage in these activities as a life-practice, in which language and
music are part of the fibre of a life well-lived.

Kaufman seems to have been misled by Wittgenstein’s comments about language-
games, and the rules by which speaking and thinking is conducted. One gets the impression
that Kaufman sees the set of language as a tightly ordered and circumscribed circle of activity,
in which meaning is laid down like the bricks in a path. Wittgenstein’s language-games, it
should be remembered, are a collection of thought-experiments which intend to uncover the
practices within which language is embedded. This does not mean that meaning is equivalent
to the behaviour which is produced by uttering a sentence (the perlocutionary sense, in which language causes an action). The point is that there are many extra-linguistic considerations involved in meaning (which is to say that not all human actions are signs, although they may all be related to signs). To see language as a practice means to see it as a form by which human beings act, but that form has a complex relation to action, since its internal structure has a certain independence from life. Similarly, life has a certain independence of the form of language, and thus can go on its merry way, while human thought whiles away its leisure in the castles it has constructed out of words. Language and life, however, also intersect, as thought and being cannot exist without each other, and have effects on each other.

Kaufman’s attempt to ground language in practice tends to ignore the multitude of ways in which language is actually used, not only in religious settings but also in other cultural activities. To judge literature by pragmatic means, for example, would be a rather short-sighted way of understanding the function of literature in human society. Language does not always have to be practical in order to give insight, nor does it always serve to orient people towards their context (it may imaginatively create an alternative context, or an ideal framework by which to judge existence). Religious language, it seems to me, transforms the world, by being a sign of God’s grace (completing the natural order of meaning).

In my view, an insistence upon language as a practice is vital to an understanding of the ways in which language intersects with all sorts of human behaviour. To see language as a practice, though, is not simply to evaluate it in terms of its consequences, especially on a purely behavioural level. Language is a mental practice, as well as a social one, and can build fantastic realms of thought which have little pragmatic utility (at least directly), and yet are immensely important and valuable, for aesthetic, imaginative, even realistic purposes. The practice of language takes place within the imaginative space of the mind, in a sort of double for the world. The mind can roam through its imaginative creations without entering the real world, and this exercise can have tremendous implications for the thinker (just as reading a novel can change one’s perceptions and experience of the world).
In this chapter, we have seen that the symbolic nature of language is vital to Kaufman's thought, since it allows thinkers to reflect on the world as a whole, by relating images to each other (rather than constantly having to compare them to the particular part of the world to which they refer). However, since symbols necessarily abstract and generalize from many perceptions, forming concepts which organize our experience, language guides our thoughts, by providing a ready-to-use order which can be applied to the world.

When Kaufman emphasizes the relations between images over their connection to the world, the system of language takes priority in his theory. Experience, then, becomes linguistic, since every cognitive activity is shaped by language. Thinking, since it is done in the medium of language, is a synthetic activity, the act of unifying the system of language. It is also an analytic tool, refining language into ever more precise images (clear and distinct). However, since all of this activity is done within language, coherence is the primary method of judgment, with pragmatic methods being a secondary consideration (since these can only be determined over a period of time). I have argued that Kaufman virtually identifies thought and language in this formulation, since they play the same epistemological role, that of unifying experience. The criteria for judging thought or language then become intra-linguistic, since thinking cannot function independently of language.

Religious language, based on this theory of language, has no private foundations, only a public structure of meaning which is interwoven into the surrounding culture. Theology has the task of reflecting on the system of religious language and the forms of life which it produces (the worlds it constructs). It must then clarify the ways in which religious language regulates experience, and prescribe the rules by which the construction of religious language occurs. In contrast to Kaufman's conclusions, though, this formulation implies that religious language is dependent upon a community which prescribes how it should be used. When Kaufman suggests that the meaning of religious language is determined by any of its uses, he is proposing a descriptive grammar, which conflicts with his own analysis of the prescriptive nature of the regulative concepts of religious language.

Religion is seen as a categorial scheme, in Kaufman's view. A few central concepts regulate the religious mind-set, organizing the believer's experience into a totality. Kaufman attempts to explicate a three-stage process by which Christian language constructs a thought-
world, a world-view which subverts our ordinary conceptual framework, and thus renders it, paradoxically, more human. I have argued that this view of religion does not adequately describe what believers are doing when they talk about God. In the next chapter, this question will be addressed, namely, the reference of religious language.
CHAPTER III
LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD

In his early thinking, Kaufman defines language as "the articulation of, and an instrument facilitating, the grasping and control of experience."\(^1\) Although a direct correspondence between language and reality is denied, he nevertheless thinks that language can "fit" reality in more or less sufficient ways. This fit, however, is measured by pragmatic criteria, rather than simply by "taking a good look" at how well language mirrors its environment. He holds that "its final justification must be its 'pragmatic' power in the historical process, made possible by its 'correspondence' with the realities of that process."\(^2\) However, he does not think that language corresponds exactly to that which it represents, since it abstracts from experience in order to create images and concepts.

I will argue that Kaufman's view of religious language is referential, since he thinks that the word "God" refers to something real. However, he denies a correspondence of theological concepts with their referent. We cannot adequately describe that reality, since it is a mere point of reference. I will argue that he could then profitably examine the images of God used within language, considering them iconic representations which point to God, a referent which transcends the sign.

In his later work, Kaufman concentrates on the function of the word "God." He sees its primary use as "orientation," by which he means positioning people towards the world in order to guide humans to live effectively and well. Theological language then becomes a worldview, a set of concepts that enables human beings to function in the world by viewing it

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through a conceptual grid. I will argue that this definition, however, has the effect of making “God” into a linguistic operator, a word that refers only within language.

III.A. Language as reference

Kaufman’s theory of language gives it two roles: it is not only a representation of the contents of consciousness (whether feelings or ideas), but also the form into which consciousness is pressed. The form of language is overlaid onto the representational activity, so that language takes on a life of its own, so to speak. He argues that “Only secondarily and reflexively can that symbolical world itself be made an object of investigation with a view to seeing whether our symbols and concepts appropriately ‘correspond’ to ‘reality.’” Language is what allows people to think about the world, but because all of our thinking is done within that linguistic framework, experience is not an immediate connection to the world, but mediated through language. I will show that he argues that the internal relations of the linguistic system generate meaning, rather than external reference. Experience does not refer directly to anything outside language, according to Kaufman’s theory. Rather, it refers to other elements of language, and by that process, orients the speaker to extra-linguistic reality. This section will deal mostly with Kaufman’s analysis of theological language, since it is in this context that he analyzes the reference of words. This procedure results in a confused theory of language, since he generalizes his analysis of religious language into his theory of language as a whole.

Questions about the reference of the word “God” are thus raised in Kaufman’s inquiry into language. If our ideas about God are completely shaped by their linguistic context, then it is not clear that the word “God” has any consistent and obvious meaning. Therefore, the traditional meaning of the word God cannot be accepted, since it assumes the ability to refer outside of experience. He argues that the word “‘God’ raises special problems of meaning because it is a noun which by definition refers to a reality transcendent of, and thus not

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3 Kaufman, _God the Problem_, 101.
locatable within, experience.”4 Kaufman still thinks that the word refers, but only within historical experience (that is, to the structures of thought as exemplified in language). The primary purpose of the word “God” (let alone the reality to which that word refers) is to unite the diverse elements of the linguistic system into an integrated whole, which has the effect of orienting people to the world. The word “God” is not descriptive, but it still performs an essential cognitive function. Unfortunately, he does not distinguish between metaphysical symbols and other types of language, but considers all language to be inadequate, even misrepresenting the world by abstracting from particular details.

III.A.1. The metaphorical nature of language

The metaphorical nature of language is identified by Kaufman as the principal cause for its misinterpretation. He argues that people are confused by the way in which metaphors refer to reality, and, by taking them literally, reify the metaphor into an existing thing. He argues that “to regard a metaphor as referring (without reifying it) is to take it as indicating something real, . . . (so that it can justifiably be said to ‘symbolize’ or ‘represent’ the reality concerned), but it is not to regard this reality as a straightforward exemplification or instantiation of the content or imagery of the metaphor.”5 Why does he use the word “represent?” This notion implies that there is some similarity between the concept and the thing to which it refers. Perhaps he is only talking about religious language, suggesting that “our traditional theological symbols by themselves do not enable us to grasp precisely what it is to which we are actually referring here.”6

However, Kaufman suggests that no language is adequate to its referent. He argues that “because of the abstractness of every sign (accentuated by its supposed fixity of meaning) it is inappropriate to think of it as capable of representing exactly anything in the continuous

4 Ibid., 7.
5 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 331.
6 Ibid., 330.
flux of experience. . . Since every symbol has its own distinctive richness and fullness that is different from what it symbolizes . . . in the nature of the case all our symbolizations always misrepresent.” He suggests that even at the descriptive level of language, we are always misinterpreting the world when we speak, as much as we try to depict it accurately. In his laudable attempt to de-mystify language, with its power to deceive its users into thinking they have grasped its referent, Kaufman denies language its capacity to reach out to the world. In the process, he fails to distinguish between metaphorical language and literal language. Since metaphors juxtapose and (ideally) keep in tension two concepts, any literalization which reduces that relation to an equivalence should justly be criticized. This misunderstanding of metaphor, however, is not a reification (making the metaphor into a thing), but rather identifying the two things that the metaphor relates conceptually in order to compare them (their similarities and differences).

Kaufman emphasizes the capacity of language to order experience, to the point that he suggests that no language can adequately represent reality. He argues against “taking the content of a symbol (or image or word) to be a proper description or exact representation of a particular reality or being.” He calls this the reification of words, making them into things instead of ideas. He accuses this practice of making an idol of language. His argument is iconoclastic, seeing no linguistic image as corresponding exactly to its referent, rather than allowing the iconic function of language to symbolize or represent.

In his latest work, Kaufman argues that “this symbolic conception or picture has itself been defined and shaped in many respects by the metaphors and images, and even the

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7 Kaufman, God—Mystery—Diversity, 178.

8 While I do not agree with Sallie McFague when she argues that “all perception and interpretation is metaphorical—that is, indirect (seeing or interpreting ‘this’ as ‘that’),” I do agree that the indirect constructions of metaphor “are not heuristic fictions but discoveries of some aspect of the structure of reality” (Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 132).

9 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 330.
grammar and syntax, of the language in and through which it is articulated.” This phrase repeats his early contention that the grammar of language shapes the thinking of the speaker. More important, however, are the actual metaphors and images that are central to the religious language. He emphasizes that these are only symbols, which to him means that they are not to be taken literally, that is, as referring to anything directly. Perhaps he means that, as David Tracy argues, “metaphor [is] not merely rhetorical and decorative substitution for the true-as-literal meaning.” If this is the case, they could not be translated into a direct description. Their meaning lies only in the relation between images, and indicates a reality that cannot be ostensively defined.

If the references of language never get outside the web of language (and this is implied by the dictum that language forms thought), then language is a strange sort of tool indeed. It is a tool that shapes thought, through the very process of expressing or representing that thought. Kaufman’s theory implies that language is a tool somewhat like a computer program: it processes the information our bodies receive, and dictates (like a ghost inside the machine) what our bodies should do about this confusing welter of data, in order to survive. However, even in a computer program, some language represents the world external to the machine, and must do so in a reasonably accurate way, in order for the computer to manipulate its environment.

Kaufman could improve his theory of language by paying attention to the various forms of language, such as the aesthetic forms of literature. By focusing primarily on epistemological problems in language, his theory of language suffers from a lack of breadth. His view of religious language does encompass many genres of linguistic activity, from the scientific through the artistic (the latter is briefly addressed by him on several occasions). The ways in which different language uses intersect is one of the most fascinating aspects of human existence, and one wishes Kaufman would spend more time dealing with specific

10 Kaufman, God—Mystery—Diversity, 134.
interfaces between concrete uses of language, such as definitions of human being in
anthropology and biology (especially areas such as genetic engineering).

III.A.2. Theology as mental construct

In religious language, Kaufman argues, the metaphorical character of language takes
precedence. He takes the position that “the referent of the word ‘God’ cannot be indicated
ostensively in any ordinary way.”12 Because higher-level concepts are integrations of lower
levels of language, built up by imaginative construction, they do not refer to anything directly.
This means that the word “God” “denotes for all practical purposes what is essentially a
mental or imaginative construct.”13 Only the meaning (the sense) of the word “God” can be
examined, not its referent. It is as if the referential aspect of the word “God” never achieves its
intended end; the word is a signifier without a signified, to use the terminology of
structuralism. In a more familiar linguistic terminology, it is a word with an identifiable sense,
but only a posited reference.

This mental construct is given a unique shape in Kaufman’s theory. He distinguishes
between the “real” God and the “available” God. The real God, according to Kaufman, “must
always remain a transcendent unknown, a mere point of reference.”14 This aspect of the idea
of God is an eternal mystery, containing a transcendent referent that can never be identified.
The available God is our stock of images and concepts about God, but all of these symbols
make “the peculiar formal claim to be inadequate to the real referent in a way entirely unique
among the words in Western languages.”15 Because this aspect of the idea of God has no
identifiable referent, the semantic structure has the effect of doubling back upon itself, and
calling into question every articulation of the concept of God. This reference is only posited

12 Kaufman, God the Problem, 82.
13 Ibid., 86.
14 Ibid., 86.
15 Ibid., 95.
within our historical human language, and always transcended by the infinite reality of the
"real God."

Although Kaufman considers the real reference of "God" to be impossible, he does
expend a considerable amount of energy in analyzing the available God, making suggestions
about the best way in which to conceptualize God. Definitions of God (language about God)
are the only referents we have for this strange idea (and so they double as references and
referents). They are a "structure of meaning . . . carried in the culture as the meaning of
'God'."\(^{16}\) This meaning is available because "there is an empirical, worldly, describable side
to faith in God, namely the attitudes, values, institutions and beliefs which are engendered by
and with such faith, and the available God himself."\(^{17}\) This reasoning is inevitably circular,
since belief in God is the only available referent for this concept, which intends an ostensive
reference, but can never complete it. The reference of "God" is never achievable (i.e. the
referent of the word is not accessible) because "even the distinction between the real and the
available God is necessarily a characteristic of the available God."\(^{18}\) That is, the idea of a real
God, transcendent in every way, unimaginable and mysterious, is itself a human idea, subject
to every form of critique that applies to any other idea of God. The real God is a complete
unknown, our only knowledge about the real God being that such a 'being' (this word used
only in an analogical sense) relativizes our existence by being a context transcending our own
meager thoughts and actions. The available God, Kaufman argues, consists of our symbols
and concepts of such a transcendent 'thing' (in his later work, Kaufman prefers to use words
such as "principle" to avoid the notion of a metaphysical substance).

In *The Theological Imagination*, certain concepts are singled out by Kaufman as
central to the structure of language. He argues that "the terms or foci, which structure the
framework and give it its peculiar pattern of meaning, in fact function only within and as a

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 98.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 113.
part of the framework itself.” The central terms thus are meta-linguistic, referring only within the system of language, and in fact referring to the system of language by ordering it. He concludes that “God is present to us and known by us primarily and fundamentally in idea, in symbol, rather than in person or in fact—if we mean by the latter the presence of a directly and empirically perceivable object.” God is a symbol, a word which signifies by means of its connotations rather than its denotations.

Similarly, Kaufman argues that there is nothing to compare our framework with, since our framework encompasses all of our thought: “Since the terms and images which articulate these world-conceptions or world-pictures are never simply representations gained in direct perception, they should not be understood as directly descriptive of objects (of experience).” Even our sensations and perceptions are integrated into this framework. If no sensations are direct and unmediated by language, then the “world-picture” is not a representation of the world, nor even an interpretation of it, but is itself a world within which the speaker of a language exists.

Despite his statements which seem to describe language as a self-contained system, Kaufman contends that the central categories of religious language have some concrete reference. He argues that “such symbols as ‘creator’ and ‘lord’ refer to something ‘real’—for us today this is the evolutionary and historical processes which produced us.” In his later work, Kaufman identifies the expression of God’s will with “actual cosmic, vital and historical powers or forces at work in the world.” Kaufman is careful to distinguish the divine agent and that agent’s acts in the world, always including the caveat that we can never know exactly the causal connections between God and particular aspects of or events in history. God’s ways are above ours, and human wisdom cannot penetrate the mind of God. However, the claim

19 Kaufman, Theological Imagination, 28.
20 Ibid., 71.
21 Ibid., 28.
22 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 330.
23 Ibid., 401.
that God acts in the world is an article of faith for Kaufman, and so it is necessary to think about how that can happen, and to try to disentangle the acts of God from those of other forces.

In his latest work, Kaufman argues that "the phrase 'ultimate point of reference' indicates the conceptual function of God-talk, not the content of the idea of God: the symbol or category 'God' provides a unifying focus for attention, devotion, and service." Kaufman has divided the meaning of the word "God" into two aspects: content and function. The content, as we saw in the previous section, is now defined by Kaufman as "cosmic forces." Although this is rather vague, it hardly matters, since the function of the word trumps any content that is applied to the word (which leads me to ask, why not use much more definite metaphors, if their literal reference is going to be denied anyway?).

Some critics see Kaufman as denying any external reference to religious language. Kevin Sharpe contends that Kaufman's theological concepts have no referentiality, only function: "Kaufman thinks there is a real God, but not corresponding to any concepts we might have and definitely not describable. Real is being used in another sense to that normally used. To use language about God is, rather, to speak about a way of life." This charge is misplaced, I think, because Kaufman does not refrain from talking about the content of the idea of God.

It would be more accurate to say that Kaufman does not think that religious ideas represent accurately the mystery of God. Griffin argues that "Kaufman often makes the more sweeping denial that none of our ideas, even those derived from revelation, can be thought to correspond at all to the divine reality itself." In other words, Kaufman thinks that language about God refers, but does not adequately represent, the reality of God. He is trying to make a distinction between concepts that represent by corresponding to reality, and those which represent by symbolizing that reality. Perhaps this distinction is equivalent to the difference


25 Sharpe, 182.

26 Griffin, 555.
between literal and metaphorical language: the former describes directly, while the latter does so indirectly, by combining words into unusual patterns.

Other critics, such as Don Wiebe, argue that Kaufman is equivocal, if not self-contradictory, in that he hesitates between two views of language: the descriptive and the conative (the view that language only indicates an intention to act in a certain way). For example, at times Kaufman argues that the symbol “God” has a real referent, at other times, that “God . . . is an ‘anchor-symbol’ for a stance taken.”27 Kaufman sidesteps the problem of the reference of the word “God” by focusing on its function within language. This strategy is not without its problems, the primary one being that “God” seems to have two functions within language. The idea of “God” must be constructed by each person in order to be authentic, and yet it must also hold all ideas together by orienting the entire set of language. These two meanings contradict each other in Kaufman’s theory.

Bruce McCormack also recognizes that “the tension (contradiction?) in Kaufman’s thought is that he is both denying the referential character of God-talk and at the same time, affirming that the symbol ‘God’ refers to a metaphysically real ground of reality.”28 If Kaufman means that “God” is a symbol which has a special way of referring, this would answer McCormack’s critique (although Kaufman still would have to specify what special sort of reality “God” this special reference depicts—a state of affairs? an event?). In the end, McCormack sides with the conative view, that “to treat the symbol ‘God’ as referential in this way [as an object of experience] is to involve oneself in a category error.”29 However, he also notes the difficulties inherent in maintaining this view, since Kaufman also wishes the word “God” to have some objective status. In my view, Kaufman would be more consistent if he would develop a metaphorical view of religious language, in which it does not refer directly, but rather re-describes reality in the light of God’s being.

28 McCormack, 441.
29 Ibid., 438.
III.A.3. Reification of language

Kaufman views all theories of language through his axiom that all of our thinking is shaped by language, and that language orients us to the world. He criticizes other theologians for reifying language, that is, identifying language with its corresponding referent, thus making words into things. For example, in a 1983 review of Robert Scharlemann’s book, *The Being of God*, Kaufman accuses the author of a tendency “to reify words or meanings in such a way that they simply are what they are—that is, they are neither more nor less than what the author takes them to be—and there is no license to conceive them otherwise. Language is taken to have certain fixed meanings which we can in no way tamper with or transform; indeed, language is a kind of subject or power or agent that controls us, not we language.”30 In this review, the point at issue is the definition of God, and Kaufman is quite right to argue that this definition does fluctuate to a certain degree (although, as he admits, there are limits to this fluctuation). But Kaufman is wrong to argue that all language fluctuates, that there are no fixed meanings at all. Much language is quite well-defined and determinate, and unless it is shown to be misleading and incorrect, then it should be retained. Instead of criticizing incorrect definitions of God, Kaufman labels all theological language as misleading in principle.

Kaufman claims that if we “reify our symbols—that is, use them as if they in fact adequately represented what they purport to represent, as if there were things that directly or precisely ‘corresponded’ to them—our supposed knowledges will actually get in the way of our living fittingly and well.”31 Here Kaufman implies that reification is the same as correspondence, thus denying language the ability to refer clearly to anything at all.


William Alston argues that Kaufman’s proposal contains a “massive confusion of truth status and epistemic status.” When Kaufman critiques the notion of truth as possession, for example, he should speak of knowledge. Alston contends that “The truth of a belief or statement simply depends on whether what the belief or statement is about is as it is said (believed) to be; and this cannot be anyone’s possession, or be infallible or indubitable, or anything else of the sort.” Truth is a function of language, as Wittgenstein noted, but this means that it is a result of a judgment about language, not a content or essence within language.

The mistake which Kaufman criticizes is misleadingly called reification, for it is not the attribution of thing-like properties to certain words, but simply the confusion of the function of abstract and concrete words in language. Abstract words summarize experience, by creating concepts which represent general aspects of experience. They can become concretized, and misinterpreted as themselves having concrete referents. But this does not reify the abstract word (making a word into a thing, as Kaufman would have it). The abstract word simply becomes mistaken for a concrete word. This does not mean that abstract words do not refer to things; they simply refer to them in a more general way, not being identified with any particular object, but with general qualities of objects.

Kaufman is correct to identify religious language as abstract and not concrete. The peculiar quality of these symbols is their analytic nature, their axiomatic character which makes them definitions not subject to other foundations. The power of religious images lies in their ability to weave their way through the rest of linguistic culture, fashioning complicated structures of implication and inference. The analysis and control of religious metaphors is therefore of the utmost importance, for incorrect and dangerous conclusions can all too easily be drawn. The danger, however, is not the reification of religious language, but its deification. To mistake language about God for God’s reality in itself is the mistake which Kaufman should critique, not the making of language into a thing (if that is in fact possible). Our


33 Ibid., 50.
language about God should be iconic, pointing to God, but not idolatrous, not replacing 
God’s mysterious reality, able to disrupt our lives as well as uphold us.

III.A.4. Religious realism

Kaufman describes language as depicting the world yet not completely corresponding 
to it. In *The Theological Imagination*, Kaufman argues that “we organize or build up a 
symbolic map or model of the context within which we live and of our place within it. With 
the help of this map we understand who we are and what we can do.” Language is a 
vantage-point from which to get our bearings, so to speak, rather than a world-picture. 
Kaufman focuses on the function of language almost to the exclusion of its content.

Kaufman talks about thought as a “world-picture” in *In Face of Mystery*. This 
terminology indicates a focus on the content of language, rather than the activity of forming 
language (the symbolizing activity of forming images). This linguistic structure is intimately 
related to a whole variety of life-experiences and situations. The central terms serve to unify 
and order the whole system of language, in order to picture the world. He remarks that “the 
basic structure and character of a world-picture are determined largely by a few fundamental 
categories which give it shape and order, and these are connected and interrelated in various 
ways by the wider vocabulary of terms and symbols used in ritual and meditation, ideology 
and story, which provide concreteness and fill in details of an overall picture.” All of these 
elements together provide the speaker of a language-system with orientation to the world. A 
comprehensive system is built up whereby the whole world is interpreted by the symbol 
system.

Fritz Buri describes Kaufman’s view of language as follows: “On a map he designates 
individual points of meaning by means of which he thinks he is able to reach the goal of 
complete realization of meaning. . . . But not only does this destination lie outside the map, 
but with the intelligibility of these milestones he runs the risk that the map which he inscribes

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34 Kaufman, *Theological Imagination*, 73.

35 Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 41.
renders only an imaginative landscape of longing and does not provide access 'to the things as they really are.' In other words, Kaufman does not convincingly show that the linguistic map which he provides accurately depicts the religious landscape, let alone the secular universe.

In the case of religious language, Kaufman states quite abruptly: "Religious traditions . . . claim to know too much—claim to know more, and to know it with more certainty—than is actually possible for us finite human beings." Is this protest against religious knowledge a repudiation of knowledge in general? Kaufman's own view of the world is intended to be realist in some sense, as he attempts to outline the sort of world (including its mysterious dimensions) in which we live. His theological method would seem to start with the accepted knowledge of a culture, in its conception of the world. This would imply that scientific descriptions of the world are a starting point for theology. However, his continued refusal to allow the reference of language to correspond to an extra-linguistic reality qualifies an easy acceptance of the claims of science to produce an objective account of the world. If science is just another construction of a 'world,' though, why start there rather than any other place? Kaufman's view of language would seem to result in a free-for-all in claims to knowledge, if all language misrepresents.

In a 1993 article on the empirical realisms of Bernard Loomer and Bernard Meland, Kaufman fulminates against the use of realism in theology: "Epistemological realisms, especially when strongly held, do not encourage the wariness that is necessary for truly sensitive theological work—concerned, as it must be, with what always remains mysterious." Kaufman seems to be confusing realism with fundamentalism, in which


37 Kaufman, God—Mystery—Diversity, 173.

38 See, for example, Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 322.

religious language is thought to mirror God's reality exactly, or to come directly from God. A realist view can be critical, in its openness to allow new visions and discoveries of reality to modify its language.

Kaufman attempts to make clear his charge against realisms in theology by arguing that they "take the primary significance of this symbol [God] to be its (supposed) metaphysical or ontological reference rather than its orienting function." He is actually arguing against correspondence theories of truth. His definition of language relies, in contrast, on instrumentalist theories of language, which emphasize its capacity as a tool modifying the world (including the self), rather than as a mirror reflecting reality (or the self). Kaufman also wishes to speak of the real, but he claims that language does not picture reality, but is a tool for orienting thought towards reality.

Many theologians have noted that the word "God" does not refer to an object like other beings, but Kaufman goes further than this. McCormack notes that Kaufman "asserts at the outset that theology has been characteristically guilty of treating the image/concept of God as though it referred to a structure or reality that was there and given (as objects of experience are there and given)." This comment identifies Kaufman's difficulty with the traditional notion of revelation, that God gives some ideas to us from the great beyond. But his attempt to justify a revision of the idea of revelation is based on an inadequate view of language. To say that God is not an object of experience does not imply that we construct the idea of God out of nothing.

Kaufman criticizes the act of elevating concrete words to the status of abstract words: certain social or biological ideas (like fatherhood, or the human spirit) become imbued with a divine aura (the deification of words!), falsely general because their particularity is transported into the abstract, thus becoming imperialistic. Frederick Ferré notes that Kaufman "insists again and again on the incapacity of any human mind to know the ultimate. All of our theories

40 Ibid., 159-60.

41 McCormack, 437-8.
are our own constructions and subject to all the flaws of our finitude and mortality."  

Kaufman is quite correct to criticize this action, but he fails to distinguish good abstractions from bad ones, considering all past religious formulations, for example, as parochial. If his process of imaginative construction is the only acceptable process of abstraction, then Kaufman's God is no less parochial than any other. Religious formulations are inevitably parochial and abstract, absolute to their adherents, but this does not mean that they are necessarily authoritarian or imperialistic. I would argue that these tendencies are misconstruals of theological talk (incorrect inferences, incompatible with the rules for good Christian discourse).  

Kaufman's attempt to locate these human tendencies as a necessary part of religious imaginative construction merely perpetuates the problem. Far better to reform religious practices, correcting authoritarianism and imperialism, thereby purifying the current religious practice.

III.A.5. Meta-language

As an attempt to assist religious thinkers, Kaufman makes a distinction between ordinary knowledge and metaknowledge, the latter being "knowledge and understanding we may come to have of the character and limits of this ordinary knowledge."  

He argues that "metaknowledge involves awareness that all our first-order knowledges are at best approximate but useful for guiding everyday life. That is, they have pragmatic utility but cannot claim metaphysical validity, they do not tell us 'how things really are' in the world."  

Here Kaufman falls into the very fallacy which he is trying to prevent, namely identifying metaphysical language as corresponding to a reality other than, or outside of, our historical

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42 Ferré, 364.
43 See Kathryn Tanner for an analysis of misconstruals of theological talk in God and Creation, 115.
44 Kaufman, God—Mystery—Diversity, 177.
45 Ibid., 177.
reality. Initially, he had implied that metaphysical language merely defines the limits of first-order knowledge, but here he suggests that “metaphysical validity” tells us “how things really are,” rather than acknowledging that this is the job of first-order knowledge.

His solution is to propose that “the common experience can stand over against us as a standard in terms of which we can check and correct our insights and interpretations.”

Kaufman seems to be denying his earlier emphasis on the interpenetration of language and thought in experience. If our experience is formed, interpreted and articulated by language, it cannot stand over against our language as an external standard by which that language is measured. I will show in the next section that Kaufman eventually comes to define experience as an element within language.

If such general categories become objectified, becoming identified with the very nature of things, Kaufman argues that they are idolatrous, confusing the sign for the referent. However, Kaufman makes the opposite mistake, of separating the sign from the referent. His analysis of the form and function of language ignores the real issues of language, by analyzing its surface rather than its depth. George Lindbeck takes issue with Kaufman’s assertion that theologians have for too long been unconscious of the constructive character of religious language, thus reifying theological words as objective. He comments that many theologians throughout history “were agnostic about . . . the sense in which our ideas objectively correspond or do not correspond to the divine being.” I would argue that the gnostic danger is precisely the tendency to claim some sort of private method by which correspondence between our ideas and God’s reality is assured. But a public religious language must still maintain that a connection is possible between religious signs and their referent. Theology can never do away with iconic language, that is, language that points and images (using human and finite forms), yet insists that the referent is greater than the sign.

If language is the medium of our thoughts (and not only our ideas, but also our sensations and perceptions), then it is difficult to see how we can ever judge our language by direct comparison with an external reality. Sharpe asks: “If theological language is not


47 Lindbeck, review of *An Essay on Theological Method*, 264.
descriptive, then how can we talk about ‘truth’ in a theological context?" Kaufman redefines truth to be an ideal which is imaginatively constructed, a purely human norm. Although truth is constructed, it can be fabricated in such a way as to include reference to norms external to the human, such as material existence. By emphasizing the constructed character of language, Kaufman has shifted attention away from the things people do with that construction. In the next section, a concrete example of theological language will be examined, in order to illustrate how I think analysis of such language should be conducted. The content of the idea of God should be evaluated, without reducing this discussion to a question of epistemology.

The real issue for Kaufman is the necessity which these words seem to have, the way in which they seem to be the only logical way to refer to reality. It would be possible to deny the necessity of such abstract categories, but still maintain that they refer to the world in a contingent way, being connected to reality through the process of cognition. Kaufman’s categorial concepts, however, are the presuppositions of any experience. Kaufman argues that since categorial concepts are constructed by the imagination, they are not a priori, not even synthetically so, as in Kant. So Kaufman’s categorial concepts are more like hypotheses than abstract representations, since the referents of these concepts cannot be directly perceived. He thus posits them as fundamental ideas which form the foundation of experience. Like Kant’s categories, they allow us to experience, since they form the presuppositions of all experiencing.

III.A.6. God as limit

In his early work, Kaufman argued that the traditional primary analogy of ‘being’ for God was inadequate. He preferred to work with the analogy of ‘person’, although he limited the use of this analogy to the limits which another person represents. In personal communication, a person must choose to reveal his or her true existence to another. Although his early use of this analogy was rather subjective because of his expressive view of language,

48 Sharpe, 181.
in his later thinking, Kaufman views the idea of “limit” as the best analogy for the way the word “God” functions. He denies, however, that God speaks: the word “God” represents a “limiting idea” which cannot be spoken over (we could never recognize speech from beyond the limit).

In *God the Problem*, Kaufman argues that the idea of the “real” God is a logical consequence of the idea of human limitation. We are limited on every side (physically, socially and morally) and it stands to reason that there must be some thing that limits us, some empirical reality to which the idea of limit corresponds. Kaufman states the argument as follows: the ultimate Limit (God) is a “generalization from such occasional immediate experiences of limitation to the total situation of the self.” From the general situation of human finitude, Kaufman concludes that it is necessary to posit an ultimate Limit, that by its very nature acts as a limit of finite human nature.

Griffin argues that “There is no easy way to see any causal connection between the ultimate Limit and the particular limits; for one thing, since there is no special experience of the ultimate Limit, there is no experiential basis for thinking of it as an act at all. Also, Kaufman has provided no way to conceive a causal relation between God and the ultimate Limit, and now has even renounced this effort.” However, Kaufman’s point is not that we actually experience an Ultimate Limit, but that the idea of limit gives rise to the idea of God. Griffin states it as follows: “Unlike our encounters with finite selves, which involve only a single mediation (noises, gestures, etc.), the encounter with God rests upon a double mediation: God is not directly encountered but is known through the mediation of the ultimate Limit, which is in turn not immediately experienced…”

Don Wiebe contends that it is unjustified to argue from the existence of personal limits to the idea of an Ultimate Limit. He argues that the idea of limit is for Kaufman “the result of inference. It depends entirely upon a generalisation from occasional immediate experiences of

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50 Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 53.

51 Griffin, 565.
limitation to the Ultimate Limit(er)." Further, Kaufman chooses to interpret this limit in terms of a personal analogy, the limits another person represents to my own person. This choice is completely unjustified for Wiebe, who suggests that "there seems to be much good reason to prefer the physical limit model in view of its, admitted, primacy in our experience." Kaufman might argue that the moral limit model is every bit as primary.

The nub of Wiebe's argument lies in whether the idea of limit can be applied outside experience: "if the ordinary experience of limitation in everyday life is insufficient to draw our minds to at least assume an Ultimate Limiter as possible . . . then there can be no reason for making the assumption at all." Wiebe denies the logical necessity of arguing from the idea of experiential limits to that of an Ultimate limit. He acknowledges that such a move could be made on the basis of religious experience of such an Ultimate Limit, although he notes that this argument has its own problems.

Wiebe holds that the question as to "whether any meaning or significance can be found that transcends the meaning to be found in the world of our ordinary experience" should be answered negatively. Kaufman, however, holds to a distinction between empirical ideas and categorical ideas, the latter which are derived from experience, but do not have a direct referential aspect. In essence, Kaufman is arguing that the idea of limit itself implies a distinction between reality and what is "other" than reality, some external reality which sets boundaries (this is a difficult distinction to hold, since the definition of reality would seem to contain everything that is).

By limiting the idea of an Ultimate Limit to an empirically testable hypothesis, Wiebe ignores the vital distinction between the sense of the idea of an Ultimate Limit and its possible reference. Kaufman's argument about an Ultimate Limit is not intended to be an empirical demonstration of an object corresponding to this idea. In fact, he quite rightly denies that this

52 Wiebe, 194.
53 Ibid., 197.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 192.
would be possible. His philosophical analysis of the idea of limit shows that if there is an Ultimate Limit, it would not be empirically available (otherwise it would not be ultimate). Here Kaufman's argument should end with an eternal agnosticism, in which no evidence can decide the question of the existence of an ultimate limit. In Kaufman's later work, he takes Kant's route, of taking the "normative" model of limit (i.e. ethical laws) as evidence of the necessity of the idea of God, if not the existence of an Ultimate Limit (now conceived in moral terms).

This argument might be illuminated with reference to Roman Jakobson's distinction between the various aspects of language. He constructs a diagram of the elements of a situation of communication:

```
  context
  message
  addresser -------> addressee
     contact
     code
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The intentions of the speaker are an important part of the communication situation, and information about the meaning of the message is located in the speaker. The reference of the message is related to the context of the communication, and is important for connecting the message to the common environment of the interlocutors.

Jakobson then proceeds to elaborate the linguistic theories involved with each aspect of the situation of communication, with a diagram that parallels the previous one:

```
  referential
  poetic
  emotive -------> conative
     phatic
     metalingual
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The conative dimension of language, he argues, is connected with the addressee (it is displayed in the vocative and imperative, which are not subject to truth tests, but are addresses in the second person). The metalingual dimension has to do with information about the

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message: it describes the nature of the message. The message itself is analyzed by the
science of poetics: the method of interpretation of relations and structure of the message itself.

Kaufman obviously places major emphasis on the poetics of religious language,
whereas Wiebe would locate most of the meaning of the message in the referential aspect.
Wiebe accuses Kaufman of wavering between the conative and referential aspects of language.
I think that Kaufman simply conflates the conative and referential: the attitude of the religious
believer is identified as the reference of religious language. This seems to me to be an unhappy
solution, if not circular. Whatever experiential aspects of life religious language refers to (and
this perhaps is where the argument really lies), it does not refer to the psychological state of
the believer (while these emotions and attitudes are not epiphenomenal, they are viewed by the
believer as benefits associated with God’s action).

III.A.7. A suggestion

Kaufman’s distinction between the real and the available God has been maintained
consistently throughout his career. Although he insists that the “real God” is undefined, I
suggest that Kaufman’s formulation of the idea of the “real God” be understood using the
mathematical notion of a variable. His characterization of the “real God” as an “unknown” is a
little misleading, since it implies that we know nothing about the real God. Kaufman does not
intend this meaning, and he goes on to describe the “real God” as an ‘x’, which implies the
mathematical meaning of an ‘unknown’, that is, a variable used in an equation to gain
knowledge about some quantity. If we understand the real God as an ‘x’, then the available
God becomes all of the ‘values’ that we can justifiably ascribe to that ‘x’.

The notion of God as a limit need not act as a formulaic ‘x’, an unknown which only
believes our attempts at understanding the riddle of human existence in an infinite, expanding
cosmos. Kaufman is correct to identify God as a limit to human existence, but human beings
are also a limit to God’s existence. Human freedom represents a sort of social contract; God’s
rights do not extend past our noses. The metaphor of limit does not necessarily imply
inaccessibility, or an absolute dualism. In calculus, the notion of limit is used to solve
functions which approach a certain value but never reach it. Some would question whether human existence is like a hyperbola (and Kaufman accuses religious language of hyperbole).

To extend Kaufman’s reasoning, all of the images and notions we have of God are substituted into some grand equation (a “theory of everything”) in order to produce a result for this calculation.\(^{57}\) Kaufman’s method is essentially a formal algorithm (a mathematical function) intended to yield some sort of knowledge about the entities which such equations describe. As Kaufman continues to draw out the implications of the theory that language forms thought, he will come to analyze the algorithm of language (i.e. the structure of the idea of God), and the variables it uses (talk about God), rather than that to which the ‘unknowns’ refer. In his view, language produces thought and knowledge (which are fleeting), rather than considering language as a repository of thought and knowledge. Language is a sort of material substratum for thought, which is a spiritual substance (meaning is of the order of spirit).

The strength of Kaufman’s theological suggestions lies in the imaginative synthesis he is able to make of a variety of disparate proposals. His analysis of the image/concept of God, for example, results in the formation of an abstract entity which unites several strands of thinking about God. It should be noted, though, that this conjunction of ideas depends on several other theological activities, such as careful reading of the primary texts, sympathetic interpretation of authors from different time periods and social locations, and a broad understanding of the cultural and social conventions and language of today’s culture. Not all of these are imaginative undertakings, in the synthetic sense, but some are receptive activities, in which a thinker is steeped in the tradition and experience of cultures both past and present, sacred and secular, critical and authoritative. Kaufman’s own synthesis is built upon an

\(^{57}\) Kathryn Tanner uses the analogy of a mathematical equation as well, arguing that rules for theological discourse, “Like mathematical functions or formulae of several variables, they work to produce theological ‘equations’ (first-order statements) of various sorts depending upon the concepts, vocabulary, ontological claims etc. of a particular theological context that are substituted within them” \((\text{God and Creation in Christian Theology, 27})\). Kaufman’s theological equation is a second-order construct, which yields a first-order result (when you substitute values into his rule for discourse, you calculate the result of the equation, and get a value representing something in the world). Kaufman’s rules are thus positive, in that they yield concrete instances of theological talk, whereas Tanner’s rules are negative, seeking only to limit incorrect discourse (see p. 29).
extensive exposure to the languages of philosophy, sociology and science, and he would do well to delineate the various sorts of cognitive activity that go on in those fields, as well as in theology.

If religious language is an imaginative construction, then it is a convention agreed upon by a community. Kaufman's analysis ignores the complex dynamics of the creation of public agreements about how to talk about God. In addition, he forgets the role of tradition in the preservation of past ways of talking about God, and the present integration of the tradition into a current framework. A religious worldview, even when it is conscious of its constructed character, would seek to construct language which maintains continuity with the historical processes in which it is embedded.

In this section, we have seen that Kaufman identifies language as metaphorical in character, thus misrepresenting reality in the nature of the case. Since symbols differ from that which they purport to represent (by generalizing and abstracting the myriad of details offered by sensation), they are not an exact duplicate of reality. Note that Kaufman applies this theory to all of language, not only religious language. This position is a result of a lack of attention to the receptive side of the imagination, as I have argued in the first chapter. However, language is also seen as a map or model of reality, serving to orient the speaker to his or her environment. Although the world-pictures generated by language are not a reflection of reality, corresponding precisely to every detail, they do (or should) serve to connect the speaker to the external world. There is a considerable tension between Kaufman's repudiation of any sort of correspondence between symbols and the world, and his claims to construct a worldview that can be used to adequately view parts of the world. I have argued that this confusion arises primarily because of a misunderstanding of metaphor, which adds meaning to language by juxtaposing elements not ordinarily put together.

According to Kaufman's view of religious language, no language is adequate to represent God, since it is all constructed by human beings. This presents Kaufman with quite a quandary, though. If all language is constructed, is not all language about God idolatrous? If all images of God are crafted by human hands, then we cannot tell which images are better than others. Kaufman opts for a this-worldly judgment of images of God, namely, the practical
effects which they have on human behaviour and action. His emphasis on the constructed
nature of religious language brings him dangerously close to a technological view of the idea
of God, in which it acts solely according to the efficiency of its function in an artificial life. In
my view, religious language is more mystical, in the sense that it speaks iconically (i.e. in a
picturing way), but as a self-effacing reference (mindful of its context of ultimate silence). This
paradox has a linguistic, even an epistemological, function.

III.B. Language as worldview

In his later work, Kaufman views the function of language as orientation, and develops
the notion of worldview in order to characterize the form of language. He argues that for a
person perceiving the world, "it will be his ‘view’ of ‘the world’ more than ‘the world as it is
in itself’ (whatever that may mean) that determines in most significant ways his experience, his
attitudes, and his knowing."\(^{58}\) The worldview unites all of these mental activities into a
unified whole, which orients him towards the world, allowing him or her to experience in
particular ways. I will show that Kaufman’s emphasis on the symbolic nature of language
suggests that a worldview actually is the ‘world’ for the speaker of a particular language.

Kaufman’s worldview seems to be a self-contained system, rather than an
interpretation of the world, relative to a particular vantage point. For a speaker of theological
language, He asserts that “from within such a perspective, therefore, God is the most real
being.”\(^{59}\) Although the word “God” is for Kaufman a categorial concept, organizing the
mind-set, it is the most powerful word, and since it is interpreted personally, it becomes a real
presence for speakers of that mind-set. Nevertheless, it is language which gives the world its
reality. I will argue that people interact with that world by virtue of using language. This is not
to say that any language will do: the speaker lives in the real world, and must be oriented to
that world, so it is necessary to get the language right.

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\(^{58}\) Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 204.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 92.
III.B.1. Worldview as perspective

The primary meaning of human existence, for Kaufman, is to be found in the sociocultural matrix which human beings create, by way of language. This matrix of meanings connects humans to their bio-historical world, by orienting them within that context. He sees “human beings as sociocultural animals who gain orientation in life through imaginatively creating worldviews in terms of which they understand themselves and the overall context within which they live.”60 Kaufman’s view of language is embedded in his anthropology, a view of what human beings are and should be. Language acts so as to set humans in an ordered world; language causes the world to be sensible.

This idea of worldview may look rather like a structuralist ‘world’, in which language creates the world for the speaker. However, Kaufman’s notion of worldview is derived from his earlier work on Dilthey, who argued that different philosophical systems represented different Weltanschauungen, that is, different interpretations of life formulated in different historical situations. Dilthey argues that “world-views are not products of thought. They do not originate from the mere will to know . . . They emerge from our attitude to, and knowledge of, life and from our whole mental structure.”61 Kaufman’s formulation of the idea of worldview is somewhat more deliberate, since he characterizes imaginative construction as a willful activity, but his emphasis on the ways in which language forms our thoughts echoes Dilthey’s link between worldviews and mental structure.

Variations of these worldviews develop throughout history, none exactly identical: “the constructed worlds of different subjects (or different communities, or different epochs) are not one and identical. . . . One’s ‘world’ is in some sense a function of one’s ‘view’ and is thus relative to his psychological and historical situation.”62 A worldview situates one in the

60 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 38.
61 Rickman, ed., Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings, 141.
62 Kaufman, God the Problem, 203.
world, presumably the same world as others with different worldviews, but seen from a
different vantage point.

At times, Kaufman seems to imply that language becomes the very reality with which we have to deal, since all of our thinking is done within language. However, he maintains that a worldview is a third-order concept, presumably derived from the processes of perception and conceptualization (although Kaufman does not identify exactly what the first- and second-order concepts are). We know things by perceiving them and developing concepts about them, but we can only know what we know by virtue of the worldview that organizes these percepts and concepts.

Hugh Jones argues that Kaufman’s view is that “theology is the presentation of an interpretation, a point of view, a perspective, which takes in man, world and God.” Jones thinks that a perspective implies looking at the world from a particular spot, and thus not necessarily seeing everything that is possible to see. Thus, a perspective interprets the world, assessing what is in its line of sight, and perhaps extrapolating beyond one’s vision. Kaufman’s view uses the concepts of man, world and God in order to represent all of reality, as seen from one point of view.

If every cognitive act is part of an inter-related framework, how does this framework link to the external world? How do we compare our framework to reality if we cannot get outside of our framework? Kaufman insists that judgments are constructs synthesized from the framework of already-existing language, and thus wholly linguistic. But this judgment must be made from outside of our perspective, that is, it must not simply judge language internally. The act of comparing language to the world defines reality by setting language and reality side by side. It is not solely sensation, since it compares sensation and language, but it must compare language directly to the world. Judgment must reach out to the world in order to effectively make such a comparison. One cannot simply compare concepts, or even perceptions (linguicized sensations), to each other (for their consistency and completeness).

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63 Ibid., 203-5. He sees this as a development beyond Kant’s critical philosophy, which viewed ideas as constructs, but did not see them as relative.

64 Jones, 90.
Judgment implies a view of the world in its otherness, in order to pass a verdict on our concepts.

Can we not move around so as to try to see from someone else’s vantage point? We may never be able to get inside their head, but we can compare our views, by talking about them, and trying to agree on perceptual commonalities. The point of language is to communicate, based on common identifiers, signs indicating common reference points. Certainly we should check our observations of the world at every point, to make sure that they accurately describe the objects we perceive. However, Kaufman does not think that language corresponds to the world in a direct and necessary way. He argues that the notion of correspondence is a particular Western philosophical framework, by which to view the world. The ‘world’ is not an empirical concept, since we cannot point to the whole world at once; Kaufman uses this semantic fact to prove his point that our language is an imaginative construction, an interpretation of reality.

III.B.2. Religious worldviews as orientation

As Kaufman develops his view of language as a perspective, he argues that “religious perspectives develop in order to give a coherent interpretation of life that will sustain the social and personal order within which men in a given society are living.”65 Religion is seen from a sociological perspective as a social bond, the necessary glue that holds society together. Nevertheless, it is still an interpretation of the world, collecting information about the world into a synthetic pattern.

Religious language, though, is seen not so much as a referential system, but as an impetus for ethical action: “Believing in God thus means practically to order all of life and experience in personalistic, purposive, moral terms, and to construe the world and man accordingly.”66 Religious language is reconstructed here to be a tool for existence oriented towards the bio-historical context of the human. Although Kaufman claims that religion is a

65 Kaufman, God the Problem, 29.
66 Ibid., 106.
construal of life, his instrumental view of religious language places primary importance in its ability to order life, rather than in its ability to picture (however inadequately) an interpretable reality.

Kaufman argues that the system of religious language provides a structure which orients the speaker to the world. He argues that “human talk about God, ideas of God, . . .

[are] a particular symbolical pattern for orienting human life, a particular world-picture.”67 Here, the worldview is not only a view, but a picture. Religious language is a framework of ideas about the world, including all of our observations about the world, but uniting them into a unified whole. Kaufman argues that ideas such as “God” gather together a multitude of human experiences and interpret them as a meaningful whole.

Worldviews also give human beings a direction in life, an orientation to the confusion of history. Kaufman argues that “a major function of what we have come to regard as religious practices and ideas has been to provide a comprehensive framework of orientation which enables humans to gain some insight into and understanding of themselves, their most profound problems, and the sort of fulfillment or salvation that might be available to them.”68 This framework contains a comprehensive set of beliefs woven into an over-arching system, spanning the horizon of possible thought. The orientation provided by such a world-view could give a rather narrow insight into the problems of the speaker of that language, especially if the orientation provided by that framework was directed towards a closed community, or even an individual self.

At times, Kaufman’s symbol-system seems to be the actual context for life. He argues that throughout the course of history, religions developed “powerful symbol-systems combined with significant patterns of life and action (rules and rituals), [which] were able to create contexts within which human beings could live and act in what seemed to them meaningful and fruitful ways.”69 Linking language with patterns of action prevents Kaufman’s

67 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 38.
68 Ibid., 70.
69 Ibid., 227.
theory of language from becoming a self-enclosed system, a ‘world’ within which its
speakers exist, the reality which they experience.

The notion of God is necessary, Kaufman thinks, because our linguistic and conceptual
systems would be incomplete without a reference point outside of the individual who creates
that system. McCormack notes that “Kaufman concedes that human beings and societies need
a center of orientation and devotion outside of themselves . . . Kaufman suggests that a
heuristic device such as the image/concept ‘God’ does not function in isolation, but serves as
the focal point of an overall picture of the world.” Kaufman does not think a reference point
external to the whole system is necessary, but that some focal point is needed, not to ground
the system, but to render it open to appeals for justification.

However, the particularity of the Christian point of view prevents it from being valid
for all people. Jones argues that “the notion of perspective appears to dissolve Christianity’s
claim to uniqueness.” There is a tension between the theological rules which Kaufman
develops as the Christian world-view, and the religious categories which he claims will work
for any believer. Since some of these terms overlap (world, human), Kaufman argues that
some common procedures can be utilized in religious discourses. When he uses “God” as both
a Christian category and a general religious category, however, he dissolves the distinction
between Christian ideas (their uniqueness) and other religious claims. The term “God” plays a
different function within the Christian worldview than in any other religious worldview.

Kaufman’s discussion of worldviews intends to point out formal similarities among all
religious discourses. This argument would indeed repudiate Christian claims to have the
uniquely absolute religious ideas, and this sort of imperialism should be rebutted. However,
the unique contributions of Christianity to religious discourses is erased by Kaufman’s use of
the term “God” as both a particular Christian and a general religious term. His view of the
relation of Christianity to other religions will be discussed more completely in the next section.

70 McCormack, 439.

71 Jones, 91.
III.B.3. Worldviews as judgments and judgments of worldviews

Kaufman's definition of God does give an epistemological lever by which objective reality can intrude upon our cognitive constructions. He writes that "the idea of God, thus, by calling into question everything finite—including every formulation or expression of the idea of God itself—can be a powerful instrument of criticism." Now that he interprets this infinite concept as the absolute basis of the historical context of our being, how does this abstract idea criticize us? He proposes that the idea of God as a historical source forces us to acknowledge that we are not masters of our fate, but are still responsible for more than even our most unselfish desires and reconstructed values.

Worldviews, in Kaufman's view, are contingent upon their location. They are relative to a speaker's context, and are consequently not absolute or ultimate expressions of the fundamental structure of the world. But some worldviews foster better human relations, and more moral action. He argues that "to speak of God's 'reality' or 'existence'—i.e., to speak of the validity or truth of the theistic perspective—is to maintain that the modes of life made possible, when existence is oriented according to this perspective, are a full and genuine realization of the actual potentialities of human nature, are in accord, that is to say, with "how things are." Kaufman makes a significant claim here: against his many critics, he does argue that language corresponds to reality, at least the human part of it. It may not be possible to say, ultimately, what human nature actually is, or should be, but Kaufman claims that certain mind-sets make possible better or worse modes of life. Of course, the question of how we judge what is better or worse, that is, how we conceive our ethical judgments, is constantly lurking in the background of this discussion. It is strange that Kaufman does not view his ethical pronouncements as yet another worldview. This would be more consistent, to say that ethics is an imaginative construction, a perspective within which one lives. Then it is difficult to see what judges any system of ethics (mere survival would not seem to guarantee moral behaviour).

72 Kaufman, Theological Imagination, 87.

73 Ibid., 49.
The sort of pragmatic effectiveness that Kaufman holds up as a standard is, in the end, a moral standard. He judges thought in terms of the kinds of ethical action it can induce. His criteria involve the ability of a thought-system to “facilitate and promote human existence within the actual ecosystem within which we live.” All language would then have to be directly related to the good of the earth, and theology would need to strive for sustainable development of Christian language. Kaufman’s construction of a bio-historical theology aims to do just that, but one wonders at times whether Kaufman is simply formulating some sort of eco-humanism rather than theology.

Kaufman claims that a meaningful whole cannot be proven to be true, but it can be “persuasive and attractive, able (apparently) to give some measure of significant order to our experience and activities.” He backs away from the realist connotations of the metaphor of “world-picture,” which leads him to argue that language orders our experience. This could mean that religious language acts as the highest level of language, synthesizing all of it into a grand unity, but Kaufman tends to argue that religious language is meta-linguistic, a substratum of presuppositions which forms our every thought.

As a result of this view of language, Kaufman argues that the task of theology is to “uncover and explore the major meaning-complexes that provide orientation within the cultures of modernity and post-modernity.” He is still concerned with the structure of religious language-systems, but now sees religion in the broadest possible sense, as any system of concepts that provides meaning for people.

Jones argues, however, that Kaufman does not use the idea of perspective consistently. Jones claims that “To grant that a cultural shift may change a perspective is,

74 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 257.
75 Ibid., 114.
however, to challenge the theory that perspectives contain the only criteria by which they may be judged.”77 There must be concepts within a culture which allow a perspective to be changed. The reasonable nature of that change must be explained: that is, the reasons which people are convinced that a new or revised perspective is more satisfactory than an old one.

Kaufman’s view of language as forming thought has led him to argue that religious language is a worldview, a self-contained system of symbols which organize a speaker’s thoughts and prompt ethical behaviour. Although these worldviews are relative to a speaker’s particular context, there are criteria which can be used to judge different worldviews. These criteria would seem to be external to language in some sense, and Kaufman continues to speak of “experience” and the “world” in ways which seem to acknowledge some sort of connection to a reality external to language. The tensions in his formulation of a theory of language at this point in his thinking stem from his attempts to combine insights from both hermeneutical and structural theories of language. If he were to argue either that language is an interpretation of the world, or alternatively that language is a ‘world’ within which speakers live, then his theory of language would be more consistent. Different views of religious language, however, result from taking one or the other of these positions. The former position would allow him to retain religious symbols as abstract syntheses of experience (even if that experience is completely mediated by language), whereas the latter would imply that religious language is a symbol-system (or textual genre, such as narrative) in which believers live, by which they experience a world which affects them, but cannot be appealed to as an epistemological foundation.

III.B.4. God as cosmic activity

In *The Theological Imagination*, Kaufman identifies God as the “personifying symbol of that cosmic activity which has created our humanity and continues to press for its full realization.”78 Kaufman analyzes the available symbol of God, putting into language his ideas

77 Jones, 96.

about the divine reality, in the hopes that this identification of God will encourage better forms of human existence. He writes: "By identifying God with the mundane, cosmic, vital and historical powers which have given rise to our humanity and which undergird all our efforts to achieve a fully humane society, I have attempted to provide a metaphysically plausible referent for a religiously significant symbol."79 This statement approaches an identification, not just a linking, of God with the final cause of the world.

Kaufman argues that "speaking of God would signify not only the fact that our humanity is cosmically grounded and sustained: God would symbolize a fundamental telos in the universe toward the humane."80 The human ends which Kaufman seeks would be seen as embedded in the very structure of the universe. In his later work, Kaufman refines this idea by introducing the concept of "serendipitous creativity," the unexpected and fortuitous happenings which occur in life. He argues that "the whole vast cosmic process manifests (in varying degrees) serendipitous creativity: an everflowing coming into being of new modes of reality."81 Rather than identifying God with the cosmic process, Kaufman seems more comfortable talking about God as the creativity within that process.

Rather than being a limit set over against human existence, Kaufman now sees God as a process within the bio-historical context of life. He writes: "God, I am proposing, should be understood as the underlying reality (whatever it may be)—the ultimate creativity, ultimate mystery—that manifests itself throughout the universe and thus also in this evolutionary-historical trajectory culminating (to date) in our human historicity."82 In a sense, this idea bursts the boundaries of the artificial limits that humanity imposes on life, by inserting new possibilities into the stultified forms of human culture and existence.

However, the notion of serendipitous creativity does not deal adequately with the problem of evil. Ferré argues that "Kaufman has moved from defining the symbol 'God' by

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79 Ibid., 54.
80 Ibid., 55.
82 Ibid., 107.
reference to the (mixed) surprises of the cosmos to \textit{redefining} the `divine' in separation from the `antidivine' parts of the `cosmic trajectory' we began with.”\textsuperscript{83} Kaufman simply defines the problem away, by restricting his notion of serendipitous creativity to the good things that result (and these are then seen as God’s doing). Ferré is arguing that the idea of serendipitous creativity only selects those happy accidents which occur in evolution, ignoring the nasty aspects of this seemingly random interplay of mutations and selection.

Ferré calls on Kaufman to recognize the inherent contradiction in this view: “\textit{Either} the symbol `God' is to be reconstructed strictly in terms of a `munificent' but morally mixed historical process that (given a few `small steps of faith') could commend itself reasonably to tough-minded moderns, or the symbol `God' retains its ancient meaning, on the authority of tradition, as `perfect,' favouring exclusively the more `humane and well-ordered' developments we and Kaufman favour.”\textsuperscript{84} Kaufman’s attempted relocations of the referent of God amount to a redefinition of God, although Kaufman does not wish to relinquish all of the traditional meaning of the word.

Defenders of Kaufman note that the idea of God is necessary both for intellectual functioning and moral action. Stoesz suggests that “God has to be imagined as a conceptual `whole' in order to meet the demands of a comprehensive worldview.”\textsuperscript{85} This does not mean that God is identified with all that is, but that the idea of God has to relate to every item of that worldview, in order to ground the whole view. This epistemological stance, for Kaufman, is the ground for the possibility of any moral action, which contributes to the whole universe, or at least to the universe becoming whole.

Stoesz argues that “Kaufman’s experience of the universe as a series of mutually dependent events has inspired his conception of God as a cosmic whole.”\textsuperscript{86} This seems to me to be an inaccurate interpretation of Kaufman’s view. Kaufman rejects pantheistic doctrines

\textsuperscript{83} Ferré, 367-368.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 368.
\textsuperscript{85} Stoesz, 209.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 289.
that identify God and the world. He chooses to express God’s reality as the source of the cosmos, distinct from the world yet immanently involved with every aspect of it. Kaufman could be accused of practically equating the notions of “world” and “history,” by presenting the idea of the world as merely the sequence of biological and social events.

This story of the natural emergence of the cosmos, however, does not require God as a hypothesis. Frederick Sontag charges that Kaufman “must romanticize the natural order to be able to see God within it.”87 The natural process can certainly be interpreted as a divine action, but not as providing evidence for such a super-added level of meaning. Such a view of nature invests the data of and hypotheses about the processes of nature with philosophical definitions of the character and significance of these processes. Sontag asks the question, “What if God does not act in conformity with the historical process?” In other words, “if we take the historicist perspective today, are we more likely to find the Devil than God?”88 Kaufman’s optimism about the direction of progress in world history seems rather outrageous when put beside the apocalyptic predictions of environmental disaster caused by human construction of the technological environment. Kaufman reveals his faith in linguistic technology, powered by the engine of imagination, but fails to recognize the limits of imagination when faced with tactile reality.

By defining God as the source of historical process, or the serendipitous creativity within that process, Kaufman’s definition continues to identify the word “God” as a meta-linguistic construct. Since he has defined historical existence as the capacity for constructing cultural forms (such as language), if God is the creativity inherent in history, God is the principle of history itself, the capacity for linguistic construction. Since Kaufman sees the history of ideas about God as imaginative constructions, his construction of an idea of God as serendipitous creativity can only be a sign pointing back to itself, the nature of historical existence as the capacity for imaginative construction.


88 Ibid., 95.
If Kaufman were to propose a new definition of God as serendipitous creativity, rather than identifying this creativity as historicity itself, he could avoid the circular nature of the argument sketched above. In other words, if he would sketch out his concrete theological proposals instead of proposing new methodological strategies, his suggestions about reconceiving the nature of God might be more readily received. His later work seems to return to his hermeneutical roots, offering now an overall interpretation of existence in general, not just human, historical existence. His theological constructions deserve serious consideration, and it is unfortunate that his methodological skepticism diverts attention from the concrete proposals which he makes about revising our images and thoughts about God.

In this section, we have seen that since symbols are somewhat removed from their empirical origins, Kaufman thinks that their orienting role in human affairs is more pertinent than their descriptive role, although the latter can never be dismissed or forgotten. In following out the implications of this view, Kaufman comes to view language as not only the medium of thinking (and perceiving and even sensing), but as a system which constitutes experience, such that to experience means to think within language. ‘Reality’ is thus a linguistic construct, which can only correspond to other linguistic structures (such as that of another person).

Worldviews offer a perspective from which to view our environment, in Kaufman’s view. They are thus judged by their fruitfulness, their ability to enable us to function well in that environment. He argues that they are judged most readily by comparison to other worldviews. I have argued that if worldviews are views of the same world, then we should be able to compare perspectives, in order to see if they are similar in form, not only in function. There is a tension in Kaufman’s view between seeing the meaning of worldviews as form or as function, which he tends to resolve on the side of the latter. This implies, however, that each worldview generates a different ‘world’ for its viewers, which can only be compared by its effects (on the world and its viewers). Perhaps, if ‘world’ for Kaufman means the self and its environment (and that whole is not available to us, but can only be symbolically pictured as a constructed concept), both constitute a system that cannot be examined independently, only from within. However, surely our different perspectives within this system can be compared,
in order to ascertain pertinent structures of that system (even if these can only be observed from within).

Religious worldviews, then, are judged according to the success by which they give human beings orientation, in Kaufman's view. Pragmatic means are used to measure the degree to which a religion enables human beings to interpret their world and engage it in fruitful ways. In the end, however, Kaufman recognizes that all such judgments happen within a worldview, so the only way to really compare religions is by dialogue between worldviews, attempting to see the structure of ideas in both (perhaps by translation). This inter-textual method of conversation will be examined in the next chapter.

III.C. Inter-textuality

Kaufman's theory of language as a worldview implies that meaning is intra-textual. However, he suggests a conversational method of theology that is inter-textual. By this, he means that everyone should have a voice in the imaginative construction of theological concepts, and that "we must enter into conversation as equals, hoping to be able to contribute something of significance to our common objective of building a more humane world."\(^{89}\)

Neither tradition nor experience should be given arbitrary authority; but both should realize that they are constructing something new, and allow it to emerge dynamically. I will argue that such dialogue should take seriously the other religion's interpretation of reality, not seeking to judge it in the terms of another worldview.

Kaufman judges religious language on the basis of "the human meaning and significance of each religious claim or worldview."\(^{90}\) This pragmatic criteria, which he calls "humanization," acts as a potentially common resource for judgments to be made of theological "imaginative constructions." It should be noted that Kaufman is not appealing to some biological or psychological or sociological foundation. He points to those ordinary activities of human beings in which thinking is always already immersed. I will show that his


\(^{90}\) Ibid., 36.
view of language as a worldview can only judge those ordinary activities from within its own language, according to his theory. It is not clear, then, what dialogue or conversation would consist of.

Kaufman's emphasis on the humane aspects of religious language has potential for bringing religions into conversation with each other. The worldwide clamour for human rights, peace and justice brings people of seemingly conflicting faiths into dialogue about the cultural dimensions of our religious language. I will show that Kaufman's analysis of inter-religious dialogue aims to construct religious symbols which integrate views about the human. I will argue that his aim to construct a common framework for discussing religious language in this world of conflicting ideologies does not do justice to the particular religions with which he hopes to communicate. I would prefer a greater appreciation of the symbols and metaphors within the worldviews of other religions.

III.C.1. Inter-religious dialogue

Kaufman challenges the notion that cultures are monolithic and rigidly determined in their internal structure. He asserts that "the internal pluralism of the great cultural and religious traditions is becoming increasingly recognized, and the supposed normativity of dominant values and practices for all groups in a culture seems now somewhat arbitrary and questionable."91 Within cultural histories, within mind-sets, we see a diversity of uses of language, even a diversity of linguistic structures. Kaufman argues that different cultures have different categorial structures. It would be interesting to know if he would extend this reasoning to posit different categorial structures even for different individuals.

Kaufman uses the model of conversation as an example of the way in which ideas emerge out of the interaction between individuals. He argues that conversation entails a sort of creativity that results in a form of revelation. In conversation, "new insights or meanings appear which, though not directly intended by any of the speakers, may prove of great

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91 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 119.
important to them." The spirit that enlivens the group conversing emerges from the interaction between them, yet proves larger than any individual’s contribution. He suggests that this interchange is a model for the evolution of cultural history, in which “much is created quite unexpectedly, some for good and some for ill but all of it the serendipitous product of human actions directed toward ends far less grand than those which actually work themselves out.” Kaufman suggests that the creativity inherent in conversation be seen as a metaphor for the creativity of history, in that new possibilities for existence arise, perhaps leading to the development of new cultural forms.

Kaufman has contributed a substantial proposal in this analysis of language. If thought arises from the complicated interaction of various mental processes, it is not an independent entity looking out onto the world in supreme disengagement. Instead, thinking arises within a process of which we are not always aware. This de-centring of egoistic thought holds much promise in analysis of theological thinking. Davaney suggests that Kaufman’s proposal spurs us to re-think a theology whose “mode is critical engagement of diverse perspectives in a pluralistic world.” Questions remain as to how conversations can be conducted so as to enable participants to construct beneficial ideas, as well as how those ideas are to be judged.

In the end, Kaufman places human history in the context of natural history. He claims that “increasingly, the underlying faith for many in our time is informed by the conception of the world as a universal ecosystem which provides the context for all of life, including all human life.” This emphasis on the environment of language places Kaufman in distinct contrast to structuralist views which posit language itself as our environment. The ecosystem of human life is seen as a radically pluralistic situation, in which human beings have generated a multitude of linguistic responses to the natural world. However, Kaufman’s focus on the semantic role of the idea of the world implies that the word “world” (and its use, i.e., its

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92 Ibid., 277.
93 Ibid., 277.
94 Davaney, 3.
95 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 114.
meaning) provides the context for life, not simply the world itself. He implies that if we think of the world as a universal ecosystem, it will be. If he is arguing that his insights are derived from an actual ecosystem (i.e. a global one), then he could claim that experience of this ecosystem provides material for thinking about it. But his claims that language forms experience clash with his arguments which use language as an interpretation of experience.

Kaufman suggests that his idea of “God” acts as a broadly inclusive unifier for religions, inviting them all to converse together under the tent of historicity. Throughout his career, Kaufman has argued against the parochial nature of Christian theology. He has consistently repudiated theological arguments that appeal to specific cultural articulations of God’s revelation, in claiming that “all particular and thus parochial religious and cultural and philosophical traditions are now outmoded and superseded to the extent that they cannot give an adequate or illuminating interpretation of our new historical situation, these new sociocultural facts about human life.”96 This new fact is the realization of the “other,” the different religious world given by another religious mind-set. Theological method can no longer be done from a particular vantage point, Kaufman infers, but must be oriented to the other, a context transcending all of our perspectives. This context is a universal one in his argument, though, not the myriad of particular ones which make up the global society. Unfortunately, the particular is erased in Kaufman’s application of the universal other.

My concern about Kaufman’s theory is that it erases the ‘other’ in the process of overcoming the dangers of the reification of language.97 Delwin Brown notes that Kaufman’s dedication to historicism cuts both ways: “historical existence is characterized by the interpenetration and, sometimes, the melding of religious and cultural traditions, but it is as richly characterized by the innovative persistence of others.”98 The difficult question of identity is at the core of this problem (and one wonders whether the category of the “other” is

96 Ibid., 133.

97 It also erases the idea of God as other. Jean-Luc Marion argues that “theology consists precisely in saying that for which only another can answer—the Other above all” (God Without Being: Hors-Texte, 2).

98 Brown, 1216.
Itself reified in postmodern theory, if reification is possible in a post-structural view of language. Kaufman seeks to correct individualistic notions of identity by emphasizing the communal aspect of identity definition. But by defining identity in relation to a group, especially if that self-definition is a perspective constructed solely by that group, Kaufman backs himself into the very corner which he seeks to avoid, namely, parochialism (or tribalism). One solution would be to emphasize the multiplicative marks of identity (our belonging to various groups). Then our construction of our own identity, however, would become a confusing appropriation of a number of linguistic world-views (as a matter of personal choice, it would seem).

If religious language is intended to be a connection to the context which surrounds us, Kaufman would do well to examine the concrete contexts in which religious languages have grown and flourished. Buddhist language, for example, must be examined in the context of Chinese and Japanese history and society, along with its unique ethical viewpoint. Christian language, similarly, must be understood within the historical process of its evolution from its Hebraic roots, through the medieval synthesis, into the modern breakdown of religion through secularity. Otherwise, Kaufman's proposal is simply another demythologizing of the Christian heritage, an obscurantist dismissal of the complicated struggles of Christians to understand and explicate their faith by constructing cultural forms which integrate their religious heritage and contemporary concerns.

III.C.2. Other religions and reification

Kaufman is "interested in learning how other religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, with its sharp criticism of all forms of reification, deals with such issues."99 He criticizes, however, "the freedom with which hyperbole, highly exaggerated expression, is often employed without being clearly acknowledged as such—indeed, often being regarded as literally true, as dogma that must be believed."100 In his dialogues with Buddhists, for

100 Ibid., 167.
example, he sharply questions their articulations of their beliefs, suggesting that the language by which they express their insights is often in conflict with our contemporary understandings of humanity, as well as being held too dogmatically.

Kaufman frames this discussion of other religious languages in terms of a warning against the dangers of reifying religious ideas, "mistak[ing] the symbolic schemes (which they themselves had constructed in the course of history) for direct insight into or experience of ultimate reality, or direct revelation from God on high." He cites the Buddhist characterization of language as a "finger pointing to the moon," but suggests that even this is a misleadingly dualistic notion, as it implies that there is something external to which religious language points.

Kaufman's arguments with Buddhist thinkers display his judgments of their concepts, based on his view of language. Schubert Ogden critiques the "arbitrariness of Kaufman's assumption that all other religions and secular perspectives, including the Christian, must submit to be judged by his understanding of human existence as historical." Buddhists have a different view of history than Kaufman, understanding all of reality to be in some sense an illusion. However, Kaufman's attempts to interpret religious statements solely in terms of historical referents is in a way a parallel to the Buddhist conception of the "thusness" of reality. As Rita Gross explains in her critique of Kaufman, "Paradoxically, meaning nothing beyond 'just this,' the phenomenal world and our limited lives become luminous and sacred." Kaufman's de-mythologizing of the Buddhist tradition looks more like a

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101 Ibid., 177.

102 This comment appears in a discussion between Buddhists and Christians, published in Buddhist-Christian Studies 9 (1989): 212. An article by Rita Gross in the same issue, entitled "Response to Kaufman: 'This is It: Nothing Happens Next,'" Buddhist-Christian Studies 9 (1989): 189-196 is particularly illuminating, as she questions his understanding of some central Buddhist concepts, especially "emptiness."


104 Gross, 196.
reduction to a secular appropriation of reality, rather than the Buddhist view of everything as sacred.

Kaufman's interest in other religious languages is commendable, and is a necessary model for theologians who can become trapped in their own discourse. Conversation with religious thinkers who have distinctly different symbols, images and methods of reasoning can broaden one's own perspective on language, and also lead to a better understanding of one's own concepts. To understand the other, though, may require a more imaginative approach than Kaufman's. It is not sufficient to simply find analogues for certain concepts in other religions, since the pattern of relations between concepts is as important as their strict definition (as Kaufman's theory of language itself indicates). A universality of religions may not be possible, at least on the level of belief, although conversation between religions may yield important points of contact, even agreement (as the ecumenical discussions between Christian churches has shown).

III.C.3. Religion as language about the ordinary

In a much more promising discussion of the relation between religions, Kaufman suggests a re-definition of the relation of religious experience and its language. Rather than holding that there is a "common human core reality or core experience" (considered as a metaphysical essence) underlying all religions, Kaufman looks to "common and ordinary features of everyday life—eating, playing, working, rejoicing, suffering, birth, death, sexuality, etc., found in everyday experience everywhere." The physical realities of life, then, are seen as common, rather than a metaphysical substratum. This view of religion differentiates Kaufman from those who see language as the substratum of life, below which one cannot go. However, in citing these ordinary activities, he forgets his own dictum that such experiences are interpreted differently the world over.

Kaufman argues that religions ought to justify their existence on human grounds, not divine ones. He argues that "Every religious tradition thus implicitly invokes a human or

105 Kaufman, God—Mystery—Diversity, 173.
humane criterion to justify (at least to its adherents) its existence and its claims."¹⁰⁶ The various world religions are surely witness to the rich and varied human imagination, in its encounter with ordinary and everyday reality, as well as the mysterious depths of human experience, especially at those liminal times of birth, death and other life passages. The symbol systems of religion, even if they are conventional, are involved in the most intense and powerful experiences of human life. In some cases, religion brings a certain order to life; in others it disrupts the ordinary flow of existence. Religious symbols have power to generate deep emotions and mystical thoughts, as well as the deep structure necessary to conventionalize and articulate a common experience for a social group. Kaufman’s theory of language could celebrate the infinite variety of religious languages that can arise from a limited set of conventions (grammar), and then examine these imaginative constructions for what they are worth.

Kaufman’s theory of language as a system certainly allows, even encourages that expansion toward different cultures and religions. If different religions are like different languages, all attempting to orient the believer to the world, then none is more true than the other, but only gives a different viewpoint, a different tool by which to live in the world. In order to understand a different religion, according to this theory, would require one to immerse oneself in that religion, absorbing the meaning of its vocabulary and rituals, and even to commit oneself to it, in order to fully experience the subjective and practical import of its teachings. Kaufman does not do this; he applies a pragmatic judgment to differing religious interpretations of reality, thinking that one can measure what practical effects a religion has.

If a religion is a world-view, however, it includes all practical effects within that world-view (although an observer from another world-view might point out the consequences of an action from within that view). Mary Ann Stenger argues that “humanization assumes a common interest of the religious traditions in the human order, but the application of the criterion could include the individuality of the different traditions.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, it may

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 36.
be that religious traditions will evaluate pragmatic effects of worldviews in different ways. Defining language as a world-view quickly leads one to see religions as incommensurable, since world-views take on a certain integrity, by virtue of the tight patterns of meaning that a language develops. If meaning can cross over the boundaries of languages constructed from different vantage points, then the task of translation becomes all important. To interpret another religion would be to find an equivalent meaning-structure which expresses a similar idea.

III.C.4. Comparing religions

In his latest work, Kaufman argues that "It is impossible to break out of an ultimate relativism of viewpoints so long as we continue simply to weigh one truth-claim against another, since each proceeds from different premises and is coherent and reasonable in terms of the overall worldview that it presupposes and expresses."\(^{108}\) His theory of worldviews requires this incommensurability, the inability to compare rival systems. Kaufman concludes that we must "encounter other significant religious and secular traditions in their own terms instead of as defined by our categories."\(^{109}\) This statement, however, is in tension with his earlier judgments of other religious worldviews on pragmatic grounds, which he uses as universal tests.

Kaufman now argues that "Christianity, thus, expresses and communicates that truth which is ultimate and saving for westerners, but it has no right, any longer, to claim that it is the mediator of religious truth for all humanity."\(^{110}\) Why does Kaufman not limit the truth of Christianity to Christians? In the same volume, he argues that "Christian theology is essentially construction . . . of a Christian view of God."\(^{111}\) Many westerners do not even know the

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\(^{109}\) Ibid., 67.  
\(^{110}\) Ibid., 18.  
\(^{111}\) Ibid., 49.
Christian stories anymore, let alone their doctrinal implications. For that matter, what about Jews? They come to different religious conclusions based on some of the same stories.

Kaufman still claims, though, that the idea of God transcends the Christian worldview. He argues that "this symbol makes extraordinarily universal and comprehensive claims for itself, defying reduction to or subsumption under any alien or independent analytical scheme or intellectual categories." Does Kaufman seek a universal God, through a process of inter-textual conversation? He acknowledges that "it is impossible to move out of and leave behind the particular symbolic, linguistic, and conceptual frames of reference within which we ordinarily do our thinking and living." Yet he proposes a theological method that can work generally for all people to think about God. There is a tension between his universal method of analyzing religious language (along with his universal method of judging it) and his acknowledgement of the particularity of meaning generated by worldviews.

If religious languages are each world-views, what possible relations could exist between them? Denny Weaver follows out the implications of a perspectival view: if all language about God is constructed, then there are "no neutral or objective standpoints from which to observe and compare the various traditions and the religious claims about that reality." Weaver proposes that each worldview has a trajectory, which can intersect with other views. Kaufman's theory relies on each trajectory "hitting the ground" of practical, ordinary life. However, it is not life which judges trajectories, but people, according to Kaufman's own theory. His proposal is merely yet another trajectory. It does have the laudable intention of trying to intersect with all other trajectories, trying to bend them towards the real (as seen from Kaufman's trajectory), but Kaufman's suggestion that this modification of trajectories will be achieved by conversation seems weak in the face of the difficult issues faced in the dialogues between the religions of the world.

112 Ibid., 3.
113 Ibid., 56.
114 Denny Weaver, "Christus Victor, Nonviolence and Other Religions," Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity, 195.
For religions to have independent claims appears to result in an interminable argument between competing parochial foundations. Each religion seems reduced to arguing only on its own terms, within its linguistic structure. This problem arises from Kaufman’s own theory of language, in that a linguistic system derives and produces meaning by its internal arrangement, which orients one to view the world in a particular way. Kaufman solves this problem by proposing a universal worldview, with a pragmatic arrangement of terms. I have sought to show that this solution is no less parochial, imposing its imperialism of modernism on any and all traditional religious views. It would be better, in my view, to live in a relativistic world, in which competing claims are made by the various religions, with no independent or universal ground by which to decide between them, than to live in a world in which there was one religious authority, especially if that authority were as prosaic and mundane as pragmatic experience. Kaufman’s modernization of religions results in a melting pot of religious culture, in which all religious claims are boiled down to their symbolic constituents, and strained through the filter of history. The rich melange of religious language is thus reduced to abstract signs and inferences.

Kaufman’s excursions into other religious thought-worlds are intriguing and revitalizing for Christian theology approaching a third millennium. Encounters with other religions can be a source of creativity, as totally different ways of looking at the world are come to be understood. A sort of transvaluation of one’s own thoughts can occur, not necessarily a conversion to an alternative religious language, but a new understanding of one’s own presumptions. Some assumptions can then be seen as superfluous, while others become even more important. This transformation has taken place in Kaufman’s theology, I think, as he has come to see the idea of the real God as the central concept, to any religious position. Other doctrinal points have receded into the background, as they do not have the practical import which the symbol of God plays in human thought and action. Kaufman’s theological method, because of its abstract purity and clarity, is translated analogically into the field of ethics, as well as into philosophy in general (especially metaphysics, which he sees as a sort of linguistic analysis).
In a more recent article, Kaufman softens his tone, speaking in methodological terms. He elucidates his own approach, contrasting it with "one-dimensional" approaches to theology, in which "the attempt is made to do theology so far as possible entirely in terms of one major resource, which is believed to supply all that we can know about the distinctively theological themes of God and Christ." Two possible resources are identified: the Bible and human experience. Kaufman critiques the use of the Bible as a sole authority on the grounds that "all texts (including scriptural texts) are subject to multiple readings and interpretations, depending on the point of view and the interests and concerns of the interpreter." The same could be said of experience, although Kaufman does not detail this concern.

Kaufman also critiques what he calls "two-dimensional" approaches, which combine the above two resources, by "attempting to bring the scriptural message into significant connection or correlation with problems in our own life-world, our own personal experience, or the socio-cultural world in which we live." He argues that the process is not as simple as that, since as "theologies make the image/concept of God central to their inquiry, they necessarily become involved in much more than a simple correlation of biblical ideas with contemporary problems." In other words, something is going on in theologians' minds before they try to correlate the Bible and contemporary experience: namely, an imaginative construction of the idea of God and the relation of that idea to all other ideas (and realities) in the world. Kaufman argues that theology is a multi-dimensional correlation of the idea of God

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116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid., 39.
(obtained not only through the Bible but also through wider experience in the world’s overlapping cultures) and all aspects of that culture, as well as its environment.

Kaufman’s main point seems to be that when doing theology, we should “acknowledge forthrightly and regularly that our theological statements and claims are simply ours—the product of our own human study and reflection, and of the spontaneity and creativity of our own human powers imaginatively to envision a world and our human place within it.”

Kaufman goes on to propose methods by which to construct this viewpoint, using his contextual theory of language (especially its connection to the contexts of society, history and biology). At this point, he would do well to drop his concern with authoritarianism, and simply proceed to elucidate the norms by which his method is conducted. The acceptance of those norms by a community of theologians would constitute a judgment of the worth of his proposal, but according to his own formulation, this would simply identify a “we” which holds those views.

Some critics laud Kaufman’s repudiation of modern epistemological foundations. Dean argues that Kaufman “locates theology in one among a plurality of histories rather than in a transcendental ego, in an ontological foundation, or in a core religious experience; he tests theology pragmatically rather than epistemologically (or, by reference to how it came to be).” While some may see Kaufman’s focus on the origins of thought within language as subject to the genetic fallacy (characterizing thought by reference to its beginning stages rather than surveying its properties in its maturity), Dean implies that Kaufman’s examination of thought is free from an endless introspection into how thinking arises, and focuses instead on how thinking works in society.

On the other hand, Schubert Ogden agrees with Kaufman’s desire to dialogue with other religions, which requires abandoning of absolute versions of Christian claims to truth, but disagrees with his methods. Ogden argues that “traditional Christian views may be as much the source of critical judgment as they are its object, while any perspective, like Kaufman’s historicism, may be as much in need of criticism as it is the basis for making critical

119 Ibid., 41.

120 Dean, “The Persistence of Experience,” 68.
judgments.” Ogden’s point is that Kaufman should develop specifically Christian reasons for rejecting absolutism, and dialoguing with other religions. However, the primary grounds for Kaufman’s claims are linguistic, that is, arguments that language is a worldview and should be judged pragmatically. These may be correct views, but they are not theological reasons for engaging in inter-religious dialogue.

Kaufman’s passion for inter-religious dialogue is laudable, but it fails to engage the rich resources of metaphor and imagery in religious languages. If participants in such dialogue can only agree on pragmatic matters, then I wonder if they are actually agreeing on their theological assessment of those ordinary activities of life? I am not saying that theology is a rarefied activity; on the contrary, I believe it has everything to do with this life. But theological images of ordinary life are not simply pragmatic: they are aesthetic, sacred and profound. This is the level at which religions differ, that is, their metaphorical interpretation of these activities. In order to converse with another religion about these matters, we have to enter their religious world and understand their understanding of how religious language functions (whether pragmatically or otherwise).

We have seen in this chapter that Kaufman views the function of language as primarily that of orienting the speaker to his or her environment. Language thus comes to be seen as orienting the subject, preferably towards the world rather than towards a solitary self. Language is relative to its context, both historical and geographical (and perhaps even individual), which does not make all language equal, but simply derived from particular contexts. Kaufman argues that it is possible to speak across contexts, in terms which unite speakers by appealing to a larger context. Religion is the largest of those contexts, and Kaufman defines “God” as the ultimate point of reference and the serendipitous creativity within the progress of the universe.

Kaufman’s analysis of action is compelling in its ability to explain the complex interactions of our self with the environments of biology and society. His attention to the role of language in representing possible actions, allowing us to compare and eventually construct

121 Ogden, 497.
an ideal type is most helpful. The role of religious language in action is convincingly presented, especially its compelling ability to guide our thoughts and impulses. Kaufman’s mature ethic, advocating the self’s construction of principles by which to guide action, is a much-needed contribution to our society’s arguments about the good. Virtue does not inhere in stories alone, nor in evaluation of consequences, but also in the recognition of a self’s responsibility to articulate his or her own principles, within the context of a society.

The theological proposals which Kaufman advances are notable for their intended relevance to the ordinary lives of believers. By identifying traditional doctrines with particular historical realities (although stated in very abstract terms), Kaufman’s theology seeks to construct Christian symbols from below, using the elements of human experiences (such as reconciliation and moral value) as the basis upon which to formulate a notion of God’s character and actions in the world. Although the worldview thus constructed is relative to a particular historical vantage point, he suggests that identifying God as the ground of all of those histories will provide a common context for the development of more humane religious language.

To interpret the world religiously does not mean ascribing to a particular religious tradition for Kaufman. On the contrary, religion is viewed as a universal worldview. God is seen as that which transcends all of our views of the world. This universal God is the source of all creativity. However, Kaufman thinks that God is uninterpretable, since the mystery of God requires us to construct images of God, rather than imagining that we can penetrate God’s being. Mystery takes the form of a conundrum, an impenetrable cipher (a “whodunnit”). One wonders why Kaufman is not silent about God, since the mystery is in principle insoluble. For Kaufman, though, revelation is a creative process, in which images of God are constructed by the interaction of human imaginations. The idea of God itself has revelatory power, but only insofar as it relativizes and humanizes our thoughts.
CONCLUSIONS

Kaufman’s view of language is central to his theological method, since he proposes that all thinking is conducted within language, and is profoundly shaped by that medium. His view that language is an imaginative construction grounds his discussion of theology, from his analysis of religious symbols to his discussion of the meaning of the word “God.” I have proceeded in this thesis to analyze Kaufman’s view of language in general, his theory of religious language (seen as a subset of the former), and finally his view of theological language, in which he argues that theology unites the system of language.

A. Language

Kaufman argues that language is intimately involved in every level of the thinking process (except the lowest, in which subject and object are not experienced as separate or distinct). Language, in fact, is the tool which enables thinkers to become conscious, not only of the world but of themselves. However, language is not simply an instrument to be used by an independent consciousness, but instead the form of consciousness, the medium in which all of our thoughts are shaped. Thus, our perceptions of the world are all coloured by language.

Kaufman views language as emerging from the interaction of the self and its environment. The imagination unites the sensory and perceptive activities of the mind into a unitary structure. He argues that this interaction creates a spiraling succession, resulting in a consciousness which displays increasing complexity. Language is thus an interpretation of the world, since the mind constructs language out of what is given to it through the senses. This construction, though, is removed from immediate contact with the world, since it produces a mental object abstracted from its given material. Kaufman thinks that representations are judged on the grounds of their effects, that is, their pragmatic efficacy.
Unfortunately, Kaufman does not distinguish clearly between thought and language. Since thought is formed by the system of language, thinking is guided by the pre-set relations recorded in language. He thus argues that language is judged by measuring its effects, rather than by comparing its images to the world. Kaufman is driven to this recourse because he discounts the contribution of the receptive imagination, which constructs images in order to represent something in the mind's environment. Since language informs cognitive activities (although not determining them), Kaufman rejects the view that language corresponds to reality. If Kaufman were to say that language is imaginative construal rather than imaginative construction, the issues would be much more clear. If language is a construal of the world, then it depends on a person's vantage point. Language, according to such a view, would be an interpretation of the world, rather than the construction of a worldview.

While Kaufman most often makes this argument about religious language, he nonetheless thinks that all language "misrepresents" reality, since it abstracts and generalizes experience. Moreover, concepts are prescriptive, organizing our perceptions according to their constructed shape. If Kaufman were to distinguish between descriptive concepts (images which represent) and regulative concepts (which organize the system of language), his theory would be more consistent.

Since he sees language as an imaginative construction that orients people towards their world, religious language is characterized by Kaufman as a worldview, which unifies the system of language (and ideas). Thinking is seen as a pragmatic activity, done within the perspective of a worldview, regulated by the central symbols of the language. The most abstract symbols function primarily intra-linguistically, ordering the system of concepts. They are judged by their effects in history, measured by their contribution to the making of a humane world.

Kaufman describes these important words as categorical, organizing language (and therefore thought) into a framework. Although he thinks that the active imagination (an organ of thought) produces language, and so is logically fundamental, it is also formed by language, since language is a public convention as to how the world should be perceived. Past
formulations of reality, however, are simply a record of how people have thought. Since the active imagination is logically primary, it is the duty of thinkers to revise the public code, transforming language into new and creative ways of describing the world.

Categorial concepts are built up out of our sensations and perceptions (and their codification in language), and they are always reformable by that imaginative construction. However, if we are not always conscious of the way in which these concepts are constructed, they will form our thinking by causing our minds to run in the pathways already prepared for us by previous thinkers and their linguistic formulations. The central categories of our language form the way that we think about the world, Kaufman claims. These highly abstract ideas unify the semantic web of language, giving the many descriptive names and qualifiers a concept around which to cohere. Symbols such as “the whole,” “God” or “being” refer to the fundamental presuppositions of our thought, and act as a grammar that classifies and organizes the huge system of language, and orients us to the world.

All language, Kaufman claims, is ultimately pragmatic, helping us to cope with our complicated and sometimes threatening environment. Language is action, a considered judgment of what is the case in reality, and a decision to act in some way with respect to that reality. Ethical judgment of language is thus the most germane sort of theoretical consideration, when attempting to imaginatively formulate language about God for a new era in history, an ecological era in which people are finally conscious of their place as linguistic creators, responsible for the effects of those linguistic creations. While this criterion is quite laudable, it does not really get outside the framework. Pragmatic ideas and judgments are no less a part of Kaufman’s frameworks than any other ideas.

B. Religious language

Religious language is thus seen by Kaufman as a construction, a synthesis of mental experience, organized by the mind in and through the medium of language. The rituals of religion are seen as external signs of inner mental states. Symbols integrate experience into
highly-charged foci, from which meaning-relations radiate like spokes from a wheel. Since the most central symbols are collections of experience, refined into abstract signs, and garnering most of their meaning from their relation to other ideas, they are logically distant from experience, and so are judged pragmatically.

Language about God poses something of a difficulty, since it does not refer to a specific object. Kaufman suggests that we construct the concept of God, but that the idea of God forces us to acknowledge the contingency of any images of God which we use. Religious language is singled out as especially important in this orientation of the human being within its historical and cultural existence. The religious imagination is vital to the humanizing of our world, since it transcends local and parochial contexts and interests. The concept of God is given a new reference by Kaufman, that of the moral forces in the universe. This historical location of the idea of God is his attempt to concretize (but not reify) the idea of God. Theology is then the criticism of images of God developed from the present history of the available God.

Kaufman argues that the symbol “God” acts so as to integrate the system of language. This gives the word “God” an intra-linguistic function, that of uniting the set of language into a whole. The meaning of the word, Kaufman argues, is precisely its “wholism,” its ability to make whole (that is, to make language, and consequently the world, or at least the speaker’s world, whole). This world, also a construction of our minds, should now be seen to include the whole cosmos, and consists primarily of the relationships between elements of this universe. God is not to be thought of as something external to the universe, but the very power that pushes its history along its tortuous path towards a more humane and just order.

There is a curious paradox to Kaufman’s pragmatic idea of God. If the primary function of the word is to orient human beings to their cosmos, how is it possible that a particular self can orient itself? If the idea of God is self-generated, how can any orientation to the wider world occur? One might argue that the idea of God is external to the self, but in the case of a cultural idea, the same paradox occurs. If the idea of God is relative to a culture and its context, how can a culture orient itself to its context? It would seem that the context is
providing the orientation, not the idea of God. Kaufman seems to actually identify the idea of God as the context of life, the powers that bring life to be.

For all his emphasis on the symbol of God, Kaufman tends to avoid the messy metaphors and curious juxtapositions that make up a living language. His neat, formal analysis of symbols imposes an abstract linearity on a complex process. His attempt to identify a common thread in all God-talk is a necessary and vital exercise, since it helps to clarify the concept. But his distillation of a mathematical formula out of the welter of symbols and metaphors has the effect of distancing the concept from its particular contexts.

Kaufman’s theological proposals provide an intriguing contribution to the current ferment about God-talk. His emphasis on the transcendence of God, which he suggests has a unique logical status by virtue of its linguistic structure, is a welcome innovation in the contemporary disputes about Christian language. His theology is guided by an overarching dedication to a God’s transcendence and immanence. Since God is utterly other than us finite human beings, our ideas of God must be infinitely revisable. Paradoxically, this very capacity for revision makes God immanent in our thinking, since the transcendent God acts as the creativity inherent in our constructions about God.

C. Theological language

The real concern that Kaufman is addressing is the status of theological language, especially language about God, and that question becomes confused in his thinking with a general theory of language. What applies to theological language does not necessarily apply to other domains of discourse. This is to say that theology has its own rules of discourse, germane to its genre: rules that reach out to every area of language, to be sure, but they are distinct patterns of using words and ideas that develop a particular way of speaking about the world.

Kaufman proposes a theory of theology, of its cognitive status, its axioms and the possible inferential moves one can make in such an intellectual system. Kaufman clearly seeks
to delineate a system of theology (and also previous systems, in order to critique them); his preoccupation with methodological concerns indicates his concern with the form of the system rather than its content. In fact, he thinks that a revision of the form (or status) of theology will result in a revision of its content, sort of an “end run” around the thorny concrete issues of theology today, such as ecumenical and doctrinal questions.

Kaufman’s theological project entails the creation of a systematic framework for all theological thinking, at least of the Christian variety. He proposes a process by which thinking about God should be carried out, a method for articulating the conceptual apparatus necessary to talk about God, and criteria for judging how accurate and helpful such talk is. His evolutionary philosophy of God involves a commitment to rephrasing the truth about God in new terms for a new time. He argues that our understanding of God evolves with our increasing knowledge of the natural world, as well as with our refinement of the process of producing ideas about the world.

At times, because he views language as forming thought, Kaufman’s view of the relation of theology and language becomes rather circular. He applies a “criteria of humanization” to the system of theological language (and in his latest book, to all religious language). These criteria (justice, equality, freedom from authoritarianism) are claimed to be purely pragmatic, that is, they simply measure the ways in which worldviews function in life. This seems to me to be inconsistent with his theory of language, because it sets up an independent arbiter, outside of all frameworks of language. Kaufman would be more honest if he claimed that he proposes yet another framework, an alternative theological standpoint (a universal creed; a new international order of religions).

Kaufman suggests that conversation be seen as a method for theological construction. Many voices, he argues, should be involved in generating a conceptual picture of the world, and then in the re-conception of that world, as the idea of God poses a limit to human ideas, and thus transforms them into a less egocentric form. He does not offer many suggestions, though, for how that conversation should be conducted, and what principles might guide the corporate construction of religious symbols. Kaufman should examine the power dynamics
that actually occur in conversations on this planet, if he is going to suggest conversation as the theological technique of choice.

I appreciate Kaufman’s theological openness to other cultural discourses, such as science, as well as his attempts to integrate all thinking under a religious rubric. The fragmentation of modern culture cries out for over-arching concepts which unify our experience, yet do not dictate the terms of that experience. We need to distinguish, however, between the concepts which are syntheses of specific concrete elements of our world (whether they be sensual or referential) and the ideas which act as techniques for guiding our thinking. Kaufman’s methodological proposals encapsulate the strategies of construction (synthesis) and connection (relation), at the expense of those of representation (imaging) and abstraction (formalizing). By privileging form over content, Kaufman renders the entire field of language according to one characterization, rather than allowing the unique subsets of language to be differentiated by their particular qualities.

The openness of Kaufman’s approach is nevertheless invigorating, in his examination of other types and systems of religious language. He offers a way of working with religious symbols which seeks to expand their reach out into the entire cultural system. This aim is highly commendable, especially vis-à-vis religious language, which has universal intentions. His irenic approach to dialogue is especially admirable, in his attempt to integrate religious languages into a comprehensive and consistent unity. His dedication to the constructed character of religious language, however, induces him to re-interpret other religious language in terms which they would not accept as adequate translations or equivalencies of meaning.

Clarifying the role of language in the process of thought is vital to an analysis of theological method. How one views language will have enormous implications on how one thinks theology should be done. I am not suggesting that we get our view of language right, and then apply it to theology. If anything, I am suggesting that we get our theology right, and then examine what kind of view of language we have been using. The way in which we talk about God is best discovered and analyzed by actually proceeding with the subject at hand. It
is time for theologians to get over their preoccupation with method, and get on with the
discussion about God. Kaufman is correct that this term is under dispute, but let us offer
concrete proposals about the meaning of the term, rather than endlessly constructing theories
about how to define it. The norms and criteria by which we judge such language are
important, but it would be wrong to subject the meaning of the word to such principles, rather
than letting them grow out of the use of the word in our society.
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