Reconstructing the Symbol “God”:
Assessing the Potential and Limits of Gordon D.
Kaufman’s Proposal

by

Linda Susan Cameron

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emmanuel College and the Graduate Centre for Theological Studies of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theology awarded by the University of St. Michael’s College

© Copyright by Linda Susan Cameron 2017
Reconstructing the Symbol “God”:
Assessing the Potential and Limits of Gordon D. Kaufman’s Proposal

Linda Susan Cameron

Master of Arts in Theology

University of St. Michael’s College

2017

Abstract

This thesis offers an appreciative critique of Gordon Kaufman’s reconstruction of the symbol “God” as Serendipitous Creativity. While Kaufman’s reconstruction is laudable in that it challenges traditional anthropomorphic visions of the divine and aims to create a symbol coherent with a scientific worldview that encourages humans to address contemporary ecological and political crises, it is limited in its theological anthropology. Indeed, it privileges higher cognitive functions neglecting the importance of the affective domain and the range of human abilities in the experience of the human-divine connection.

Therefore, this thesis opens an interdisciplinary discussion of the significance of the affective domain in the human-divine relationship referencing attachment theory, the psychology of religion, evolutionary psychology, psychoanalysis, and contemporary neuroscience to reveal the origins and persistence of the human inclination to seek a relationship with the divine. The thesis concludes that more nuanced approaches found in the United Church’s A Song of Faith, and in the work of Sallie McFague, Marcus Borg, and Daniel Maguire resonate more with believers’ emotional needs than Kaufman’s reconstruction.
Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank for the inspiration to take on this project and for guiding me through the process. I am grateful to Professor Emeritus Lee Cormie of St. Michael’s College for introducing me to the work of Gordon Kaufman. I thank Professor Marsha Hewitt for opening up the world of Freud’s writing and in particular his analysis of religion and for her lessons in holding one’s own theological commitments lightly in order to remain available and attentive to other perspectives. Many thanks to Professor Joe Schner of Regis College who offered helpful suggestion after reading the Proposal. I am enormously thankful for the knowledge, wisdom, and kindness of Professor Tom Reynolds of Emmanuel College who has been my guide in writing this thesis.

To my friends and family who believed I would complete this project I am eternally grateful. Most of all I could not have done this without the love and support of my son Paris Cameron-Gardos, my fellow traveler in the world of ideas, and of my husband Adrian d’Angelo whose intuitive understanding of the affective domain has been the greatest gift.
Table of Contents

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1 Gordon Kaufman ............................................................................................................ 8
  1.1 Kaufman’s Theological Journey ................................................................................... 8
  1.2 The Influence of Science ......................................................................................... 10
  1.3 Reconstructing the Symbol “God” .............................................................................. 13
  1.4 Kaufman’s Theological Anthropology ....................................................................... 17
  1.5 Responses to Kaufman ............................................................................................. 22

Chapter 2 The Complexity of Being Human ................................................................................ 28
  2.1 Overview of contributions to a fuller understanding of the uniquely human ............. 28
  2.2 Bowlby and Ainsworth ............................................................................................... 31
  2.3 Freud ........................................................................................................................... 33
  2.4 The Psychology of Religion--Kirkpatrick and Granqvist ........................................... 35
  2.5 Contemporary Attachment Theory. Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience .................... 39
  2.6 Implications for Kaufman’s project and his theological anthropology ...................... 43

Chapter 3 Nuanced Approaches: Toward a More Robust Theological Anthropology ................. 45
  3.1 Gordon Kaufman ........................................................................................................ 47
  3.2 Other Voices ............................................................................................................... 48
    3.2.1. Sallie McFague ................................................................................................ 49
    3.2.2 Marcus Borg ..................................................................................................... 50
    3.2.3 Daniel Maguire ................................................................................................. 52
    3.2.4 Summary .......................................................................................................... 53
  3.3 The United Church: A Case Study.............................................................................. 54
    3.3.1 A New Creed and A Song of Faith................................................................... 56
    3.3.2 Summary .......................................................................................................... 60
    3.3.3 Critical Observations on Kaufman and the United Church Statements.............. 61

Chapter 4 Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 65

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................. 69
It is the task of theology…to bring to consciousness these symbolic patterns (whether “religious” or “secular”), to critically examine them, and to reconstruct them in ways which will enable them to function more effectively in face of the problems of contemporary life.

Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*

An emotionally derived sense of religiosity as described by Freud, Kirkpatrick, Grandqvist and others may be much more rigid and impermeable to reasoned discursive argumentation since so much more is at stake than liberal values, that is, the very survival of the psychological self.

Marsha Aileen Hewitt, *Attachment Theory, Religious Beliefs, and the Limits of Reason*
American theologian Gordon D. Kaufman’s self-assessment as one whose “thinking [is] in many ways unrepresentative of traditional Christianity and perhaps much modern theology as well…” accurately describes his minority position as a theology passionate for contemporary science, and his emphasis on the importance of cross disciplinary and cross cultural collaborations.\footnote{Gordon D. Kaufman, \textit{God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 169.}

I first read Gordon Kaufman’s work several years ago in the Research Course. Kaufman’s essay “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity” was assigned reading early in the term. It was the most riveting piece of theological writing I had read up until that point. I was struck by Kaufman’s passion and clarity as he laid out his proposal for reconstructing the symbol “God.” At last I had encountered a theologian who boldly addressed the question which seemed to hover below the surface of much contemporary religious thought—the disconnect between a scientifically based worldview (unquestioned by most mainline Christians) and a widespread acceptance of ongoing references in hymns, sermons, and study groups, to an anthropomorphic God who hears prayers, created the world, and is a source of strength and comfort in times of trouble.

My happy musings on Kaufman's essay were abruptly interrupted by one of my much younger classmates who denounced Kaufman as a heretic and certainly not someone we should be reading. Theirs was no well-constructed argument but rather an emotional plea for erasing distressing ideas which had come uninvited into my classmate's life. Rage, anger, and perhaps fear were apparent in my classmate's heightened colour, shaking voice, and defensive body
language. All the more surprising since they had recently shared that their educational background was in the biological sciences.

We moved on. After the tumult died down I interpreted and filed the outburst under youthful religious enthusiasm, lack of experience in the real world, and a somewhat surprising gap in knowledge for a person who aspired to ordained ministry. My supercilious elder attitude blinded me to the fact that in that moment I had been privileged to witness the depth and emotional significance of belief in a personal God presence. As I moved on through more courses and gained insight, I began to appreciate the complexity of the issue. Thanks to my classmate’s outburst the seed of this thesis was planted. Over time my appreciation of Kaufman would deepen along with a growing certainty that he had not sufficiently explored the emotional undercurrents which present challenges to a reconstruction of the symbol "God.” Reason and logic alone, characteristic of Kaufman's argument, are no match for a deeply embedded need in many people for an emotional sense of connection with what is considered divine.

Kaufman’s theology draws almost exclusively from cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecology as the grid on which contemporary Western visions of reality are based and which must be used as the measure of what is credible for reconstructing the symbol “God” appropriate to address the crises of our times. However, the result overlooks the contribution of disciplines such as psychology and anthropology which help us understand the emotional aspects of our individual and phylogenetic development. Because of the extremely limited considerations of the affective domain in his reconstruction of the “God” symbol, Kaufman pays too little attention to the emotional challenges involved in eliminating the personal relationship with God. Substituting “Serendipitous Creativity” for a variety of God-concepts such as Creator, Sustainer, Father, Mother, Divine Protector, poses challenges to believers for whom a relationship with a personal
God brings meaning to everyday life and consolation in times of crises. While Kaufman’s theological reconstruction may be credible in light of modern science, it may not be immediately relevant for many. Attendance at worship in most mainline Protestant churches attests to the continuing affirmation of an anthropomorphic God who blesses, protects, hears prayers, and who “numbers the very hairs of your head” (Matthew 10:30). An important criterion for the divine to be meaningful is relatability, criteria that outweighs the importance of coherence with a scientific worldview. The deeply embedded reality of relationship permeating all aspects of human experience, including the religious, is explored further in Chapter 2.

The 2011 United Church Observer survey “What You Believe” invites further research into the question of the experience of a personal relationship with the divine in United Church members and adherents. The survey results indicate that 92% of respondents affirmed their belief in a God with whom they had, or desired to have, a personal relationship. Most used the term “Creator” and although some respondents were open to feminine representations of God, there was little difference in groups characterized as Mainliners, Traditionalists, or Intuitives in their positive assessment of a personal human-divine relationship.

This thesis explores Kaufman’s work specifically with respect to his theological anthropology and suggests that some of the inadequacies of Kaufman's reconstruction of the symbol "God" may be addressed by insights from attachment theory, the psychology of religion, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience which can supplement Kaufman's singularly cognitive
emphasis by adding the significance of the affective domain in the human-divine experience. The intention of this thesis is to show the importance of these insights but does not include the construction of an expanded theology. Kaufman’s project is not lacking in meticulous articulation of the conviction that symbols must be credible for our times; however it does display a failure to directly address Kaufman’s own intuitive sense that cognition, agency, responsibility, and self-consciousness might not provide a complete map of that special trajectory which is humanity. Kaufman’s reluctance to probe further on this issue can perhaps be explained by the fact that he did not know how to approach the emotionally charged convictions which may emerge in discussions about the attraction to personal images of God.

My thesis will critically assess Kaufman’s view of the normatively human, as revealed in his theological anthropology, in light of past and current research in interdisciplinary fields that focus on the affective domain in human life. Doing this will provide the platform for a fuller appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of Kaufman’s reconstruction proposal, probe the limits of his vision of the uniquely human and assess his goal of constructing a symbol system capable of helping us meet the crises of our time.

The methodology I incorporate involves first, a critical exposition of Kaufman’s work to reveal the evolution of his theological orientation, to explore his focus on science as the arbiter of a concept of God credible for contemporary life, and his radical reconstruction of the symbol God as a viable alternative to an anthropomorphic divinity for orienting people to effectively address the crises of our times. Second, I propose to stretch the parameters of Kaufman’s assumptions about what is uniquely human by interrogating these assumptions in light of knowledge available from research on the affective domain that provides insights into the continuing inclination, for many, to seek a human-divine relationship. An exploration of a more nuanced picture of what constitutes a human self available through dialogue with evolutionary
psychology, neurobiology, the psychology of religion, and the practice of psychoanalysis offers a lens through which to assess both the potential and the limitations of Kaufman’s reconstruction project. By supplementing Kaufman’s emphasis on higher cognition and language with knowledge about the processes underlying human development, we gain a more complete and more complex picture of the uniquely human. Kaufman’s own scientific imagination, his passion for expanding interdisciplinary work, and his openness to a diversity of perspectives is consistent with this approach. Thus, the method of this thesis is a critical analysis of Kaufman that compares and augments his theological anthropology with knowledge from the human sciences, and actually serves Kaufman’s own methodology by extending the boundaries of his inquiry into the uniquely human.

This project falls within the field of constructive theology as well as the field of critical theology which Kaufman defines as a discipline which engages in “the most radical sort of questioning of its own commitments…an umbrella discipline [which] could provide the sort of context that would facilitate this kind of examination and assessment of diverse living frames of orientation today.” Engaging Kaufman’s theology in conversation with other disciplines meets these criteria.

The thesis is organized in an introduction and four chapters.

Chapter 1 deals with Kaufman's theological journey, the influence of science on his project of reconstructing the symbol "God" Kaufman's view of the uniquely human, i.e. his theological anthropology, and responses to Kaufman’s theology. Kaufman’s Mennonite faith orients him to an interest in pragmatic rather than doctrinal issues in Christianity. Paradoxically, for one so determined to explore how Christianity can become relevant to contemporary human crises, the work itself may seem to some “abstract and speculative.” With a conviction that

contemporary cosmology, evolutionary theory, and ecology must play a part in any assessment of religious symbols, he launched his project to reconstruct the symbol “God” appropriate for our time. Evaluations of Kaufman’s theology include appreciation of the unique theological undertaking as well as criticisms of his singularly Western viewpoint, the limitations of his vision of the essentially human, and concern about his positive views on modernity.

Chapter 2 explores an expanded view of what is uniquely human by presenting an overview of Attachment Theory, Freud as a pioneer in providing insight into the human-divine relationship, the work of John Bowlby, the contribution of contemporary neuroscience, and the psychology of religion. The picture of the human self that emerges is more complex than Kaufman’s and challenges the likelihood that a concept of God entirely lacking an emotional component will be accepted by most believers. The focus of this thesis is an exploration of whether Kaufman’s notion of God credible for our time connects adequately with believers’ need for affective relationship. The issue of whether the notion of God is viable or altogether dismissible is not part of this discussion.6

Chapter 3 explores examples of more nuanced approaches to the challenge of acknowledging both a scientific worldview based on cosmology, evolutionary biology, and the reality that a theological anthropology must include an understanding of the critical part the affective domain plays in religious experience. The work of three theologians of Kaufman’s generation, Sallie McFague, Marcus Borg, and Daniel Maguire, is referenced in a discussion of the significance of emotion in their perceptions of God and their theological evolutions. It is noted that while all three are in basic agreement with Kaufman’s project to make Christianity credible for our time, they differ from Kaufman in their emphasis on personal experience and

6 In Chapter 1 Kaufman’s rationale for abandoning the anthropomorphic God symbol is presented as an important part of his process. Similarly, in Chapter 3 Maguire’s reasons for proposing the possibility of Christianity without God are presented as part of his religious orientation. In neither case is this the main focus of the discussion.
emotional response as an integral part of their theological perspectives. The United Church’s faith statements, particularly *A New Creed* and *A Song of Faith* are referenced to explore how a church that aims to be responsive to its members’ emotional reality as well as coherent with scientific worldviews navigates this challenging terrain.

In Chapter 4 I evaluate Kaufman’s project in the context of his emphasis on language, cognition and moral agency as the uniquely human. In light of research from the affective domain Kaufman’s theological anthropology is found to be limited. However, I suggest that on the basis of his underlying motivation, i.e. to develop a God concept that will orient human beings to successfully confront the crises of our times, there may be common ground.

Kaufman’s work merits attention for a number of reasons. He nudges us to reconsider our understanding of “God” not as a doctrinal issue to be solved for all time but rather as a practical issue for our time as we face unprecedented human and ecological crises. He sees the traditional image of an anthropomorphic divine being as a stumbling block that cannot be reconciled with scientific Western understandings of evolution and cosmology and thus prevents Christianity’s full engagement in the world. His theological anthropology admittedly presents a limited version of what is uniquely human. Ironically, for one so fascinated by science, his focus on the sciences that have no direct relationship to human functioning is a limiting factor in his project. My modest contribution to Kaufman commentary will be to point out this limitation and its implications, a perspective that appears to be absent in other commentaries. In the spirit of Kaufman’s interdisciplinary focus and his openness to new knowledge, I propose as a suggestion, which can be further developed in other works, that a wider perspective on the uniquely human is compatible with Kaufman’s goal of equipping contemporary human beings to face the crises of our times.
Chapter 1
Gordon Kaufman

In Chapter 1 I explore aspects of Kaufman’s religious background, historical context, and education that provided the impetus for his project of reconstructing the symbol “God.” His interest in the 20th and 21st century scientific worldview, particularly in cosmology, evolutionary science, and ecology is shown to be the basis for his assertion that an anthropomorphic God symbol can no longer be either credible or useful in orienting human beings to address the crises of our times. I assert that his theological anthropology that identifies higher cognition, language, and moral agency as the defining characteristics of the uniquely human presents only a partial picture of a more complex and relationally based reality.

1.1 Kaufman’s Theological Journey

Raised in a devout Mennonite family in the academic community of Bethel Mennonite College, Kaufman was set on a lifelong path of loving human relations and service to others. His Christian pacifism, a central tenet of Mennonite faith, set him apart from the patriotic fervor of most of his contemporaries and in WWII he served as a conscientious objector. His membership in what Kaufman terms a “cognitive minority” led him to “be suspicious of certain practices and beliefs taken for granted by most Americans, as well as of some of the major claims made by mainstream Christianity…”7 As he expanded his intellectual and social horizons, the positive result of this stance was a determination to value minority standpoints and the “importance of affirming…the pluralism of human religious and cultural life as a whole.”8

---

8 Ibid.
Kaufman’s intellectual and spiritual quest led him to transition from the neo-orthodoxy of his student years (influenced by Barth’s writings and personal contact with Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich) to a gradually evolving realization that, for him, the task of theology “must… be the construction of an adequate construal of reality for today.”

Central to this task is the reconstruction of the Christian symbol God “no longer …lodged in a creator-agent (a concept no longer intelligible as will soon be more fully explained)” but in a conception of God “appropriate to focus human devotion and orientation in today’s world.” Kaufman’s concept of a de-reified and de-personalized ultimate mystery resonates with contemporary cosmology, evolutionary theory, and ecology: contemporary cosmology speaks of an ever changing universe rather than a fixed creation; evolutionary theory tells us of a billions years long process that led to human life not the creation of an original couple in the Garden of Eden; ecology situates human beings in the web of life not a special creation charged with having dominion over the rest of sentient and non-sentient creation. Kaufman’s project opens out into a position that maintains that our very survival as a species (in Kaufman’s terms our position as bio-historical beings on a special “trajectory” of creation) depends on an ongoing relationship with the creativity without which human life would perish. God is affirmed but reconceived “as a particular form of creativity and ordering going on within the world, namely that serendipitous ordering which has given rise (among other things) to the evolution of life on planet Earth and the emergence of human beings, and which continues to sustain us and to move us toward a more profound humanization.”

For Kaufman, a reconstructed concept of God answers a two-fold need—acknowledging that we must use all our accumulated knowledge resource to confront the

---

12 Ibid., 346.
crises we face as a species while being ever cognizant that we remain incapable of understanding the ultimate mystery underlying all that is, including our own limited place in the cosmos. This dialectical tension, found in the theocentric traditions, is one that theology must reconstruct in order to “focus human devotion and service on that which would bring human fulfillment (salvation).”

1.2 The Influence of Science

Kaufman’s reconstruction of the symbol “God” rests on the foundation of a 20th and 21st century scientific worldview. In his 2001 essay “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity” Kaufman explains the need for a reconstruction of the God symbol by referencing knowledge from the fields of cosmology, evolutionary theory, and ecology. Having long since moved beyond the ancient Biblical conception of “earth and its immediate environment…as all that existed” contemporary cosmology speaks of a vastness of space and time—a universe having “come into being in and through a “big bang” some 12 to 15 billion years ago” whose dimensions are beyond human comprehension. In view of this, Kaufman points out that the idea of “some almighty personal being who existed before and apart from the universe and by all-powerful fiat brought it into being…” is by today’s standards incredible. Natural selection and evolutionary science, so aptly described by Daniel Maguire “go around to the back of the mountain and creep and crawl in itsy-bitsy steps up the gentle slope to the summit, finding clues for some things along the way.” Only recently (in evolutionary time) has an agential species appeared. Since the development of agency has taken millions of years after the first appearance

13 Ibid., 305-7.
14 Kaufman, “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity,” 410
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
of life on earth, it is not possible to credit a preexisting agential supernatural being with any decisive action, let alone the creation of a universe.

Kaufman urgently counsels that our continued existence depends entirely on the supportive ecological framework that developed over billions of years. Human determination to master the planet has long blinded us to the fact that whether our tiny "niche is Earth's ecological web" will implode or continue to sustain us depends on the health of the whole planet. Therefore, there is human responsibility for the planet, which reconstructing theological concepts helps to highlight.

Doubtless we are biological beings, the result of billions of years of incremental evolutionary movement, living in a tiny part of the universe in a narrow niche of ecological support. As well as biological beings, it is equally important in Kaufman’s theology that we are historical beings. This is the content of Kaufman's scientific worldview. Yet for Kaufman there is an equally compelling question that must be explored. Although our understanding of the cosmos and the evolutionary unfolding that has resulted in the existence of our species is necessarily fragmentary (and in fact must be regarded in itself as a human construction), the picture we have is sufficient to help us understand our bio-historical place in the bigger picture.

However, “…that human existence is evolutionary-historical, in no way settle[s] the religious and metaphysical issue about the ultimate context of human life…” Kaufman explores the question of what we are to make of our place in the universe by contrasting two “great metaphorical frame[s] which we have inherited from antiquity.” The first alternative “conceive[s] the evolutionary-historical development here on earth…as transpiring within an

---

20 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 252.
21 Ibid., 252.
eternal structure of things which follows essentially the same patterns forever.”

The second alternative sees life on earth “as a part, and expression of, a cosmic evolutionary-historical process that characterizes or pervades all reality.” Kaufman notes that “a great divide among human civilizations between these two fundamentally distinct perspectives” has existed. In the first instance, Kaufman notes, life occurs “within a system of great cosmic cycles, a pattern common to much Hindu, Buddhist, and Greek thinking.” In the second instance, “change is more fundamental than structure: all structures come into being in the course of time and eventually pass away again in time.” Kaufman notes that religious traditions that have taken this view as primary are essentially “the descendants of ancient Israel (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, but also Marxism, and modern secular humanism)” where “this perspective reached its most influential early articulation.”

For Kaufman there can be no final answer to which perspective is “correct” since neither can be verified by any means currently available. However, verifiability aside, Kaufman finds that the second perspective, a vision of the cosmos and human life characterized by “emergence” meaning that “the world is so constituted that under certain conditions new and unexpected forms, forms which are novel and perhaps unprecedented, may come into being” is preferred for a number of reasons. It reflects what we know about evolution; it coheres with the ancient wisdom of Israel that history is unfolding toward “a new heaven and a new earth” and therefore provides a reason for human beings to act responsibly in co-creating a world of justice and peace in the niche we occupy.

---

22 Ibid., 251.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 252.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 253.
29 Ibid., 259.
In his reference to “emergence” Kaufman cites the description provided by J. Bronowski in a 1970 article in Zygon in which Bronowski asserts that evolution “gives the arrow of time a barb which stops it from running backward; and once it has this barb, the chance play of errors will take it forward of itself.” This description fits well with Kaufman’s conception of humans as bio-historical beings moving incrementally forward toward the realization of a more and more humane existence. Kaufman’s commitment to creating a theology that was credible by being in step with a scientific worldview was longstanding, extending well into his later years. A serendipitous meeting at a conference on emergence led to a personal and collegial relationship with complexity theorist Stuart Kauffman. In 2009, the unlikely pair—Mennonite theologian Gordon Kaufman, and atheist biologist-complexity theorist Stuart Kauffman—co-taught a course on Emergence/Creativity and God that addressed issues of how to live one’s life in the face of enormous uncertainties: we don’t know what will happen, might happen, or even what can happen. The loss of certainty concomitant with the replacement of an anthropomorphic God with “Serendipitous Creativity” was a theme Kaufman had addressed in his reconstruction project.

1.3 Reconstructing the Symbol “God”

Kaufman lays out the details of his reconstruction project in a several works that form the background of his project to reconstruct the symbol “God.”

In two autobiographical essays Kaufman offers us glimpses of the experiences that ground his theological project. Several themes emerge from his Mennonite background. The

-----

30 Ibid., see footnote 9, 480.
32 The primary literature comprises the following: “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage” (1994); “The Development of My Theological Thinking” (2004); An Essay on Theological Method (1975); In the Beginning...Creativity (2004); “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity” (2001); In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology (1993).
emphasis on works rather than faith-claims as the appropriate response to Jesus’ teachings\textsuperscript{34} is important. Also worthy of note is Kaufman’s confession of being “tone deaf” to any sort of religious experience. This reminds us of Freud’s response to what his poet friend Rolland termed the “oceanic feeling” and which Rolland credited as the basis of religion. Kaufman, like Freud, confesses that he has no personal experience of what some might call mystical experiences and while acknowledging with interest that others may have had such experiences, he regards their interpretation of such an experience as a “categorical mistake.”\textsuperscript{35} No doubt people do have experiences they believe bring them close to the divine but in Kaufman’s estimation these mystical moments do not provide a credible basis for knowing God or building a theology. For Kaufman theology is a human construction whose purpose is practical—to orient people to contemporary life.\textsuperscript{36} The task is to align a re-construction of Christian symbolism with the insight that science gives us about “our place in God’s universe and our responsibilities in God’s world [as being] much diminished from what our traditional stories and images have suggested.”\textsuperscript{37} Kaufman’s pragmatism inclines him to a greater interest in the human capacity for conscious thought and rational decision making than to the more elusive emotional realm. This theme will be further explored in the section on Kaufman’s theological anthropology.


\textsuperscript{34} Kaufman, “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage,” 177. Kaufman states that “My own theological stance has always been informed by this conviction [that the transformed life as presented in Jesus’ life, ministry and death] about the priority of life...over formulations of doctrine or belief.”

\textsuperscript{35} Kaufman, “The Development of My Theological Thinking,” in \textit{In the Beginning ...Creativity} 109-10 Kaufman writes that while “mystical experience has continued to interest me, this has always been from a distance, so to speak: I seem to be ‘tone deaf’ with respect to so-called religious experience. When others speak of their ‘experiences of God’ or of ‘God’s presence,’ or the profound experience of ‘the holy’ or of ‘sacredness,’ I simply do not know what they are talking about. . . . I have long since concluded that talk about ‘experience’ of God involves what philosophers call a ‘categorical mistake,’ and thus should not, therefore, be engaged in.”

\textsuperscript{36} Kaufman, “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage,” 179. Kaufman writes that “It became evident that theology is, and always has been, a work of the human imagination, creating and recreating overall perspectives of human life in the world” and whose task is...[to] “imaginatively (re)construct a Christian world picture which could effectively provide orientation for life today.”

In *An Essay on Theological Method* Kaufman discusses the challenge of establishing an appropriate theological vocabulary on the basis of “religious experience.” For Kaufman, there is no “pre-linguistic experience” of transcendence or ultimacy, or the infinite. Although he stresses the social basis of all individual experience, he asserts that at every juncture this is language based. Language is the only path by which raw experience assumes a meaningful place in human development. He endorses a Wittgensteinian outlook where etymological and lexicographical research is the path to understanding the meaning of “experience.”

*In the Beginning . . . Creativity* deals with the need to move beyond the traditional Christian anthropocentric focus where God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness address the existential issues of despair, anxiety, guilt, and meaninglessness. Kaufman asserts that the problems we face today are a great deal more catastrophic than personal angst. In the face of an unfolding ecological disaster, continuing to serve and worship a God seen as an omnipotent saviour may impair our ability to address the destructive momentum we ourselves have created by mitigating responsibility.

Underlying Kaufman’s point is “his analysis of humans as the creators and bearers of cultural and linguistic systems.” Three themes emerge: there can be no claim to final certainty since all worldviews are the products of human imagination; these constructs are historical, being continually transformed according to changing circumstances; these worldviews function to orient and guide humans in the practical aspects of life and are therefore context driven.

Kaufman does acknowledge that he is aware of the emotional, social, and psychological issues embedded in a comprehensive account of human nature as it touches on the human-God relationship. For example, after enumerating the many negatives attached to the traditional conception of God he goes on to admit that “Despite these many shortcomings…it is clear that

---

39 Davaney, 171.
40 Ibid., 171-2.
the traditional western conception of God, based on the model of the self-conscious and dynamic human agent, has been (and still is in many quarters) of great effectiveness in the ordering and orienting of human life.”41 He affirms: “It is to the community of selves in interaction that we must look for the actual locus of the human, not the individual self, the ego.”42 Kaufman seems to anticipate a more nuanced investigation of the complex question of the human-God interface and its relationship to human-human connection. Kaufman’s interest in the contributions that other fields can bring to theology in seen in his positive assessment of both Marx and Freud, the class struggle, and psychoanalysis understood as vehicles which enlarge the scope of human agency.43

Although Kaufman points out many positive outcomes of reconstructing the symbol “God,” his ambivalence about sharing these ideas with non-theologians becomes apparent in his discussion of how pastors, while needing to be theologically educated themselves, should concentrate on serving the individual needs of congregants and not attempt in any overt way to educate their flock on the significance of a reconstructed God symbol.44 His separation of theology and pastoral work seems to undermine the very foundation of his argument that the symbol “God” must be reconstructed if it is to have meaning for the crises facing humankind. His rationale for continuing to use the term “God” because of its traditional connection with images of a loving father seems to undercut his own argument and introduces a peculiar irony into his work. However, this ambivalence at the same time speaks to Kaufman’s awareness although perhaps not as fully articulated as we might wish, that his project is not completely realized.

In “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity” (2001) Kaufman responds to criticism that he has not dealt adequately with the question of theodicy in reconstructing the

---

41 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 272-3.
42 Ibid., 151.
43 Ibid., 173.
44 Ibid., 356.
symbol “God” as Serendipitous Creativity since morality cannot be ascribed to an impersonal force. Kaufman answers this criticism with his special trajectory theory. On the trajectory that gave rise to humans, Kaufman asserts that the emergence of love, specifically the capacity and need for agape-love, gradually evolved as a distinctive characteristic. Reflecting on the much diminished place of humanity in the totality of the cosmos, Kaufman asserts that a personal relationship with the anthropomorphic God of tradition becomes “no longer…appropriate of even imaginable or intelligible.”45 The context of our lives and the object of our concern must be the joys and tragedies of the tiny planet on which we find ourselves. The capacity and need for love is to be realized in human relationships as we work within the continuing trajectory which moves towards an ever more humane manifestation.

Kaufman’s sense of urgency around the need to reconstruct the symbol God in a form that will orient people to face responsibly the reality of contemporary life takes precedence over working through the complexities of human emotion as it relates to his project. Minimizing the place of the affective domain in the human-God relationship is a serious omission for we know from contemporary neuroscience, psychology, and psychoanalytic practice that much decision making goes on at the implicit rather than the explicit level and speaks to the enduring reality of deeply embedded successful evolutionary survival strategies. These topics will be explored in Chapter 2.

1.4 Kaufman’s Theological Anthropology

Kaufman’s categorization of humans as bio-historical beings grounds his theological anthropology. Our shared biological origins with all life forms that arose over billions of years of evolutionary development make humans part of the great web of life. While fully accepting our

biological roots, Kaufman’s main interest in probing the question of what is uniquely human tends to minimize biology and emphasize historicity almost as if biological issues were completely understood and accounted for while historicity remains an area where theological questions can be relevant. He underlines his orientation to the question of what is essentially human: “Although processes and events up to the emergence of self-consciousness and self-directive activities and movements can certainly be understood in largely evolutionary-biological terms, it is hard to see how specifically historical developments of this sort, including above all the emergence of historicity, are much illuminated by recourse to biological explanations.”

Kaufman locates humanity on a unique trajectory of creative mystery, completely dependent on planet Earth’s ecosystem for its survival and, at the same time adapted over millions of years to be historical beings. He asserts that “we humans have ourselves transformed that life into diverse forms of historical existence, and it is this our historicity which, above all, gives our existence its distinctively human character.” Kaufman summarizes his position:

This cultural inbuilding of our human nature means that our humanity has been created as much by history as by biological evolution. To be sure, the possibility of there being humans at all resulted from a process of evolution through some billions of years. But the actual emergence of distinctively human beings came about through the growth of historico-cultural processes that helped to push the development of homo sapiens in surprising but decisively important directions. We are, then, all the way down to our deepest roots as humans not simply biological beings, animals. We are biohistorical beings, and it is our historicity that gives our existence its distinctively human character.

It is telling that Kaufman dismisses reports of experiences of God, often thought of as mystical experiences, as a “categorical error.” Since these types of experiences fall within the domain of feelings, in Kaufman’s estimation they are more related to our biology than our historicity. They do not qualify for inclusion in a theological anthropology which could be

46 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 288. Italics mine.
helpful in orienting human beings to what Kaufman sees as the ultimate Mystery with which we must come to terms.

Language, a common set of symbols provided by each culture for the course of an individual’s development, sets the stage for self-reflection. Language is the engine that allows humans to develop a self, to become self-conscious, to make decisions that are not simply responses to environmental cues, and to develop higher order concepts such as justice, peace, and responsibility. It allows humans to store and analyze emotional states and thus sets us apart from our forbears in the evolutionary mosaic. In Western culture the development of the experience of an inner life is essentially a linguistic construction along the lines of Wittgenstein. For Kaufman, the domain of feelings, wishes, memories, desires, hoping, is made possible by “certain specific linguistic patterns and practices.”

To capture the evolutionary moment when humanity began to emerge as a separate entity, Kaufman shares his version of evolutionary history. He pictures the gradual development of “symbols and artifacts and new patterns of living and acting” occurring as one species of Homo formed first into “hordes of clever animals” who then developed into tribes. As interactions requiring more complex forms of communication developed, and as the group needed methods of maintaining and enhancing the social order, language grew. With the ongoing move to more sophisticated technologies, and the need to share knowledge with each successive generation, language grew more and more complex. Kaufman asserts that “from a very early time on, thus, human existence has been structured largely in socially developed linguistic and ritualistic terms, and the world and the self have been ordered and organized symbolically.” The ability to symbolize created an ever-expanding repository of references that were language based. This

---

49 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 165.
50 Ibid., 158.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 159.
development allowed our early ancestors to move out of the realm of immediate experience and into the realm of history making. In Kaufman’s view, language makes self-consciousness possible as well as shaping our experience and although “our language remains almost entirely unspoken in any particular moment, it nevertheless functions as the fundamental ordering principle of experience…”53 With language comes self-consciousness—the awareness that an “I” exists independent of the environment but connected to the larger “we” of parents, community, and ultimately the world. The self-conscious human makes decisions, exercises agency, and takes moral positions. Agency involves accountability. An agent is one “who is held accountable for what he or she does, and who holds herself or himself accountable.”54 “An agent is…a living process, a process continuously engaged in transformation of itself…as well as engaged in transformation of external realities.”55

Kaufman uses the term “normativity” to emphasize the separation in capabilities and potential between humans and the rest of sentient beings. It is these differences that for Kaufman provide a conceptual marker between biology and historicity and his interest lies primarily on the side of historicity. Historicity marks humans off from other species and is what makes even possible a discussion of normativity. Five points of normativity are enumerated: what is normative for human beings is directly and intimately connected with the historical aspects of our being and that which most clearly distinguishes humans from other forms of life; historicity only becomes possible when a balance between order and freedom, continuity and creativity is maintained; our future survival and the survival of all life demands that we take on much greater responsibility for the environment and the ongoing movement of history; we must know who we are and our history to assess what our real possibilities are; taking responsibility for ourselves as historical beings must include taking significant responsibility for the wider organic and physical

53 Ibid., 167.
54 Ibid., 147.
55 Ibid., 173-4.
networks to which we belong. As we see in Kaufman’s assessment of what is normatively human, knowledge and responsibility or moral accountability are the key attributes.\textsuperscript{56}

Kaufman cautions against adopting Jesus as the model of the normatively human. While the “mode of life “Jesus exemplifies…and requires of his followers…characterized by mercy, forgiveness, [and] healing [are] much needed in today’s world” there are significant negative issues connected to modeling normative humanity on Jesus.\textsuperscript{57} Kaufman mentions the fact that Jesus represents only half of the human race, and is a figure from an ancient socio-cultural setting unlikely to be transferable to contemporary history, and further, very significantly, that such an adoption can “legitimate and reinforce male and patriarchal social and cultural practices and institutions.”\textsuperscript{58}

In a discussion of the development of human agency and the emergence of the “I” in each individual person, Kaufman at times comes remarkably close to insights available from Attachment Theory and neuroscience (to be discussed in Chapter 2), and at other times veers far away from these insights. He remarks: “The I emerges into consciousness and intentionality as a feature of a physical organism that is already going somewhere…satisfying its own needs…seeking to nourish itself…to reproduce itself so that its species will survive.”\textsuperscript{59} The impression that the infant is in many respects like a newly hatched dragonfly is bolstered by Kaufman’s assertion: “At birth an infant has no conscious, deliberately chosen intentions of its own; its life is governed entirely by the blind drives and needs of an organism striving to live and grow.”\textsuperscript{60} Kaufman takes a decidedly classical Freudian interpretation with respect to the drives

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 126-8.
\item Ibid., 92.
\item Ibid. Also in “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage” Kaufman notes: “Doubtless the context of sharp and persistent feminist criticism of traditional theological procedures and points of view, by some of my own graduate students at Harvard Divinity School…in part accounts for both my methodological concern…with practical problems of human living and my growing openness to radical change in theological ideas.”
\item Ibid., 156.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
gradually becoming transformed into intentional behaviour but with the “I” remaining under threat in its effort to act intentionally as long as “behaviour...proceeds out of such unrecognized or unknown drives and desires...”\(^{61}\) Then, in what appears to be a remarkably prescient comment, suggesting that Kaufman does in fact recognize that relationality exists from the earliest moments of the infant’s life when he says “However, the emerging self is connected not only with its own body: it always stands in another set of relations as well, to other much more fully developed selves.”\(^ {62}\) Then, as quickly as it seems Kaufman has moved into a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the relational dance of development, he asserts that “…these other selves (usually the child’s parents) demand of it behaviour shaped according to patterns which they externally impose in place of the simple and direct satisfaction of the infant organism’s desires: regular feeding (not simply on demand)...”\(^ {63}\) Once again, Kaufman asserts his position that language and cognition are the human normative.

### 1.5 Responses to Kaufman

A variety of responses to Kaufman is presented in this section. With the exception of James Beilby and Daniel Maguire all include appreciation for the breadth, depth, and daring of Kaufman’s project. Molly Haslam raises issues around the exclusion of variously disabled in Kaufman’s definition of normativity. Sheila Devaney’s concern centres on what she sees as Kaufman’s overemphasis on Western culture as the measure of worth. John B. Cobb, Jr. has serious reservations about Kaufman’s privileging of modernity and the effect this may have on ignoring evil. Beilby’s response is based on his belief that the human self is separate from the evolutionary process. Maguire seriously doubts that Kaufman’s de-reified divinity will satisfy believers and suggests that Kaufman’s assertion of his theism is poorly supported in his work.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 157.

\(^{63}\) Ibid. Italics mine.
Several logical and ethical issues arise when considering Kaufman’s vision of the normatively human. Since self-consciousness, awareness of historicity, and the ability to locate the self within a historical framework for the purpose of making choices that will benefit not only the self but also one’s community and ultimately taking account of the good of all people and the planet, we must ask where pre-linguistic and post-linguistic persons fit in Kaufman’s theological anthropology. Infants function at a pre-linguistic level for at least some time and even when they enter the stage of language development, it takes years before we can claim that they are fully agential beings. Where are we to place those who were once cognitively and linguistically capable but because of decline through age, disease, or accident have lost these capacities? Surely, Kaufman does not mean to exclude all the above from what we accept as part of normatively human. Paradoxically, in his determination to articulate a normatively human capable of accepting a reconstruction of the God symbol and applicable to the diversity of a global village, he has drastically shrunk the parameters of “what sort of beings we men and women are.”

In *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability* Molly Haslam “explores Kaufman’s construction of the theological concept “human being and the degree to which the construction does not fulfill his requirement of appropriateness to human experience and the provision of meaning for human life…” While commending Kaufman for his methodology that takes as a starting point what is actual, rather than essential about human nature, Haslam concludes that Kaufman has, in fact, fallen into an essentialist stance in limiting human normativity to beings who have the capacity to exercise agency, engage in self-reflection, and to use symbols. Haslam does not dispute the significance of these capacities but sees a problem when only these

---

64 *In Face of Mystery*, 321.
Haslam proposes to reconstruct the theology of essential humanness based on Martin Buber’s relational understanding of human being which locates our humanity “in I-Thou relationships in which there is a mutual responsiveness of one to another.” In this vision of the essentially human, the intellectually disabled are included as full members.

Sheila Davaney, one of the people who helped Kaufman finalize the text of *In Face of Mystery* affords Kaufman a distinctive place among theologians who take human historicity seriously and who call for a radical revision of theology’s task. However she expresses concerns related to Kaufman’s focus on moral agency and his minimizing of tradition in shaping human life. She also comments that Kaufman’s theology, grounded in Western ideas of full human development, has a limited application in our contemporary multicultural world. In the sense that Kaufman envisions an inevitable and largely positive movement toward one world Davaney’s critique is valid. However, his voice is more prophetic than prescriptive. Kaufman asserts that “it is the unfolding of history itself that has brought us to this new quest for unity and universality in contemporary human existence” and that humanity’s growing realization that we must live together in the limited space we have on Earth is bringing us together. He also acknowledges to his readers that he writes “inevitably, from a modern Western Christian point of view and as a white male living and working largely in academia…”

John Cobb argues that Kaufman has invented a new genre of theology which deserves much praise but also requires much criticism. Cobb’s theological overlap with Kaufman is

---

66 Haslam, 30.
69 *In Face of Mystery*, 120.
70 Ibid., xv.
extensive including the incorporation of biology and cosmology, a focus on worldview as crucial, the inclusion of world religions, and the avoidance of theological authoritarianism. However, there comes a point where an essential theological divide cannot be denied. Two issues in particular concern Cobb. He believes that while Kaufman, like himself, understands traditional Christian beliefs as constructs, Kaufman, unlike Cobb, does not relativize contemporary theories in the same way that he relativizes Christian constructs and thus privileges modern worldviews.

At the heart of the difference is Cobb’s concern that Kaufman is not clear about the purpose and function of God. It seems to Cobb that Kaufman is presenting three versions of God: one that is the source of the entire cosmic-historical process; one that is the process itself; and one that seems to relate to only those features of the process that brought “humanity into being and move[s] us toward greater humaneness.”

Cobb has identified an outcome of Kaufman’s determination to make “God” fit into the scientific worldview while at the same time making “God” a force for the ongoing humanizing project. It is a conundrum that Kaufman cannot satisfactorily resolve. Kaufman does admit that the same creative forces that operate in the cosmos at large also permeate human history and are evident in the sometimes horrific and sometimes marvelous twists and turns of human project. All of this is a part of Kaufman’s proposal that is problem-laden but it doesn’t point to Kaufman ignoring historical evil as seems to be Cobb’s concern. Kaufman is clear about the urgent need to address evil in its many manifestations and asserts that the God symbol revisioned as Serendipitous Creativity will empower us to confront evils that we previously believed were divinely sanctioned.

Kaufman tries to deal with this problem by suggesting that humanity must “be very constrictive…about our projects and our creativity” staying within the bounds of influence

71 Cobb, 176.
72 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 278.
marked by our little niche in the cosmic order.\textsuperscript{73} He also refers to the possibility of a kind of “quasi-teleological” process in human historical development that seems to point to the unfolding of a more and more complex set of possibilities that must ultimately be seen as part of the mystery beyond our comprehension.

James Beilby, a professor of Systematic Theology at Bethel University, an evangelically oriented school, disagrees with Kaufman’s viewpoint that the human self is part of the evolutionary process. He also takes exception to Kaufman’s yardstick of humanization as a method of judging the adequacy of theological constructions. He finds Kaufman’s logic inconsistent in that it places humanization or human flourishing as its goal, but that Kaufman admits that we may never understand the meaning of human life. He also finds the concept of Serendipitous Creativity a questionable basis for inspiring trust and commitment, as destruction, suffering, and death appear to be an essential part of evolution.\textsuperscript{74}

Daniel Maguire’s critique of Kaufman’s theology addresses two issues. First, he does not believe that the abstract, neutered version of God will answer the needs of believers who want a relationship with a personal, anthropomorphic divine being. He sees the mental gymnastics involved in the reconstruction an unmanageable solution to an unsolvable problem. He would prefer a more honest synonym for Serendipitous Creativity, i.e. natural selection, which at least makes a convoluted attempt to pursue unconvincing arguments for Serendipitous Creativity being a viable contemporary God concept unnecessary. Second, Maguire brings to our attention an issue in Kaufman’s theology around Kaufman’s insistence that his theology is theistic. Maguire notes Kaufman’s remark that his move to a non-personal metaphor brings Christianity

\textsuperscript{73} Kaufman, “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity”, 418.
into “closer conversation with Buddhist, Taoist and, and Confucian views of reality.” and wonders if this signals a slide into non-theistic Christianity.\textsuperscript{75}

Building from these responses, my critique of the deficit in Kaufman’s theological anthropology and his reconstruction of the symbol God, stems not from his assertion that the human self is part of the evolutionary process but rather from his minimizing of any continuing significance of our biological roots in favour of privileging the development of human historicity and all that entails—language, agency, the capacity to make moral choices. Too often our biological roots and their emotional contours have been viewed as inferior to our higher cognitive abilities. We are poorer in our understanding of who we are as human beings if we ignore the complex archeology that each person possesses, a rich embedded history of our development as a species replicated in every individual life. Kaufman’s project is limited by his focus on language and higher cognition. There is much to be learned about who we are and can be from the silence between words, gestures, intonation, relationships based on wordless reciprocity, and experiences that cannot be bound by language. In order to supplement Kaufman’s vision of what is uniquely human, what we men and women truly are, in Chapter 2, I explore the contributions from other disciplines which provide a deeper and more comprehensive view of what is normatively human.

\textsuperscript{75} Maguire, 27.
Chapter 2
The Complexity of Being Human

Chapter 1 introduced Kaufman’s project to reconstruct the symbol God as Serendipitous Creativity tracing the historical, educational, and religious influences that led him to decide that his theological task was to construct a theology credible for our time and coherent with a scientific worldview. It was noted that Kaufman’s scientific interest that focused on cosmology, evolutionary theory, and ecology determined the approach he would take in assessing the credibility of religious symbols. Kaufman's assessment of humans as bio-historical beings was found to weigh heavily on the historical with limited interested in the biological aspect of humanity. His focus on higher cognition, language, and moral agency as normatively human combined with his lack of awareness and interest in the importance of the affective domain was identified as a limiting factor in his project. In the spirit of Kaufman’s interest in interdisciplinary work and his openness to other viewpoints, Chapter 2 explores contributions to a more complex view of the uniquely human and what impact this understanding may have on the viability of Kaufman’s project to reconstruct the symbol God.

2.1 Overview of contributions to a fuller understanding of the uniquely human

Exploring a more complex picture of human nature than the one Kaufman puts forward and its implications for Kaufman’s project is the aim of this chapter. This picture will be drawn from the fields of attachment theory, the psychology of religion, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience. It will help us understand why Kaufman’s proposal for a reconstruction of the symbol God may be shortsighted and limited in its capacity to be embraced as an alternative to the traditional anthropomorphic version of God. Kaufman’s proposal is logical, rational, and well argued but it may not resonate with many believers.
While Kaufman’s concept of the normatively human, focused on historicity, self-consciousness, and the capacity for moral accountability fits well with his project of reconstructing the God concept to cohere with a 20th and 21st century scientific understandings of the cosmos, by expanding Kaufman’s account of the normatively human we may better understand the persistence of belief in an anthropomorphic God. Exploring both historical and contemporary insights into the affective domain of human life—its attachment basis, pre-linguistic and sub-linguistic components—augments Kaufman’s theological anthropology and may open a path to seeing these diverse visions as complementary rather than incompatible.

In this chapter I will reference a number of authors each of whom has augmented our understanding of the significance of emotion in our concept of the essentially human. The chapter begins with a discussion of John Bowlby’s work in establishing that the quality of the attachment relationship with a primary caregiver has a profound and lasting effect. He proposed that attachment behaviour is a successful evolutionary survival strategy that increased the likelihood of infant survival in the face of environmental threats and theorized that as a result of the attachment relationship the child develops Internal Working Models (IMWs) of self and others that persist through life. Next is a discussion of Freud’s contribution. As Marsha Hewitt points out, many of “the most fundamental conclusions to date [of the psychology of religion and attachment theory and evolutionary psychology] bear out Freud’s interpretation of what he referred to as the universal, “deep psychic need” of human beings for a relationship with supernatural being(s).”76 Freud’s limitation was in differentiating different types of attachment: for him attachment to god(s) was always framed in terms of terror and helplessness.77 Illuminating other possibilities and expanding such limitations, Lee Kirkpatrick’s and Pehr Grandqvist’s contributions in the field of the psychology of religion offer resources that are

---

77 Ibid., 67.
discussed in the next section. Grandqvist’s work on social correspondence probes the role of parental religious orientations on their children. Among his other interests is the role of implicit processes in responses to attachment-activating messages in young theistic believers. Kirkpatrick is an important voice in unpacking evolutionary psychology’s contribution to our understanding of religion. Delving more deeply into the construction of the self, the next section highlights the Interdisciplinary work in the biological and psychological sciences in the work of psychoanalysts Alan Schore and Peter Fonagy, research that has revealed that “affective processes appear to lie at the core of the self…” and that the development of a human mind involves a great deal more than increasingly complex cognition.78 In a multitude of ways, each leads us to discover the richly layered emotional and developmental strata presupposed by Kaufman’s account yet unacknowledged by it because of his primary focus on language and conscious cognition as the most significant features of human personhood.

Notable is the extent to which interdisciplinary dialogue (a theme in Kaufman’s work) and the importance of acknowledging the insights of intellectual predecessors occurs in these writing. Both Kirkpatrick and Granqvist acknowledge their debt to Bowlby as they explore the attachment question in the field of the psychology of religion and both have incorporated recent interdisciplinary approaches in their work. Psychoanalyst Allan Schore’s work on the “emotional processes that mediate the fundamental capacity for self-regulation”79 melds with neurobiology and with Granqvist’s experiments with theistic believers accessing God as a successful strategy to regulate distress.80 This growing acceptance of the importance of the implicit as compared to the explicit reminds us of Freud’s lifelong fascination with the unconscious as the territory where the key to life’s mysteries resided and whose illumination would occur through the then new

---
79 Schore, xiv.
80 Granqvist, “Religion as Attachment,” 12.
science of psychoanalysis. His insight that understanding the working of the unconscious offers a more reliable prediction of behaviour than an understanding of the conscious now seems to be validated by advances in brain imaging.

2.2 Bowlby and Ainsworth

Bowlby’s practice in child psychiatry brought him into contact with children who had experienced trauma including long separations from their caregivers during World War II, hospitalizations, and institutionalizations. Bowlby’s research associate, Mary Ainsworth, created experimental situations which allowed observation of children and primary caregivers in situations of separation followed by reengagement. Their observations led to the development of categories of attachment—secure, insecure, and disorganized—which became the basis of further development in the field.81

Bowlby postulated that attachment behaviour and attachment relationships developed as a successful evolutionary survival strategy whereby the infant-caregiver bond provided protection from external dangers. From his perspective as a psychoanalyst he observed that the extent to which the caregiver was able to accurately “read” and respond to the child’s emotional state was highly predictive of long-term mental health. Of particular interest to our study of Kaufman’s project and the persistence of the belief in a personal God, is Bowlby’s assertion that “a religious group…can come to constitute for many people a subordinate attachment-figure, and for some people a principal attachment-figure…and that in such cases, it seems probable, the development of attachment to a group is mediated…by attachment to a person holding a prominent position within the group.”82 In opposition to much psychoanalytic thought at the time, Bowlby contests

the “regressive” or pathological” nature of such attachment and reminds his reader of “the vital role that [attachment] plays in the life of man from the cradle to the grave.”

Bowlby’s observation gives us pause to consider that in searching for a God concept that would orient us to address the crises of our times Kaufman may have overlooked the potential energy for this endeavour that resides in being part of a faith community. It is probably safe to say that few people in the pews are actively wrestling with the intellectual and emotional challenge of aligning their God image with contemporary cosmology, evolutionary science, and ecology. And equally safe to guess that most are feeling at some level, a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging may have a number of causes—belonging by long association, or having recently been warmly received, or even having been asked to take on a responsibility. This attachment in its many manifestations can be an energizing vehicle for confronting crises ranging from social justice issues to ecological crises. An orientation that allows us to face the realities of our world may be equally effective whether it comes from reconstructing the God symbol or from a strong sense of attachment. Of course, there is a dark side to this type of attachment. As history shows us, the power of attachment to a group or a charismatic leader can be manipulated to achieve catastrophic goals. Vigilance to movements and individuals who offer security through dehumanizing and demonizing others is required. Kaufman provides intellectual resources to counter this based on a rational inquiry into faith’s credibility and coherence with a modern worldview.

83 Ibid., 208.
84 Personal experience: several years ago the small congregation to which I belong made the decision to offer sanctuary to a refugee family facing deportation. The energy to accept this challenge came from a shared sense of belonging that sustained the original group. A wider and deeper sense of belonging developed as others not previously associated with the congregation and others from a variety of faith communities joined to help. Theological discussions about an appropriate God concept based on contemporary cosmology, etc. did not figure in an orientation to address the crisis.
2.3 Freud

One hundred years before Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s research into attachment began to experimentally validate the long term effects of the relationship between caregiver and child, Freud was making largely intuitive explorations into the significance of early life relationships. In Hewitt’s opinion “Freud anticipates some of the central tenets of what is now known as attachment theory in his argument that the origins of religion lie in the infant’s need for a parental figure that becomes gradually internalized within the developmental processes involved in the formation of self/other and the world at large.”

While Kaufman dates the development of religion and the creation of the symbol “God” to an evolutionary period where language and higher levels of cognition appeared, Freud locates their origins in the mists of pre-history—the band of brothers’ patricide of their feared, hated, yet loved father. Influenced by the work of Frazer, Darwin, and Robertson, and most of all by his search for an explanation of his patients’ emotionally charged father-son relationships, Freud crafted a psycho-myth in which “…the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually.” This “psycho-mythology of the primal horde is the narrative vehicle whose purpose is to illuminate the psychic truth that lies at the heart of religion and culture and the minds that produce them.” Monotheism and Christianity in particular offers the special presence of the personal God that could “recover the intimacy and intensity of the child’s relation to his father…”

---

86 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 233. Kaufman’s version of the emergence of religion focuses on humans drawing on “the resources of knowledge and wisdom and skill…” to diagnose the “more difficult problems and ills faced by the society.”
88 Hewitt, Freud on Religion, 50.
Freud pioneers the scientific exploration of the affective domain’s relationship to the human-divine relationship. That religion functions efficiently as civilization’s handmaid in repression is possible because of an underlying psychic reality. Freud posits that this psychic reality is connected to the child’s relationships with its parents, particularly the father. On one hand it is true that religious belief is an illusion. On the other hand it is also true that belief in God is based in reality—the emotional reality of early experience.90

As a lifelong student of culture, Freud approached the study of religion with curiosity, respect, and a sense of awe that a human construction has been able to hold such enormous sway over humanity. He brings his full intellectual arsenal to the task of deconstructing religious doctrine placing it in the category of “illusion” rather than “error.” Illusion is not the same thing as error “nor is it necessarily an error” says Freud.91 Illusion includes an essential element of wish fulfillment and is not open to proof. On this basis, religious doctrine fulfills the requirements of an illusion because it provides a wish fulfillment in the form of assurance about three fundamental, otherwise incapacitating anxieties: the anxiety of being helpless in an uncaring universe, of facing a world without a moral order, and the anxiety of being mortal. Freud agrees with his imaginary interlocutor that it would be “senseless to [try] to do away with religion by force and at a single blow.”92 He does however, hold out hope that human beings will gradually come to terms with life as it is, “withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies into their life on earth…”93 We hear echoes of Freud in Kaufman’s words: “We must come to understand that how we live out our lives and

90 Freud alludes to this question of “truth” saying “religious doctrine tells us the historical truth—though subject, it is true, to some modification and disguise—whereas our rational account disavows it.” The Future of an Illusion, 42. Further to this see Marsha Hewitt, Freud on Religion, 35: “Freud is arguing that while the beliefs flowing from this psychological process [internalization of the paternal parent] result in false propositions about external reality, they nevertheless contain a kernel of truth that has its origins in that reality.”
91 Ibid., 30.
92 Ibid., 49.
93 Ibid., 50.
take responsibility for ourselves on planet Earth…will have to be oriented much more in terms of
the overall context of human life…than traditional ways of thinking about God have
suggested.”

2.4 The Psychology of Religion—Kirkpatrick and Granqvist

Kirkpatrick approaches the need for “a good theory of human nature” for insight into
belief in God from two distinct yet overlapping perspectives—attachment theory and
evolutionary psychology. Kirkpatrick acknowledges his debt to Bowlby whom he views as
perhaps “the first truly modern evolutionary psychologist…drawing upon ethology and control
theory [who] conceptualized the attachment system as a functionally organized suite of evolved
psychological mechanisms, designed by natural selection as a solution to a recurrent adaptive
problem.” Kirkpatrick assesses attachment theory as “a value-neutral theoretical basis for
understanding many of the same aspects of religious belief in which Freud was interested.”
He attributes his continuing appreciation of Bowlby’s theory to his certainty that “there really is an
attachment system—in the same way that there really is say, a visual system or an eating
regulation system—that reliably develops in all humans.” He attributes the fact that “religion
persists with such tenacity, despite many intellectual forces to the contrary…[and in particular is
the reason] charismatic and evangelical churches continue to grow, [as] mainstream
denominations decline…” to the difficulty of maintaining attachment bonds in our contemporary

94 Kaufman, “On Thinking of God as Serendipitous Creativity,” 422-3. At this point we might
consider whether Kaufman’s proposal to ground God in a cosmological-evolutionary-ecological matrix
could offer a path to religion different from Freud’s ‘illusion.’
95 Lee A. Kirkpatrick, Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion (New York: The
96 Ibid., 186.
97 Ibid., 18-19.
society. He suggests that belief in a personal deity fulfills a need in cultures where feelings of alienation and loneliness are widespread. Kirkpatrick makes a convincing case that the perceived relationships between believers and God often tend to meet the established criteria for attachment relationships, i.e. establishing a closeness to God, turning to God in times of distress, using God as a secure base which provides the same psychological advantage as other secure bases, and seeing God as stronger and wiser than themselves. Kirkpatrick remarks that although “the old man with the white beard God is rejected by adults, it proves remarkably difficult for adults to think about God in abstract terms.”

While attachment theory goes a long way in explaining the individual’s need for a relationship with God, it does not answer the question of why people “find the idea of God or other supernatural phenomena plausible to begin with.” This question is better explored from the perspective of evolutionary psychology that premises that our evolved psychology has remained virtually unchanged since the late Pleistocene of about 100,000 years ago. In contrast “our ability to produce culture and the fact that our cultural evolution proceeds at a much faster rate than genetic evolution.” This chasm between genetic evolution and cultural evolution that is overlooked by Kaufman significantly undermines the credibility of his theological anthropology. Although humans have advanced in remarkable respects (compared to our animal relatives) the underlying platform on which human accomplishments rests remains the same as that of our ancient ancestors. Our emotional structure, where the believer’s relationship with the divine is seated, has not essentially changed. Our evolved faculties are designed to accomplish

---

99 Ibid., 157.
101 Kirkpatrick, Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion ,284. Kirkpatrick quotes S.J. Guthrie, Faces in the Clouds 1993: “recent theology would like to eliminate anthropomorphism but virtually all writers agree that theology can only guard against its grosser forms because eliminating all forms eliminates religion.”
102 Ibid., 269.
three basis tasks: to understand physical objects, to understand plants and animals, and to relate to other people and their mental lives.\footnote{Ibid., 270.} Such an elemental conception of what we are about, remarks Kirkpatrick, “may seem not to square with every day experience especially if everyday experience involves being an intellectual and interacting with scientists, philosophers, and poets.”\footnote{Ibid., 275.} Kirkpatrick argues for the religion-as-byproduct of evolved psychological mechanisms or systems hypothesis and locates the belief in supernatural beings as part of these evolved systems.

…[There are] two particular evolved psychological systems from which beliefs about supernatural agents seem to emerge readily and spontaneously: an agency-detection system and a theory-of-mind (ToM) system. [The agency detection system] is calibrated (by natural selection) in such a way as to err on the side of false positives rather than misses…because the relative costs of such errors were asymmetrical over deep time. Similarly, the ToM system is designed to analyze perceived agents in terms of their desires, goals, and intentions. These systems thus spontaneously produce high levels of psychological \textit{animism} and psychological \textit{anthropomorphism}, respectively, thus rendering notions of unseen gods with largely human-like characteristics plausible, memorable, and worthy of transmission to others.\footnote{Ibid., 332.}

Kirkpatrick’s insight helps us put the issue of an anthropomorphic God in a wider perspective. Attachment theory while extremely relevant does not fully explain the long human history of creating a wide assortment of deities of which the most recent and familiar to us is the God of the Abrahamic traditions. Kirkpatrick’s research supports the view that the inclination for religion-creating activity is a byproduct of other evolved adaptations, not an adaptation specifically evolved for religion-producing purposes. The agency detection system mentioned above is an evolutionary psychological system that works to identify what or who in the environment should be attended to in terms of possible danger or interest. Evolutionarily speaking it is better to err on the side of caution when identifying such an event as the consequences of ignoring it may be catastrophic. The other evolved system, ToM, works to
assess the intentions and goals of the perceived otherness in order to respond appropriately. In layperson’s terms, Kirkpatrick’s point is that for our early ancestors these systems would have made the move from assessing an experience in nature to attributing it to an agent to believing it would be advantageous to pacify, worship, and emulate the agent.

In his 2010 Godin Award Lecture, Pehr Granqvist pays tribute to Bowlby, Ainsworth, and Kirkpatrick who made, and are making, important contributions to attachment theory’s contribution to understanding the human-God relationship. After summarizing the early research done by Bowlby and Ainsworth, Granqvist discusses Kirkpatrick’s two opposing hypotheses relating to perceived relationships with God.107 The first, correspondence, proposes that “securely attached individuals, who possess positive working models of themselves and others, will come to view God [as] a reliable, secure base with whom one can have an enduring personal relationship.”108 The second, the compensation model, proposes that insecurely attached persons may “develop an attachment to God …as surrogates for unsatisfactory human attachments.”109

Developing more refined research techniques—as a successor to the Adult Attachment Interview—on the human-God relationship with subjects who profess belief in a personal relationship with God, Granqvist and associates use sophisticated subliminal priming techniques to establish a higher level of reliability than that gained through techniques such as self-reporting.110 This type of research has enlarged our understanding of the “correspondence” or “compensation” theories of attachment by the unexpected finding that “Participants with memories of having been sensitively cared for…increased their use of God to regulate the...
distress [caused by the attachment-activating message] whereas participants with memories of having been insensitively cared for decreased in their distress-regulating use of God…”

For Granqvist “There should be no doubt that emotions contribute to shaping the world and the way that we perceive it. Nor is there any doubt that religion is an important feature of the world. And there is no such thing as religion without emotion.”

2.5 Contemporary Attachment Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience

Recent thought about what comprises the essentially human challenges Kaufman’s supposition that the normatively human is found primarily in the higher cognitive domain. In “the last ten years a shift has occurred in science’s focus regarding what it considers to be the essential attributes of the human condition.” The view that we can influence the way we feel by conscious and voluntary cognitive processes is giving way to the realization that much of what happens for us as we “appraise and adapt to personally meaningful changes in the environment occurs largely at levels beneath conscious awareness.”

In their 2008 paper, Schore and Schore point out that “advances in neurobiology initiated in the last decade…have stimulated the transformation of classic attachment theory…” These advances have considerable impact on how we assess the adequacy of Kaufman’s conception of the normatively human. While Bowlby’s attachment research points to the connection between the original attachment figure and the lasting consequences on an individual’s relationship with the divine, modern attachment theory’s elaboration of the mechanisms that operate at the unconscious psychobiological level argues for individual development arising out of the

---

111 Ibid., 12.
114 Ibid.
relationship between the brain/mind/body of both infant and caregiver addresses more directly the question of how we become functioning humans. The dialogical exchanges between the infant and caregiver regulate the “infant’s postnatally developing central…and autonomic…nervous system and through this regulatory process an infant becomes a person, achieving a psychological birth. This preverbal matrix forms the core of the incipient self.”

Safety and security were previously considered the primary evolutionary reasons for infant-caregiver attachment. Shore and Shore’ research provides a new perspective indicating that from our earliest days and throughout life the right lateralized system is centrally involved in implicit processes and in the control of vital functions supporting survival and enabling the organism to cope with stresses and challenges. Other studies in neuroscience report that this early maturing right hemisphere is centrally involved in “maintaining a coherent, continuous and unified sense of self.” Right brain development (not left brain where language function is localized) is enabled by the dyadic partnership of infant and caregiver and it is here in the right brain where “strategies of affect regulation that act at implicit nonconscious levels” are encoded. Bowlby’s theoretical Internal Working Models are a concrete reality.

In contrast to Kaufman’s emphasis on language as the foundation of all that is uniquely human, research indicates that most of our human to human interactions depend on an underpinning of affective cues that happen so quickly that we can neither translate them into words nor consciously reflect on what is happening. As human beings we “rely extensively on non-verbal channels of communication…the verbal channel is a relatively poor medium for

---

116 Ibid. Italics mine.
117 Ibid., 12.
118 Ibid., 12. Schore and Schore quote O. Devinsky Right Cerebral hemispheric dominance for a sense of corporeal and emotional self. *Epilepsy and Behavior*, 1, 60-73.
119 Ibid.
expressing the quality, intensity and nuancing of emotion and affect in different social situations…” 121

The work of Peter Fonagy and associates moves our understanding of the far-reaching effect of early attachment exponentially forward and provides us with a remarkable insight into the uniquely human. A full exploration of their work is far beyond the scope of this thesis. I will limit the discussion to two issues—affect regulation and mentalization which can be seen as central to the underlying goals of Kaufman’s project to support contemporary people with appropriate orientations to meet the crises of our times.

Human infants are not born with the ability to deal with emotional distress and we cannot say that this is “learned” if by learning we refer to some conscious cognitive process. Rather “A dyadic regulatory system evolves where the infant’s signals of changes…in his state are understood and responded to by the caregiver, thereby achieving their regulation.” 122 Through this experience the infant comes to know that heightened emotional states do not signal a complete “disorganization beyond his coping abilities.” 123 Over time “negative emotions feel less threatening and can be experienced as meaningful and communicative” rather than a prelude to the complete disintegration of the self. 124 The sensitive caregiver reflects back to the child their “acute affective state accurately, but not overwhelmingly.” 125 This soothing may be done by “combining mirroring with a display that is incompatible with the child’s affect” that introduces an element or playfulness into the infant’s emotionally charged experience. 126


122 Peter Fonagy, György Gergely, Elliot Jurist, Mary Target, Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self (New York: Other, 2002), 37.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid., 38.

125 Ibid., 42.

126 Ibid., 42-3.
Affect regulation and mentalization, the capacity to recognize one’s own feelings, desires, thoughts, and motivations and the ability to distinguish these from the feelings, desires, thoughts, and motivations of others are inextricably connected in the attachment process. Fonagy presents a strong argument that from the earliest days and as a mundane occurrence, a sensitive caregiver “ascribes a mental state to the child with her behavior” and that this is “a process that is preconscious to both infant and caregiver, inaccessible to reflection or modification.” Thus the child’s ability to develop the awareness of his or her own mental states and the mental states of others depends on their experience of the caregiver’s mental world.

The popular and scientific movement toward crediting genetics over early environment in influencing development motivates Fonagy et al to move attachment theory to a new level involving a more complex view of attachment’s primary evolutionary function as the “contribution it makes to the ontogenetic creation of a mental mechanism that could serve to moderate psychosocial experience relevant for gene expression.” Fonagy et al posit that the early infant-caretaker relationship equips the infant with a neural processing system (Fonagy calls it the Interpersonal Interpretative Mechanism IIM) that is “a product of the complex psychological processes engendered by close proximity in infancy to another human being—the primary object or attachment figure.”

Mentalization and affect regulation processes initiated through the infant and sensitive caregiver dyad, eventually result in the ability to maintain organization in the face of tension, to understand one’s motives and desires as well as those of others, and “to function effectively in a stressful social world.” Beyond affect regulation directed to achieve goals in the external environment, Fonagy et al point to the ultimate level of affect regulation—“mentalized

---

127 Ibid., 53-4.
128 Ibid., 54.
129 Ibid., 107.
130 Ibid., 124.
131 Ibid., 98.
affectivity.”132 This concept “marks the adult capacity for affect regulation in which one is conscious of one’s affects, while remaining within the affective state.”133 Evolutionarily speaking this is noted as a goal “no less significant than …is the goal of acting on one’s emotions.”134

2.6 Implications for Kaufman’s project and his theological anthropology

This review of contemporary thinking on attachment in general and attachment as it relates to the human-divine relationship indicates that any attempt to discuss what constitutes the uniquely human that excludes emotional factors will be incomplete. Kaufman’s theological anthropology is limited by overstressing language, cognition, and agency as the uniquely defining characteristics of human personhood. Attachment theory, as it contributes insights into the human-divine relationship and human nature, supplements Kaufman’s vision by including the affective domain in all discussions of what constitutes a human being. As Marc Cortez notes, any theological construction of what it means to be human must be willing to engage with “other anthropological disciplines as legitimate dialogue partners.”135 The nuanced picture of what constitutes a human self available through an interdisciplinary dialogue with evolutionary psychology, neurobiology, the psychology of religion, and psychoanalysis, offers a wider lens through which to assess both the potential and the limitations of Kaufman’s reconstruction project.

Contemporary neuroscience raises doubts about Descartes’ dictum—Cogito, ergo sum—as an adequate description of human self. The long-standing focus on cognition as the key to understanding our human selves is giving way to an acceptance of the importance of implicit

132 Ibid., 96.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
versus explicit awareness across the range of human activities. Kaufman’s perspective, which might be summed up as “I think therefore I can rationally adjust my understanding of God to accurately reflect the scientific worldview.” is limited because of its singular focus on cognition, language, and agency. A less limiting definition of what we might regard as uniquely human will be attempted in the Conclusion.
Chapter 3

Nuanced Approaches: Toward a More Robust Theological Anthropology

In this chapter I address the challenge posed by the realization that both Kaufman’s bold attempt to make Christianity credible by reconstructing the symbol God and the enduring reality that we are formed and sustained in relationship must be considered in a theology that can be meaningful for contemporary religiously affiliated people. In Chapter 1, I traced the development of Kaufman’s thought that led him to propose a God symbol reconstructed as Serendipitous Creativity, a symbol that he asserted would cohere with a scientific worldview. His view of human beings as bio-historical, part of creation but also apart from creation, privileges language, higher cognition, and moral agency as the normative human characteristics. Indeed, his theological anthropology fits well with his preference for analysis over experience, and with his conviction that our capacity to be history changers offers the only possible solution for intervening in the potentially catastrophic situations we face as a species.

Assessing Kaufman’s version of the normatively human as too limited to include either human diversity or to describe the complexity of human functioning, in Chapter 2, I turned to research into the human self, both historical and contemporary, that reveals a normatively human much more complex than that proposed by Kaufman. Functioning more often at the non-verbal level, responding instantaneously at an emotional level, with a self constructed and nurtured through an intimate relational dance of pre-conscious yearning and response, this normatively human is complex and challenges Kaufman’s view of humans as normatively highly functioning cognitive decisions makers. In these richly layered emotional and developmental strata we find insights that help us understand, acknowledge, and respect the believers’ proclivity for a relationship with God.
The goal of Chapter 3 is to identify, describe, and comment on several examples of theological efforts that have combined a scientific worldview with an acknowledgement of the importance of the affective domain. The individuals and the institution chosen share many of Kaufman’s goals for Christianity in our time: that Christianity be open to evolving to meet the needs of human beings and an environment in crisis; that Christianity commits to increase inclusivity in all areas of human experience; that Christianity be a positive force in orienting human beings to live in harmony with the larger creation. The approaches taken go beyond Kaufman’s emphasis on higher cognition and recognize the enduring emotional components of our evolved psychology. The potential to resonate with these largely unconscious processes found in these examples may point to possibilities for supplementing Kaufman’s project.

Three contemporaries of Kaufman have been chosen as counter-voices to his focus on higher cognition as the marker of the uniquely human. The discussion will be brief, not venturing into an in-depth analysis but pointing out alternatives to Kaufman’s position on God that still fall within his methodological criteria. Sallie McFague, Marcus Borg, and Daniel Maguire each in unique ways demonstrate how including the emotional factor opens the doors to bridging the divide between scientific understanding and the truths of our human evolved psychology. McFague’s work on God metaphors points to her focus on relationship as the basis for re-orienting the human-God relationship from one of authority to one of intimacy. Borg searches and finds a meaningful replacement for the supernatural deity of his childhood in panentheism and in experiences that move outside the rational, cognitive, linguistically defined boundaries. Maguire, the non-theist in the group, exchanges an intimate relationship with the divine for a passionate love of the mythopoetic Sinai/Exodus liberation epic that continues through scripture to the New Testament. All of their work overflows with emotional references that round out Kaufman’s work by including experiential, non-linguistic, and literary elements absent in Kaufman’s more abstract and austere approach.
The United Church of Canada’s two most recent faith statements are then investigated as a case study in how a community of faith responds to the challenge of continuing to assert a relationship with God and to acknowledge the scientific truths of contemporary cosmology and evolutionary theory. The United Church is an example of a church that takes the modern context and its exigencies seriously and at the same time, addressing the emotional components of faith that have traditionally been important for believers.

The chapter begins with a brief recap of Kaufman’s project of reconstructing the God symbol and of his theological anthropology. It then moves to a discussion of McFague’s, Borg’s, and Maguire’s work. This is followed by the case study of the United Church’s recent faith statements. In all, by exploring these other approaches, this chapter may suggest ways that expand Kaufman’s project.

3.1 Gordon Kaufman

Kaufman focuses on reconstructing the symbol God within a basic symbolic pattern drawn from the Christian faith...employing elements grounded in the modern ‘secular faith.’”136 He concludes that an acceptance of evolutionary theory nullifies the concept of God as a Being but “the notion of God as the ultimate mystery of things, a mystery that we have not been able to penetrate or dissolve—and likely never will succeed in penetrating or dissolving” remains.137 Kaufman proposes that humanity developed on a “special trajectory” of creation which over billions of years has given rise to consciousness, human creativity, and love, possibilities unique to our place in the cosmos. Since Kaufman offers no hard evidence to support this special trajectory theory, it is fair to speculate that perhaps he offers it as some solace for human beings in a universe marked by unimaginable forces of creativity and destruction over which we they have no control.

136 Ibid., 180.
The uniquely human resides in our historicity. Over time humans “have ourselves transformed [our] life into diverse forms of historical existence, and it is this our historicity, which above all gives our existence its distinctly human character.” Language is the tool that allows the development of self-reflection, decision-making, and the development of concepts such as responsibility, peace, and justice. Higher cognition, moral accountability and the ability to reflect on the past and plan for the future are normatively human attributes. A number of questions arise regarding Kaufman’s viewpoint.

It may legitimately be asked what is “theological” in Kaufman’s theological anthropology since it seems that the God symbol reconstructed as Serendipitous Creativity is not a symbol on which human beings are to model their lives. This is one of several conundrums in Kaufman’s project. He is clear that human beings, representing only a tiny niche in the web of life, are to live within norms that include “productive creativity alone” and to do otherwise would “manifest monstrous hubris and arrogance.” However, Kaufman also asserts that the serendipitous creativity involved at the cosmic level is the same creativity behind the many trajectories of creation, one of which is the trajectory which gave rise to human life. He conjectures that serendipity may extend to the notion of the serendipity of history—“a creativity which often brings into being what appear…to be horrifying evils, as well as great goods.”

3.2 Other Voices

Kaufman’s Serendipitous Creativity is one approach to the challenge of creating symbols, metaphors, and concepts of the divine credible for our time. Looking briefly at the work of three theologians of his generation—Sallie McFague, Marcus Borg, and Daniel Maguire—presents an opportunity to consider alternative solutions to the challenge of how to approach and resolve the

138 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 109.
140 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 278.
God question, while acknowledging the truth of a scientific worldview and the reality of our complex human natures.

3.2.1. Sallie McFague

Like Kaufman, Sallie McFague asserts that “our time is sufficiently different and sufficiently dire” to require major changes in Christian concepts and metaphors from those that were useful in previous eras of history. McFague values the Hebraic roots of Judeo-Christian theism that addresses God as Thou and understands God as one who “wills, loves, acts, and responds.” She does not disagree with the use of personal metaphors to name God since for her God’s relationality is the prime issue. The problem is that the particular metaphors that have been upheld by tradition i.e. king, ruler, lord, and master, encode an imperialistic, distant, hierarchical divine presence. McFague believes that relationally oriented metaphors are needed to orient us to a God who is in relationship with the world and to encourage us to value relationship with each other. The possibilities of the Father metaphor have been too sullied by connections with authority and power to be useful. In taking on this challenge McFague mentions that she is answering Kaufman’s call to students of religion to deconstruct and reconstruct the central religious symbols to free them from suggestions of militarism or escapism and make them useful in the contemporary world. To this end she engages in a thought experiment of metaphor reconstruction grounding her choices of Mother, Lover, and Friend in sources of Scripture, Tradition, and Experience. Her aim is to express the love of God with images reflecting the most intimate human relationships.


\[142\] Ibid., 18.

\[143\] Ibid., 91. Kaufman is supportive of these metaphors as they relate to social and personal life in a way that more abstract metaphors cannot. He also supports naturalistic metaphors. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 337.
We notice that McFague’s theology depends largely on her personal beliefs about God, interpretations of Scripture that support these beliefs, and especially on personal experience. She shares the story of her lifelong attachment to God involving a series of “conversions” a tellingly evocative emotional description of a faith journey. From early childhood until the present McFague has been aware of God in her life. During her teenage years the sense of wonder was overshadowed by God the Great Moralizer of the Episcopalian church. In college she experienced an awe inspiring intellectual conversion after reading Barth. Then after a brief period of feeling detached from such a distant God her next conversion occurred after reading an essay by Gordon Kaufman. She describes this as both an intellectual and theological conversion that led her to learn about cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecology and helped her locate humanity in the larger web of life and creation. Still the missing and final piece did not come until she began to work with a spiritual director, practiced daily prayer and meditation and moved from talking about God to “becoming acquainted with God.”

3.2.2 Marcus Borg

Of the three commentators being discussed Marcus Borg is the most accessible to the general reader. The wide audience for his books and the enthusiasm generated by his personal appearances during his life attest to the fact that his perspective on Christianity had great traction with a wide audience outside the academy. Borg reports that the question of God “devotionally, intellectually, and experientially” has been central to his life. He sees his own theological evolution as mirroring Western human history in its journey of religious belief. The supernatural theistic all powerful being of his childhood became incredible in the face of a scientific

144 Sallie McFague, Life Abundant (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 4-9.
worldview. A deism that conceived God as the distant architect of creation who had no continuing involvement with human life that followed was found emotionally unsatisfying. Ultimately, in his thirties he embraced a God concept that met both his intellectual and emotional needs—panentheism. God is both transcendent and immanent: God is “more than everything, even as God is present everywhere. God is all around us and within us, we are within God.”146 This God concept is validated in his reading of the Bible where human-God relationships are often described as encounters with God and where affirmations of God’s presence in human experience abound. He has no issues with language that personifies God as long as it is not taken literally at which point it becomes both an intellectual and a spiritual obstacle.147

Borg places a high value on experiencing God as the most powerful venue through which life changing insights occur and that have the most powerful influence on how we “know” reality and how we are to live with ourselves and others. He refers to these events as connecting with the sacred or mystical experiences. In the three cases in his own experience there was a momentary or longer disconnect with the activities of normal life, an intense feeling of joy, a surge of appreciation for beauty in everything, a sense of intense connection, and “a non-verbal, nonlinguistic way of knowing marked by a strong sense of seeing more clearly and certainly than one ever has.”148 Although one cannot conjure at will these kinds of experiences, Borg does suggest that there are ways to soften our hearts to the sacred with intentional practices. These include group practices involving sacred sound, sacred music, sacred silence and individual practices such as nonverbal prayer.149 Although Borg and Kaufman both affirm Christianity as a meaningful pathway for orientating human beings to contemporary life, on issues involving the

146 Borg, 32.
147 Ibid., 34-7.
149 Borg, The God We Never Knew, 113-27.
value of experiential, nonlinguistic pathways to God they do not agree. As we know, Kaufman considers interpreting such experiences as reliable evidence of knowledge of God a mistake.

### 3.2.3 Daniel Maguire

My third choice may seem an odd one to include in examples of approaches that include the affective domain since Daniel Maguire takes an even stronger stand than Kaufman on the question of reconstructing the symbol God. I confess to finding the finely honed outlier, provocateur persona in which Maguire revels to be highly engaging. Non-theist, former Catholic priest, social activist, and eminent professor at the Jesuit Catholic university Marquette, dismisses outright Kaufman’s project as a viable alternative for the religiously affiliated. They will not accept Serendipitous Creativity as a substitute for an anthropomorphic God since it “does not become incarnate, have siblings, drink wine and even be accused of overindulging.”

He finds the work of Kaufman and others who attempt to reconfigure the God concept while maintaining they are faithful to Christian tradition suspect. He suggests that “Serendipitous Creativity” is a good synonym for “natural selection” and prefers the honest curiosity of those who work in that field to the divinization attempts of theologians who when faced with mystery insist on naming it.

It would seem that Maguire is a hard-hearted realistic on matters spiritual. But this is not the case. Maguire has abandoned a passion for God and substituted it with a passion for the revelatory epic contained in Scripture. He declares that “early on I fell in love with the revolutionary moral classic that began with the mythopoetic Exodus/Sinai narrative and then pulsed like a building leitmotif through the maze of Hebrew and Christian scriptures and traditions.”

For Maguire the contributions of Christianity do not rest on the three traditional

---

150 Maguire, 27.
151 Ibid., 3.
pillars of a personal deity, an incarnate divine Jesus, and the promise of life after death but rather on the great moral epic begun with the people of Israel and continuing in Christian scripture. Maguire understands religion as an emotional response to the sacred and is in fact “beginning of all virtue.” This response of awe and gratitude is “so much more important than an imagined personalized deity” and so much more appropriate for the crises we face. Maguire’s passion blazes across the pages as he endorses Bruggermann’s insight that the Bible is poetry that intends to push the reader and listener beyond their comfort zones. Poetry moves us, challenges us, and it sees “more deeply into the real and to what really might be.” The avowed non-theist Maguire values the place of emotion in religion more than the avowed theist Kaufman. In Maguire’s word, “Never underestimate the incisive power of metaphor.”

Maguire acknowledges that for believers who experience God as a personal friend, the loss can be horrific. However, he then reminds the reader that God-talk is ambivalent, inspiring both atrocities and heroic work and that “it remains a matter of dispute whether theism in human history has done more good or harm.” For Maguire the issue is not ultimately how we describe God or what attributes we assign to God since “deeper than hypotheses about ‘God’ are the critical urgency to respond positively and creatively to the marvel that is life.”

### 3.2.4 Summary

McFague, Borg, and Maguire have each experienced a theological journey. McFague describes hers as a series of ‘conversions.’ Borg describes his as an evolution of belief beginning

---

152 A position that many current members of the United Church would find quite foreign.  
153 Ibid., 183. Maguire sums up the foundational moral experience as the response “Wow!”  
154 Ibid., 159.  
155 Ibid., 161.  
156 Ibid., 166.  
157 Ibid., 182.  
158 Ibid.
with a childhood acceptance of a supernatural Being and cresting in an adult perception that God is within us and we are within God. Perhaps Maguire can claim the most dramatic transformation— from ordained Catholic priest to non-theist gadfly constantly annoying the Catholic hierarchy. This history of changing, growing, and questioning, they have in common with Kaufman along with accepting the relevance of a scientific worldview. They differ dramatically from Kaufman in a number of ways. First, the positions they put forward are based on personal experience rather than rigorous intellectual argument. Their experiences of God (in Maguire’s case his experience of the revelation of the Exodus/Sinai epic) are valued as the most significant aspect of their theological development. We can imagine Kaufman smiling benignly at the naiveté of believing that ecstatic moments of God awareness could be mistaken as reliable data on which to build a belief system. Second, all three of them value emotion as an important feature of their humanity. The crucial moments in their experience are recalled as being infused with emotion. Third, whereas Kaufman values convincing argument and logical progression of thought we see in McFague, Borg, and Maguire a willingness to embrace intuition, value evocative language, and invite the reader into their experience.

### 3.3 The United Church: A Case Study

Contrary to a popular perception that the United Church has no theology at all, in fact it has been “awash in theology” since its inception in 1925.159 Its four statements of faith, the *Basis of Union (1925)*, the *Statement of Faith (1940)*, *A New Creed (1968)*, and *A Song of Faith (2006)* each state their faith “in words appropriate to their time.”160 I will summarize the two earlier

---


160 All four documents are found in *The Manual (2016)*, 11-28.
documents briefly and focus in depth on the two more recent documents to with respect to the themes of God and theological anthropology.

The *Basis of Union* containing the Twenty Articles of Doctrine came into effect in 1925 following a twenty-three year negotiation among Methodists, Congregationalists, Local Union Churches, and a significant portion of Presbyterians. At this point God is seen as a king who “makes all things work together in the fulfillment of His sovereign design…” God hears and responds to prayer and will “grant us every blessing according to his unsearchable wisdom…” God of *The Basis of Union* is an anthropomorphic male deity, all powerful, unchanging, with a passionate desire to bring human beings humanity into “sonship” with Himself. God, as depicted in the 1940 *A Statement of Faith*, bears similar names to God in the Twenty Articles—sovereign Lord, compassionate Father, Creator, and Upholder. The shift in emphasis is seen in God’s activities. Here He is the Father who endlessly struggles to realize “His gracious purpose for man.” This God faces the fact that his highest creation has proven powerless to act justly and love mercy and is “unable of himself to fulfill God’s high purpose for him.”

In the 1925 document human beings are made in God’s own image, capable of fellowship with God, free to make moral choices (Article IV) yet “our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God …all men are born with a sinful nature” (Article V). Those who do not accept the saving grace of Christ, the only path to salvation, “shall go away into eternal punishment” (Article XIX). The reach of human responsibility is limited to what God requires of every person—to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. Not much changes when we look at The 1940 *Statement of Faith* except for the specific reference to the divide between humans and the “lower creatures.” Human have the capacity to share God’s “thought and purpose.”

---

161 Ibid., 17.
162 *A Statement of Faith*, V.
brought on by the decision to separate themselves from God’s purposes. Redemption is possible only through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

As is the case with all four faith statements, these two earlier documents respond to and reflect the social and historical periods in which they were created. *A Statement of Faith* reflects a shift in the emphasis in Western Protestant theology from before 1914 when “many liberal Protestants believed that God was intimately involved in earthly affairs and was guiding the faithful in creating the Kingdom of God on earth” to a period greatly influenced by the reality of war, depression, and the realization that humanity seemed to be descending into a downward spiral of terror and chaos. A grave disappointment in modernity and the loss of hope that science would propel humanity ever forward is reflected in the Introduction to the document: “If our purpose were apologetic we should have to use more of the language of modern science and philosophy. Because our purpose is affirmative we have as far as possible adopted rather the language of Scripture, a language which matches the supreme facts it tells of God’s acts of judgment and mercy.” Rather than “modern science and philosophy” whose failure to curb human evil is deeply felt, Scripture, pointing to human sinfulness and God’s transcendence is posited as a more reliable anchor for one’s hopes.

3.3.1 *A New Creed and A Song of Faith*

The social and cultural changes in the 1960’s affected North American theological discussions including those of The United Church. Two decades of neo-orthodoxy wound down as questions arose “about the transcendence and immutability of God and the language of faith

---


Prominent United Church figures such as Douglas Hall began to write about the end of “Christendom.” United Church Moderator Ernest Howse was surprised by the controversy that ensued after his announcement that he did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. This was the complex theological climate from which *A New Creed* emerged.

Few congregants joining in the beautiful words of “our beloved *A New Creed*” on a Sunday morning are aware of the complicated gestation and birth of this faith statement. The committee tasked with its creation presented the completed text to the 23rd General Council meeting in Kingston, Ontario on August 29, 1968. After discussion a motion was passed referring it back to the Committee on Christian faith “with the request that it be re-drafted in a manner that will give more adequate expression of the Christian Gospel for our time.” It was not until November 1968 that the Executive of General Council approved it for use and publication. *A New Creed* was further amended in 1980 changing “Man” to “We” and again in 1994 to add “to live with respect in Creation.”

Perhaps the enduring resonance of *A New Creed* can be explained by the fact that the words and statement used are “suggestive rather than definitive, allowing for them to be filled with personal content by those who say the creed.” The God of *A New Creed* is known to us through experience rather than doctrine. God is experienced as the host who welcomes us in God’s world. God is Creator involved in an ongoing creative project. God has “come to us in Jesus” but the tradition designations of Father and Son are omitted. We feel moved to celebrate God’s presence, not shrink in fear of God’s judgment. There is a comfort in God being with us.

---

166 Ibid. I have paraphrased Beardsall’s comments.
168 Haughton, 15.
We are not alone but rather part on an ongoing creative project that asks us to live respectfully with the rest of Creation.

Moving beyond older formulas, the United Church’s most recent iteration of a faith statement, *A Song of Faith*, is intended to be evocative and poetic in character

[It is] more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*, following the intention of *A New Creed*, which is to say it does not claim to tell the church what it *should* believe so much as it attempts to put forward in an orderly and evocative way what the church seems to believe, based on its action, its discourse, and its relationship to the Christian tradition in general and its own history in particular.\(^{169}\)

Two themes, humility and celebration, emerge in naming and understanding God appropriate for our time: humility in that we are reminded that “attempts to name the Divine are simply that—attempts to describe a reality that is always greater than human language can encompass” and celebration in that the chosen response to such incomprehensibility is to sing.\(^{170}\)

To reflect the diversity of opinion and belief in the United Church, God is called by a variety of names: Holy Mystery, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, God, Christ, Spirit, Mother, Friend, Comforter, Source of Life, Living Word, Bond of Love, as well as the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.\(^{171}\)

Along with God’s traditional function of creating and caring, God’s creativity is linked to “complex patterns of growth and evolution of subatomic particles and cosmic swirls.” The distrust of science and the decision to privilege scripture over science, as noted in the 1940 *Statement of Faith*, has been replaced with an enthusiasm for knowledge about all parts of creation “animate and inanimate.”\(^{172}\)

Over the course of eighty-one years from *The 1925 Twenty Articles in The Basis of Union* to the 2006 *A Song of Faith*, the United Church’s vision of the essentially human shows

---


\(^{170}\) *A Song of Faith*, Appendix B, 12.

\(^{171}\) *A Song of Faith*, 3.

\(^{172}\) Ibid.
significant change. In 1925 human beings are made in God’s own image, capable of fellowship with God, free to make moral choices (Article IV) yet “our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God …all men are born with a sinful nature”(Article V). Those who do not accept the saving grace of Christ, the only path to salvation, “shall go away into eternal punishment” (Article XIX). The reach of human responsibility is limited to what God requires of every person—to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

*A New Creed* brings a distinct shift in perspective on what is essentially human. The word “sin” does not appear in the United Church’s most beloved statement of faith. Instead, the theme of human uniqueness is relationship, our desire not to be alone, the directive to live in respectful relationship with Creation, to love and serve others. What is distinctly human is our capacity to know we are not alone and to be thankful. The impetus for this shift in tone and emphasis came both from outside and inside the church. A new era of ecumenism dawned as anti-Catholic rhetoric was replaced with joint faith ventures. The United Church was rethinking its traditional mission perspective and beginning to move to partnership relationships with local faith leaders. Inside the church educational curriculum material aimed to bridge the 100 year gap between what was being taught in United Church seminaries and the knowledge level of members. A groundbreaking moment for women ministers occurred in 1965 when Lois Wilson was ordained as the first married female minister. These changes resonated with the larger societal shifts that seemed to be happening at cataclysmic speeds. The birth control pill meant that for the first time women were freed to express their sexuality. Free speech movements and demands for student involvement in governance emerged in universities. Fashion and music reflected the new attitudes about personal expression. In its faith statement and curriculum material the United
Church chose to be open to change and adopted a “scientific yet reverent” tone. United Church historian Phyllis Airhart once said a New Creed sounds “sort of 60ish to me.”

*A Song of Faith* continues the tradition of noting sinfulness as a uniquely human trait. However, a fresh perspective on sin is introduced with the emphasis on sin as a systemic issue rather than a solely personal one. A list of specific examples of systemic sin is provided illuminating its social, environmental, sexually exploitive, economic, and emotional faces. A noticeable shift away from the threat of eternal punishment seen in *The Twenty Articles* and *A Statement of Faith* as a consequence of sinfulness toward an emphasis on the “fullness of life” that becomes available to human beings as the result of working “with God” is evident. The consequences of a fully lived life are the uniquely human experiences of “beauty, truth, goodness…friendship and family, intellect and sexuality…the articulation of meaning.”

Underlying this vision of the essentially human, both in the Appendices and the document itself, is the sense of empowered human beings. Sin in all its manifestations is real, yet human beings have the capacity, indeed the duty, to act responsibly and creatively in relationships with others, whether familiar or distant and to see “all people as kin”, to recognize the destruction that humanity has brought to the planet, and to take restorative action, to call out an economic system that dehumanizes themselves and their fellows, and to constantly extend the boundaries of inclusiveness.

### 3.3.2 Summary

The four faith statements capture watershed moments in a shift from anthropomorphic understandings of God to more nuanced conceptions and metaphors. The traditional anthropomorphic God evolves from a gendered vision of the Divine to a kaleidoscopic array of

---

173 Beardsall, 106-113.
174 *A Song of Faith*, 5.
possibilities under the umbrella of “Holy Mystery” offering interpretive choices for the diverse strands of faith expression in the United Church.175 The God of Scripture, once privileged over philosophical or scientific interpretations of reality becomes a God intimately linked to the ongoing evolutionary project. Scripture, once “the true witness to God’s Word and the sure guide to Christian faith and conduct”176 is now approached with a caveat: it is up to us to “wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place from the human experiences and cultural assumptions of another era…[and that] interpreting it narrow-mindedly, using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred” leads to a critical judgment by The Spirit.177 Human agency, once focused on personal salvation available only by repentance and the saving grace of an atoning Christ, now has a much broader focus. Human beings are seen to be capable of understanding non-Christian spiritualities, acknowledging that many paths lead to the Divine, analyzing the economic and social destruction brought about by a market driven economy, taking responsibility for reversing ecological degradation, and accepting that human life is a part of a larger web of life.178

3.3.3 Critical Observations on Kaufman and the United Church Statements

_A Song of Faith_ and Kaufman both use the term “Mystery” although in the case of the United Church it is paired with “Holy.” Overall, both affirm humanity’s urgent need to address social and ecological ills that diminish life and threaten planet Earth. Both point to life lived

---

175 Various Writers, “What Do We Mean by God?” _United Church Observer_ November 2010. In this article five United Church ministers and one student minister share their visions of God. To varying degrees all six are metaphorically or mystically oriented.

176 _A Statement of Faith_, IX.

177 _A Song of Faith_, 5-6.

abundantly and generously in the here and now and the recognition that all humanity is kin as desired goals.

While there are many similarities, the differences are clear. One of these differences arises from the fact that Kaufman, writing as an academic theologian, is free of the demands to collaborate or produce work representing a wide range of belief and opinion, demands that must be addressed in creating a communal faith statement for an entire denomination. Kaufman has the latitude and methodology available to ask a direct and challenging question—how might the symbol God be reconstructed to cohere with contemporary scientific worldviews. Equally or more important in considering differences is the underlying question of the limiting effect of Kaufman’s assessment of the uniquely human on his project.

As we have discussed, Kaufman’s vision gives great weight to higher cognition, moral agency, self-consciousness, and language. For Kaufman, experience and feeling are not reliable sources on which to base a reconstruction of the God symbol relevant for our time.

In its most recent statement of faith The United Church alludes to this issue from a different perspective. While the church embraces the intellectual tools of modernity (and post-modernity, and whatever it is that comes after post-modernity) including evolution, human as part of the web of life it presents these scientific facts in a different light than does Kaufman. They are not denials of previous traditional understandings but rather a deepening and enriching of earlier understandings now view in the context of historical developments in our knowledge repertoire.\(^{179}\) A complete reconstruction of the symbol God is, for Kaufman, a necessary first step, the *sine qua non* that must be addressed and put to rest (at least as far as current scientific knowledge allows) before re-building credibility. In *A Song of Faith* suggestiveness and poetic evocation is preferred over prescription and precise definition. God’s presence is affirmed and many possibilities of experiencing that presence are offered. Some come close to Kaufman’s

\(^{179}\) *A Song of Faith*, Appendix D, 17.
choice and some resonate with a more traditional perspective though tempered by juxtaposition with more contemporary renderings.

Both *A New Creed* and *A Song of Faith* recognize the importance of the affective domain in the uniquely human. *A Song of Faith* “seeks to be something of a love song, an offering up of those values ideas and truths that the United Church holds close to its heart.” It acknowledges a range of human feelings—joy, gratitude, awe, regret, sadness, love—that arise in response to being alive. In both *A New Creed* and *A Song of Faith* there is recognition of the lifelong desire to belong. This is expressed in a number of ways: longing for attachment to a power greater than the individual self (we are not alone we live in God’s world, the One on whom our hearts rely); belonging as part of creation (we bear in mind our integral connection to the earth and one another, Finding ourselves in a world of...living things, diverse and interdependent, our place as one strand in the web of life); and belonging in a church that values justice and healing (that all might have abundant life, and calls us to protect the vulnerable, a church with purpose: gifts shared for the good of all).\(^{180}\) A poetry-like form with its repetitions and rhythms connects the listener or speaker with levels beyond the strictly cognitive. In fact, many of the people joining in reciting *A New Creed* may not “believe” in all the doctrine contained in the statement yet they experience an emotional response that has its own logic. Why *A New Creed* is often referred to as “our beloved New Creed” speaks to this point. It would not be surprising if brain imaging revealed involvement of the right frontal cortex in those reading or reciting these words. As Schore and Schore have demonstrated it is here that a stable self takes root and forms the ground for empathic responses to the self and others. These United Church faith statements seem to achieve a balance that both acknowledges a scientific worldview and embraces a theological anthropology that includes the affective domain. While the United Church seems to appreciate the emotional needs of believers for affirmation of a human-divine relationship, the church may

---

\(^{180}\) *A Song of Faith*, 3,8,4.
still need to move further in articulating the implications of a contemporary cosmological, evolutionary, and ecological worldview. Kaufman’s thorough and articulate analysis of these issues may prove helpful in understanding the scope and challenge of such a project. Congregational learning opportunities provided by study groups, guest speakers, and book groups could be avenues for deepening awareness. As well, courses for ministry students and ministers that specifically address the issue and how to communicate sensitively and effectively with their congregations about the issue would be important. Engagement at both the congregational and the seminary levels, as well as the passage of time, may result in a clearer articulation of a scientific worldview in a future faith statement.
Kaufman’s proposal to reconstruct the symbol “God” credible for our time coherent with a scientific worldview moves theological thought forward in its attempt to make Christianity relevant in facing the unprecedented challenges before us. However, as has been shown, the parameters by which he identifies are too narrow to acknowledge the vast and well-documented part played by emotion in our human endeavours as well as to include the wide variety of persons in the human family who fall outside his conception of the uniquely human. In any group of religiously affiliated people, for example a United Church congregation, we find a collection of highly cognitive, linguistically capable, and morally responsible individuals. Yet these same people (with notable exceptions) continue to worship, pray, sing hymns proclaiming a close relationship with God and to speak of God as a real presence in their lives.\textsuperscript{181} To explain this phenomenon we need a more complex picture of what comprises the uniquely human. In the spirit of Kaufman’s scientific orientation this thesis turned to the human sciences to help us understand the complex emotional aspects of being human. Research and insights gained from attachment theory, psychoanalysis, the psychology of religion, and neuroscience help to widen and deepen our perspective, so as to acknowledge the deficiencies of Kaufman’s position.

The persistent theme in monotheistic religions of a personal relationship with God suggests that it is a successful coping strategy affording believers a sense of safety and care first

\textsuperscript{181} A Personal observation: During Prayers of the People in a church that I attend it is often part of the liturgy to have a sung response after different parts of the prayer. One particularly beautiful sung response is from \textit{More Voices}, Number 90. “Don’t be afraid. My love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear...” Although the word “God” does not appear in the text nor is there any other religious references, simply love, stronger than your fear, and “I have promised...to be always near” it is clear who the “I” refers to. Frequently these simple words and combination of chords move even rational, stalwart Protestants to reach for Kleenex, blow noses, and attempt to surreptitiously wipe away tears before the prayer is finished. Such is the power of accessing emotion. \textit{More Voices}: Supplement to \textit{Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada} (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007).
experienced in primary attachment relationships. Further, as contemporary neurobiology has shown, secure attachment enables the development of self-regulation that allows the person to deal with primitive emotions such as “shame, rage, excitement, elation, disgust, panic-terror, and hopeless despair” while maintaining an intact and coherent self.\textsuperscript{182} It also enables the ability to be self-aware, to reflect on one’s own emotional states, and to experience empathy by mentalizing the emotional states of others. When it comes to assessing the likelihood of popular acceptance of Kaufman’s quite distant and abstract reconstruction of the symbol God being embraced statistics are not on his side: they point to a strong correlation between a religiously oriented upbringing, a secure attachment history and a continuation of a religious orientation in the offspring.\textsuperscript{183} Also evolutionary psychology points to deeply embedded psychic mechanisms (designed for other survival purposes) which seem to function as a wellspring in the creation of deities. Observations of liturgies, vocabulary, prayer practices in the most liberal of mainline Protestant churches where one might realistically expect to see at least some interest in proposals such as Kaufman’s indicate that such a discussion is not happening.\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{182} Allan N. Schore, 135.

\textsuperscript{183} Granqvist, “Religion as Attachment: The Godin Award Lecture, 10-11. “If parents have been observably religious, secure offspring are expected to be as well, in which case the perceptions of God will more or less mirror that of a reliably sensitive attachment figure.”

\textsuperscript{184} Of course, this is too broad a statement to be entirely factual. There are some congregations that have become more flexible about the God symbol and a few that have intentionally eliminated references to an anthropomorphic God. In her dissertation, Rebekka King discusses her research at West Hill United, the congregation led by Rev. Greta Vosper. Conversations with congregants who were asked about people who had left the congregation revealed a fascinating insight into the reason for their exits. The respondent’s opinion was that some people had left not because of the theology (which had already been developing before Vosper’s arrival) but because of the language during the services. The respondent felt that from her conversations with them it seemed that they missed “the emotional connection with the hymns that you sing, the words that you hear,…if you don’t say those things …you don’t get the feeling….” Rebekka King, The New Heretics: Popular Theology, Progressive Christianity and Protestant Language Ideologies (Toronto: University of Toronto), 2012. Since several other congregations in the United Church have adopted similar God-talk theologies, e.g. George Street United in Peterborough, Southminster-Steinhauer United in Edmonton, and have not experienced similar negative responses inside and outside the United Church, we might speculate that it is the “language” that makes the difference. Perhaps there is a way of speaking of God that respects both a scientific worldview and our evolved psychology. If the language is too strong or emotional needs are not respected or suggested to be childish, this may provoke a negative response. My first lesson in this was the response of my classmate after reading Kaufman’s essay. On the other hand, other readers e.g. Sallie McFague have been moved to further learning and deepening of faith journeys after reading the same essay.
While Kaufman’s work meets rigorous intellectual standards, the United Church’s *A Song of Faith* speaks in images that encourage an emotional response. In this, *A Song of Faith* as well as *A New Creed* resonate, either by design, or more likely simply because the tradition and scripture include a personal relationship with the divine, with deep responses that may be difficult to explain without reference to the affective domain. The work of McFague, Borg, and Maguire backs up such a viewpoint, considering emotion as an important component of their theological approach. Any investigation of the concept of God that excludes emotional factors will be incomplete. Thus, a more holistic theological anthropology is crucial for considering how to frame and create images that resonate with the affective domain, even in highly rationalistic schemes like that of Kaufman.

For those who decide to take up the challenge of articulating this more holistic theological anthropology, rich resources exist to move the project forward. Two strands of awareness must be added to existing schemes of the normatively human that like Kaufman’s privilege higher cognition, language, and moral agency as those capabilities that set us definitely apart from the rest of creation. The first strand is awareness that relationship is at the core of all that we call human. The reality of this has been confirmed in the work referenced in Chapter 2 and affirmed in the scripture of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As *The New Creed* proclaims, “We are not alone.” Our selves are first formed in subtle pre-linguistic relational exchanges and our entire lives are defined by searching for, and being nourished and challenged by relationships that for the religiously oriented include a relationship with the sacred or divine. The second strand that must be added to our conception of the uniquely human is the acknowledgement that

---

185 As well as creating symbols that resonate with the affective domain, further research needs to be done to further elaborate Kaufman’s Serendipitous Creativity, perhaps along the lines of McFague’s and Borg’s panentheistic model, especially in scientific and cosmological terms. Texts like John Haught’s *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* and Ian Barbour’s *Religion and Science* may provide useful resources in furthering work on the doctrine of God. John Haught, *God after Darwin* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008) and Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: historical and contemporary issues* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997).
emotion is as valid a component in the uniquely human repertoire as higher cognition. The richness of the affective domain allows human beings to relate at multiple levels of awareness, to respond to non-linguistic cues, to experience empathy, and to know the divine and sacred through modalities that do not require higher cognitive involvement. We have referred to these possibilities in the work of McFague, Borg, and Maguire and in the faith statements of the United Church. These suggestions only skim the surface of what might be possible for a theological anthropology that opens up to a wider definition of the normatively human.

Phrased in the terms of the discussion earlier, the divine-human relationship for religiously oriented securely attached individuals continues to support neurologically embedded coping processes. Paradoxically, as incredible as a personal relationship with the divine may seem to Kaufman, it appears that relationship with the divine can support the development of exactly those capabilities needed to live compassionately with one’s fellow humans and work together to creatively address the crises of our times—Kaufman’s hope for contemporary humanity.

It is important to keep in mind that Kaufman’s underlying motivation in reconstructing the symbol God is to make Christianity credible and therefore a positive force in orienting human beings to deal with the unprecedented crises threatening all life. Kaufman believes in Christianity as a vehicle for extending the humanizing project. His emphasis on function rather than absolute faith-claims allows us here in this thesis to add new knowledge sources to his project without violating his underlying perspective of being open to further refinements. Supplementing Kaufman’s project with insights from attachment theory enriches our vision of the normatively human. Opening to the possibilities of a more nuanced approach that embraces the affective domain and honours a sacred tradition offers potential beyond that of either a complete dismissal of the traditional anthropomorphic God or an unquestioning embrace of a personal divinity.
Primary Sources


The United Church of Canada. A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada (2006),
Secondary Sources


