Toward a Theology of Culture:
A Dialogue with
John H. Yoder and Gordon Kaufman

Duane K. Friesen

Introduction

First, I want to reflect generally about a “believers’ church” model of a theology of culture. Secondly, I will examine some of the central theological issues in developing a theology of culture through a dialogue with the two most important and influential Mennonite theologians of this century, John H. Yoder and Gordon Kaufman. Both Yoder and Kaufman have been my teachers, and I have been deeply influenced by both. This essay reflects my personal effort to explore commonalities and tensions between them, in order to work through my own point of view.

Central for a theology of culture is a model or vision of the church. I believe the church in twentieth-century North American society is in a situation analogous to that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon who were advised by Jeremiah “to seek the shalom of the city where they dwell.” Jeremiah’s phrase captures the dynamic or tension involved in being the church: a people who are called by God to embody an alternative cultural vision to the dominant culture of North America, and at the same time, a people whose purpose is not to withdraw into safe sectarian enclaves but rather to be a “presence” in the dominant culture by “seeking the shalom of the city” wherever the church exists.

In a more complete analysis I would say more about what I mean by “exile.” Obviously, the North American church does not live in the hostile situation of the Jews in Babylon. Nevertheless, there is an important sense in

Duane K. Friesen is professor of Bible and Religion at Bethel College in North Newton, KS.
which the church must see itself as in “exile,” not “at home” in North America. As Douglas John Hall puts it: “Intentional disengagement from the dominant culture, with which the older Protestant denominations of this continent have been bound up in the past, is the necessary precondition for a meaningful engagement of that same dominant culture.”

My model is shaped by an Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, part of the larger believers’ church tradition. This stream in church history has developed an alternative to a view of culture based on a “Christendom” model which assumes that the church is, and should be, integrally linked with the dominant institutions of society. A Christendom model assumes the church is in a position to shape the entire social order by virtue of these linkages. With the break-up of Christendom, the church now faces the reality of secularization and minority status in a world of religious pluralism. Many Christians within all denominational traditions are also realizing that to be a follower of Christ places one at odds with many of the dominant values of our culture (i.e., rampant consumerism, violence, ecological destruction, radical disparities between rich and poor). In this time, therefore, “believers’ church” models have become increasingly relevant for the church as a whole.

A theology of culture, however, should be broadly ecumenical. I am also attracted to the strengths of other Christian traditions (especially the Roman Catholic and the Reformed traditions) which have more experience in relating to the larger culture. My own Mennonite heritage traditionally has too one-sidedly emphasized a theology of the church that supports “withdrawal” from the dominant culture (reinforced by ethnicity). And especially in the last several decades, when Mennonites have left these ethnic enclaves, they have tended uncritically to accommodate themselves to the dominant culture, especially the culture of consumer capitalism. Mennonites have not developed an adequate theology of culture that balances an emphasis on the church as an alternative cultural vision with Jeremiah’s advice to “seek the shalom of the city where you dwell.” The agenda for Mennonites is how to “be” the church, and at the same time how to engage the larger culture in a creative and discriminating way.

I must also say something about where my work fits within Christian social ethics, a discipline in which Ernst Troeltsch and H. Richard Niebuhr have profoundly shaped our thinking about the relationship of the church
and culture. I am referring to Troeltsch’s famous church/sect/mystic typology developed in his classic work, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, and Niebuhr’s five types developed in his classic work, Christ and Culture.

From the first time I read Troeltsch and Niebuhr I have felt there is something wrong with how they set up the problem, and with how their typologies work descriptively. Niebuhr defines Christ in terms of ideal virtues (i.e., love, hope, humility) oriented toward a God “beyond” the world of culture. According to Charles Scriven’s analysis of Niebuhr, “‘Christ’ in the phrase ‘Christ and Culture’ is thus the one who points us away from finite values to the Maker of all things.” Niebuhr (like Troeltsch before him,) defines Christ in such a way that if one were to have a “pure” relationship to this Christ, one would by definition stand in opposition to culture. Secondly, by treating culture as a monolithic entity to which Christ is related, Niebuhr makes a dichotomy between Christ and culture. Thus he defines the problem as a tension between Christ and culture, as if the problem were an opposition between two monolithic entities separate from each other. This definition then determines the structure of the rest of his book. As in the case of Troeltsch’s sect type, those who most faithfully seek to follow Christ are against culture by definition. Such an opposition is, of course, impossible, for to be human means to belong to culture. And so this type (represented by I John, Tertullian, Tolstoy, and the Mennonites) is frequently critiqued in his book for not being consistent. The “Christ of culture” type is even more problematic for Niebuhr, because it represents those who accommodate completely to culture. For him the only viable options are the remaining three types (all of which assume a Christendom model). These types are better because they seek to relate both poles, Christ and culture. Niebuhr ends with his fifth type, Christ the transformer of culture—the one he prefers and the only one he does not critique. Routinely the reader of Christ and Culture identifies most with this fifth type. Paul Ramsey reports using this text in his college classes:

It is difficult to speak with sobriety about ‘Christ transforming culture’ and converting the works of men. Thus I have learned from attempting these last several years to teach H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture to my
students; they can never quite understand why Augustine and Calvin belong under the type ‘Christ transforming culture.’ That this is not simply a function of their lack of information or their immaturity, or their teacher’s lack of aptitude, seems to me to be indicated by the fact that when Richard Niebuhr’s book first appeared almost everyone in American Christendom rushed to locate himself among the ‘transformists’: naturalists, process theologians, personalists, idealists, Lutherans and Anglicans who were sometimes Thomists, as well as those you would have expected. It was as if the ‘typology’ or clustering of Christian approaches to man’s work in culture and history had suddenly collapsed in 1951, so universal was the conviction that, of course, the Christian always joins in the transformation of the world whenever this is proposed.  

*Christ and Culture*, contrary to the way most persons read it, is not just a descriptive history of types but a theological/ethical argument.

The problem is with definition. Instead of beginning with a definition of “Christ” as an ideal in opposition to culture, I believe we must begin with a definition of an “embodied” christology, one which places Christ in the context of his Jewish culture of first-century Palestine. Rather than beginning with a Christ abstracted from his time and place, defined in terms of a religious idea (Troeltsch’s language), as an ideal of agape love (Reinhold Niebuhr’s language), or virtues or excellences (H.R. Niebuhr’s language), we must begin with a view of Christ as the concrete presence of God in the world of culture. Christ, therefore, rather than being defined against culture, represents a cultural vision.

An adequate theology of culture is one that has an embodied christology. We need a christology that can provide a vivid picture of a Christ who is not disembodied from cultural formation, but rather is concrete enough to provide leverage for assessing how we should engage the particularities of culture. The christology of many Christians conveniently relegates Jesus to a “separate” sphere of life (the spiritual) or to the afterlife, as an answer to their special concern about eternal life. Jesus is disconnected from culture,
from living life responsibly before God in the world. When Christ is defined in terms of abstract ideals, relegated to the “spiritual,” or salvation is defined primarily in terms of life beyond the grave. Christians then tend uncritically to legitimize the dominant political and economic system. Jesus either is defined as “acultural” and is therefore irrelevant to culture, or is defined so abstractly that we establish the meaning of Christ for us, rather than Christ challenging us to a more faithful way of living.

The tension is, then, not between Christ and culture but between different cultural visions. There is no form or “essence” of Christianity “outside” of or against culture. Rather, we see in the New Testament the way in which different cultural visions come into conflict with each other. The significance of the fact that Jesus Christ is sarx (flesh, body) provides a norm for a discriminating ethic within culture. That means culture is not to be viewed as a monolithic entity but is to be related to in a discriminating way. So, instead of monolithic responses to culture (i.e., against or in affirmation), the church’s position as the “embodiment” of Christ in the world will vary—sometimes in sharp conflict with the dominant culture, sometimes in harmony with it, other times simply neutral, sometimes seeking to transform it. When we read Paul’s letters, for example, we can observe how the early church sought to define its cultural vision in concrete and specific ways (on sexuality, marriage, the role of women, ecstatic utterance, food offered to idols, circumcision) in relationship to the cultures (Jewish, Greco-Roman) around it. We see how Paul approached his own Jewish cultural context in a discriminating way, not making monolithic responses to culture as a whole, but through a complex process of reasoning that both affirms his kinship with his Jewish roots (as in Romans 9) and also “relativizes” the rules of circumcision for Gentiles (as in Galatians).

A believers’ church model must wrestle with the tension between “being” the church and “engaging” the larger culture. On the one hand, the church is called to be the church, to develop an alternative cultural vision faithful to Christ. On the other hand, it is to “seek the shalom of the city where it dwells.” I have labeled a book I am working on to address these issues, “Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Singing God’s Song in a Foreign Land.” The terms “artist,” “citizen,” and “philosopher” are bridge images or concepts that serve to link the alternative cultural vision of the church with
the wider culture. As artists, Christians are called to seek the beauty or aesthetic excellence of the city where they dwell, as citizens to seek the public good, and as philosophers or lovers of wisdom to embrace the wisdom of the culture wherever it is found (whether in the world of science or in dialogue with other religious traditions).

I will illustrate briefly my method by showing how I proceed with the bridge concept of “citizen.” A Christian understanding of the citizen is founded on two principles. It is based on (1) a vision or model of the good society which grows out of a view of the church, and (2) a commitment to a process of analogical thinking that entails drawing from that vision norms for how other societies beyond the church might work and be structured. Such analogical thinking requires both faithfulness to the vision of the church and imaginative thinking in translating that vision into other languages that will link us with other human beings as we seek the shalom of the city where we dwell. My position has some affinities with that of Karl Barth, who believes that Christians should relate to political institutions by means of analogy with the kingdom of God. I would apply the concept of analogy much more broadly, however, and not restrict it to the Christian’s relationship to the state. Barth says that since Christ is Lord over the entire world, the church desires that the shape and reality of the State in this fleeting world should point towards the Kingdom of God, not away from it. Its desire is not that human politics should cross the politics of God, but that they should proceed, however distantly, on parallel lines. . . . It sets in motion the historical process whose aim and content are the molding of the state into the likeness of the Kingdom of God and hence the fulfillment of the State’s own righteous purposes.8

The church is, in a modest way, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. Though it is not the Kingdom of God on earth, it seeks to “body” that Kingdom in a distinctive way. The church’s experience of that vision of the Kingdom then becomes the basis for the process of analogical thinking as it relates to the larger society. A Christian understanding of justice will draw analogically from a corporate vision of church where the well-being of the whole body
Toward a Theology of Culture

requires that human needs be met by mutual aid. Since membership in the
church is based on respect for the dignity of each individual who has made a
voluntary commitment to be a member, by analogy the church will work in
the larger society for the respect and safeguarding of religious liberty. Based
on the experience of the discerning process of respectful dialogue, by analogy
the church will support democratic structures of participation and decision-
making in the larger society. Based on its vision of a nonviolent process of
confronting an erring brother or sister (Matt. 18:15-18), the church by analogy
will search for and model nonviolent methods for confronting evil in the
larger society.

Yoder’s and Kaufman’s positions

Both Yoder’s and Kaufman’s theologies have been shaped fundamentally by
their Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. I am intrigued that both see themselves
in continuity with their Anabaptist/Mennonite roots. Both have had a very
important influence in the wider church and university: Yoder’s Politics of
Jesus is one of the most widely-read books in social ethics; Kaufman is a
leading theological thinker who was president of the American Academy of
Religion in 1982. Probably the most important differences between them are
a consequence of whom they have engaged in conversation as they have
developed their theology. Yoder’s work has been developed in the context of
ecumenical dialogue, and out of commitment to an evangelical and biblical
tradition of theology. Kaufman, located more within the university and more
in dialogue with other religions, has developed his theology within a post-
Enlightenment and liberal tradition. Most people would probably see these
two men’s approaches as incompatible. Yet I resonate with dimensions of
both of them, and believe that both their approaches must be taken into account
for developing an adequate theology of culture.

Yoder

We see a fundamental unity and continuity in Yoder’s work, beginning with
his first major book in 1964, The Christian Witness to the State, to his two
most recent books, one co-authored with Glen Stassen and Diane Yeager,
Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture, and For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical, which came out just before his death. Four motifs or themes have shaped Yoder’s scholarly career.

a. The starting point for Yoder is Jesus Christ as a political/social model of radical nonconformity. Jesus models an alternative politics of nonviolent servanthood made vivid in the cross. He calls his followers to a way of life that is an alternative to a politics of historical management, a mode of consequentialist ethical reasoning that requires humans to “do evil that good may come about.” Jesus Christ is not simply an example to be followed but is eschatologically the Lord of history, the Slain Lamb, whose way will ultimately be victorious over the principalities and powers. Followers of Jesus are thus called both to a radical faith or trust in the God of Jesus Christ who accomplishes God’s purposes in history through nonviolent love and to radical obedience to the paradigm of the cross. This is the basis for Yoder’s commitment to Christian pacifism and his critique of just war theory. Though he has written extensively on these issues, I do not treat them as a separate theme here, because he grounds his thinking on war and peace in his christology and in his theology of the church.

b. Equally central is a model of the church. Yoder, who was trained in historical theology and whose dissertation at Basel examined the dialogues between the Anabaptist radicals and Reformers in Switzerland, is committed to a “free church” or believers’ church vision. He argues that with Constantine the church took a fundamentally wrong turn. Many theologians today concur with him in his view of “Constantinianism.” His critique, however, tends to be more radical in that he sees remnants of “Constantinian” assumptions in the way many continue to do theology and ethics. For example, the meaning of history for Yoder lies in the people of God called to be an alternative community in the world, not in the general flow of history where theologians often claim to be able to “read” where God is working (i.e., through this or that liberation movement, or through the orders of creation).

However, Yoder is not “sectarian” in Troeltsch’s sense (the church as withdrawing from society) or like H.R. Niebuhr’s type, “Christ against Culture.” For Yoder the church is to embody, based on the model of Christ,
Toward a Theology of Culture

an alternative cultural vision, which then becomes a basis for its mission and involvement in the cultural setting, wherever it is, as a creative pioneering community. His writings are full of suggestions of how the church is culturally creative in contributing to the “shalom of the city where it dwells”–through alternative models of nonviolent conflict resolution, the development of hospitals and schools, alternative models of restorative justice, by learning models of decision-making in the context of the church (and thus contributing to the development and growth of religious liberty and democracy which predate the Enlightenment). We do not have space here to describe the considerable thinking Yoder has done, based especially on his careful exegesis of biblical texts, in describing the concrete and doable (not utopian) practices that mark such a model of the church from its decision-making processes to its practices of the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

c. A third theme is the ecumenical character of Yoder’s work. Yoder believes in dialogue and conversation, which he has been deeply involved in throughout his career (at an official level in the World Council of Churches, in his writings where he has engaged theologians like Karl Barth and the Niebuhr brothers, and on the lecture circuit that has taken him to several continents). Again, Yoder is not sectarian. He views his project as a model that can be normative for the church as a whole, not just for those in the historic peace churches or Mennonites (whom he often critiques for failing to carry out their own historic vision). In these conversations, Yoder’s distinctive contribution has been to ask whether there is still a place for the category of “heresy” and schism. While open to learning from many different traditions and models of the church, he is critical of the automatic assumption that all models somehow contribute to the larger truth or whole. He challenges the church to ask which visions are more or less faithful to the New Testament vision of the church.

d. A fourth theme is Yoder’s interest in a theology of mission, which flows logically from a believers’ church model. Yoder begins with the acceptance of the “particularity” of the Christian faith and the need to share the good news of the gospel with others. He rejects the attempt to find a general universalizable foundation (whether in natural law or in an
Enlightenment view of universal reason) that can unite all human beings. Yoder could be described as a postmodern before postmodernism was in vogue, in his acceptance of relativity and that all human beings are shaped by their own historical particularity from which they cannot escape. In a recent article in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* (Spring 1996), he responds to Jeffrey Stout’s *Ethics After Babel* by distinguishing between “babel” (radical historical particularity and the relativity of all human perspectives), which he accepts, and “babble” (the inability of persons to communicate across cultural linguistic barriers).

Yoder believes in the possibility of imaginatively communicating the good news of the gospel across cultural boundaries, a model he traces back to the sixth-century Hebrew prophets, “the transformative telling of good news by one particular people to another.” In this sense he moves beyond relativism (the problem with postmodernism) and also avoids various forms of foundationalism which seek to find some universal ground for ethical or truth claims. Of course, though Yoder starts with a confessional stance (here one notes the influence of Barth, whom he studied under in Basel), the confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” is anything but a relative claim. By definition Christ is Lord of all history, of all peoples and cultures.

*Kaufman (after An Essay on Theological Method, 1975)*

Though there are a number of continuities in Gordon Kaufman’s career as a theologian, beginning with *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith* (1960) and culminating in his recent systematic theology, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (1993), in contrast to the continuity in Yoder’s thought, Kaufman made a major shift in direction with his book, *An Essay in Theological Method* (1975). In the preface to *In Face of Mystery* Kaufman says of that essay:

I argued that theology is, and always has been, an activity of ‘imaginative construction’ by persons attempting to put together as comprehensive and coherent a picture as they could of humanity in the world under God. This view contrasts rather sharply with more conventional conceptions
Thus my description of Kaufman’s position is based on motifs or themes we find in his work since 1975.

Whereas Yoder has written essays to fit a particular occasion or to respond to a specific problem or issue, Kaufman has always worked toward more systematic reflection. His major work, *In Face of Mystery*, is organized around the conceptual scheme of God, humans, the world, and Christ. He puts Christ at the center of his conceptual scheme because he is writing as a Christian theologian. Christ is not simply a fourth category beside the other three, but functions as the orienting center for interpreting God, the human, and the world. But that does not mean we can begin with God or christology in explaining Kaufman’s position. Whereas Yoder’s work has been focused on christology and a particular view of the church which follows from it, Kaufman has been preoccupied with how humans can conceive of God in the light of modern conceptions of the human and the cosmos within which humans live. It would be misleading to describe Kaufman’s view of God first (or his view of Christ as the orienting center for his theology), because Kaufman believes we can only “construct” a concept of God, since God is the ultimate reference point for all reality, in relationship to how we interpret the universe and the place of humans in it. In ordering our thinking, therefore, he begins with an understanding of the place of human beings within the bio-historical process.10

Let me now attempt to describe Kaufman’s approach to theology with five points.

a. Human beings are fundamentally social animals with distinctive symbolic/linguistic capacities that make it possible to create “culture,” humanly created worlds of meaning. Human beings are both shaped by and create symbolic systems or world pictures that orient their lives in the universe. This is the most distinctive feature of human reality, one that has emerged out of the long bio-historical evolutionary process. World history shows that humans have created a plurality of world pictures, each developed in
relationship to different historical and cultural conditions. The monotheistic world picture developed by the Hebrew prophets which oriented the life of Israel and later the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is one of these world pictures (dramatically different from the world pictures reflected in Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism).

Language makes it possible for humans to transcend themselves and reflect self-consciously upon the world picture they have created. They are not simply determined by tradition but are free to modify their world picture or even to create entirely new worldviews. However, because they are finite creatures bounded by time and space, deeply rooted in particular histories and cultural traditions, the humanly created worlds are relative and particular. There is no mid-air position, an objective, neutral, absolute, framework "outside" of historical particularity from which one could judge the truth of a particular worldview. Those who take the biblical worldview as the true revelation of God on the basis of authority do so from a particular finite human standpoint, and the fact that they claim that their world picture is absolute does not establish its absolute truth.

b. Kaufman’s passion is theology, talk about God. “God” is that symbol in terms of which “everything” is to be interpreted and understood. If there were something beside God, then God would not be God. One would have created an idol, an object of worship and devotion that is not really God. The central task of the theologian is to aid the human community in distinguishing between God and the idols, penultimate realities not worthy of our devotion and worship. So how does one talk about God, given the relativity of our human standpoint? In order to proceed, Kaufman identifies the primary functions of the symbol “God.”

The God symbol serves to relativize all human concepts, projects, plans, ideas, and ideologies. To worship God is to view all human projects as penultimate, not ultimate, objects of devotion and loyalty. Kaufman critiques theologies which make dogma, the creeds, the Bible, or the church as the primary focus or the final authority of a theology. “Serving the church, for example, is undoubtedly of importance to Christian theologians. But this must never become theology’s driving motivation: that would be putting an idol in the place where only God can rightfully be.”

The term “mystery” in
Kaufman’s theology refers to the “bafflement of mind” that humans experience when they try to “wrap their minds around” the symbol, God. All talk about God is a “construal” of reality, and Kaufman warns us when we do theology to “take special care, beware of what is being said; the speaker may be misleading you; you may be misleading yourself.”

Secondly, the concept of God serves to “humanize.” It provides an orientation for humans about how to live their lives. In the Bible’s monotheistic world picture humans are called again and again to “be like God.” This is dramatically stated in the Sermon on the Mount, where we are urged to be indiscriminate in our love (even to love enemies) because God is like that, making the sun to shine and rain to come on both the just and unjust (Matt. 5:43-48). The problem is that the Bible’s world picture (a God who created the world, is sovereign Lord over history, and is acting in history to save the world) has produced both very creative and destructive consequences in history. Kaufman argues that we have to both deconstruct and reconstruct this picture in order to develop a view of God that genuinely humanizes rather than oppresses or leads to violence. For the Christian the normative standpoint by which to evaluate a notion of God is by reference to Christ, and the way in which Christ’s way of reconciliation and freedom is lived out by persons and communities.

c. Because of human finitude, in developing a plausible concept of God faith is necessary. We do not live within the limits of reason alone. But instead of an irrational Kierkegardian leap of faith, Kaufman calls for a series of “small steps of faith” as we seek to construe the nature of the human and the world, in relationship to which, then, we can relate the symbol “God.” The concepts of “the human” and “the world” are also human constructions, which we try to interpret plausibly in the light of what we know. However, we are confronted by a plurality of views at each step. We do not have objective, universally accepted understandings. So Kaufman argues for the plausibility of a metaphysical rather than a strictly phenomenalistic account of humanity and the world, and that requires a step of faith. He also argues for the world as cosmic evolution rather than an eternal structure (another step of faith); and he sees the presence of serendipitous creativity in the biohistorical process, and that too requires a step of faith. By serendipitous
creativity Kaufman means we live in a universe that is open to the future, that in the course of evolution new events produce consequences (both good and evil) which are quite surprising and quite unpredictable. Kaufman contends that as we look back at the cumulative evolutionary and historical development, we can see a series of creative advances of directionality in this cosmic process that, from our viewpoint as humans who emerge out of it, is “good.” Though we have no “objective” scientific basis to view the process as more than a chance or random occurrence, we can choose to take a step of faith to see in it a tendency toward purposeful development.

The trajectory eventuating in the creation of human historical existence could be seen . . . as a significant expression of the serendipitous creativity manifest in the cosmos as a whole; and thus the appearance of human modes of being in the world would be properly regarded not as a metaphysical surd but rather as grounded in the ultimate nature of things, in the ultimate mystery.  

d. Kaufman can now deliberately construct a concept of God. He says that we come to an important fork in the road. We could view God, as in the Bible and tradition, as analogous to a human purposive agent, a personal being who relates to the world like human beings do to each other. Or, we could imagine God not as a being or agent separate from the universe but in terms of the bio-historical process as a whole. Kaufman proposes a non-dualistic reconstruction of theology in which God functions as the ultimate point of reference within a universe viewed holistically. He believes that the inherited biblical/theological picture of God’s relationship to the world is problematic for two main reasons. He is critical of the traditional God/world dualism, which pictures God as a self-subsistent being who exists independent of the world. Such a notion is difficult to hold, given our modern view of the universe as a self-contained, interdependent whole. What does it mean to hold to an “other” reality independent of the universe? How is such an idea intelligible?

Secondly, Kaufman believes that God as an agent independent of the universe has often been interpreted in very tyrannical, authoritarian, and
destructive ways. He does, however, want to preserve the essential functions of a “transcendent” God—the leverage we need to challenge all human idols and to challenge the human tendency to create gods to suit our own needs and interest. So while opting for a non-dualistic view, Kaufman believes it is critical to preserve the Godness of God.

e. A specifically Christian theology turns to Christ as a paradigm for God and the human. The central Christian claim is that at a particular point in history, in connection with the man Jesus, we were given a paradigm for understanding both what God is and what the human is. However, we should not view God as simply in the man, Jesus, but must develop a “wider christology” which includes Jesus and the events surrounding him. When Paul says, for example, that “God was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19), by “Christ” he does not mean simply the man, Jesus of Nazareth, but the whole relationship of the cosmos to God which was changed in and through the events surrounding Jesus Christ. Passages like this, Kaufman says,

[S]ignify the new order of relationships among humans and between humans and God which began to come into being in connection with Jesus and developed further after his death and resurrection . . . . To say God is incarnate in Christ, then, is not to say simply and directly that God is incarnate in Jesus; rather, God is incarnate in the larger, more complex human reality, surrounding and including and following upon the man Jesus: the new Christian community, with its spirit of love and freedom, of mutual sharing and forgiveness of one another. It is in this new order of interpersonal relationships that the incarnation of God is to be found.14

For Kaufman, therefore, wherever the spirit of love and freedom symbolized by Christ is present within the cosmic process, God is present.
Comparative analysis

Both Yoder and Kaufman recognize and emphasize the particularity and relativity of all human standpoints. Both are critics of “foundationalism,” the assumption that humans can establish an objective, universal framework from which to judge the “truth” or validity of a point of view. I think both have been influenced in this direction by their awareness as Mennonites of holding to a minority point of view not widely shared by the larger culture. Yoder repeatedly makes this point as an Anabaptist theologian who critiques Constantinianism. And Kaufman says:

My Mennonite background has also been responsible in some respects for my long-standing interest and attention to issues connected with historical and cultural relativism. The sectarian religious stance into which I was early initiated led me 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 (combined as these latter were, especially during the war [WW II], with what I took to be serious evasions of the moral demands of Christian discipleship).  

Both writers, however, refuse to take the radical subjectivist postmodernist route which rejects any claim to establish norms by which to test truth or ethical claims. Yoder is a biblical realist who employs historical reason to interpret biblical texts in cultural context to distinguish between more faithful and less faithful readings of those texts. He also believes in the possibility of translating the “good news” of the gospel into a variety of cultures, and in the role of analogical imagination in finding faithful ways to model the good news within the wider culture. Kaufman uses reason in a different way, primarily to determine the kind of language about God that can “make sense” of how we understand the world. He is committed to dialogue or conversation with others (in fact, he characterizes theology as conversation). He has been a participant in dialogue with Buddhists, because he believes that understanding and learning is possible despite the relativity
of standpoints. Further, though Kaufman does not appeal to the authority of texts rightly understood and argues against relating to other religions based on appeals to the truth claims of different worldviews, he says we can employ reason to ask about the pragmatic or ethical consequences entailed in our particular views of the world, humans, or God.

Beyond this general agreement, however, Yoder and Kaufman have responded to historical particularity and relativity quite differently. Yoder offers little indication that the awareness of relativity has penetrated him existentially as an experiential reality as it has Kaufman. Over the years Yoder has confidently proclaimed the Lordship of Christ over the world, an absolute claim on all peoples and cultures. There is not a hint of doubt, of struggle, of uncertainty, or that we are bodies who experience passion and pain. There is surprisingly little reflection on the nature of the faith commitment involved in making such a radical confession. True, Yoder repeats frequently that such a commitment requires a voluntary decision by the believer (symbolized by believer’s baptism), yet he never places himself in the existential situation of the person who is, in the context of religious pluralism, challenged to make a decision, aware of the other possible commitments that are available. That is, Yoder reflects from inside the circle of faith, assuming a commitment to the Lordship of Christ.

Kaufman’s awareness of relativity penetrates much more deeply. In his autobiographical statement in *The Religious Studies Review* Kaufman says that his studies at Northwestern University in sociology and later his theological studies with H.R. Niebuhr and Liston Pope at Yale impressed on him the relativity of all human standpoints, including his own. Theologically he speaks of this under the category of human finitude and sin, the propensity of humans to absolutize their own standpoint. “When then, our fellow humans disagree with us, especially on profound moral and religious issues,” he says, “we should not immediately reject their positions but should sympathetically attempt to understand and appreciate the insights with which they have provided us.”

If Yoder writes theology from within the circle of the church, Kaufman works more at the boundary between two circles—the modern human predicament and the church shaped by Christ as its orienting center. Kaufman is much more conscious of the predicament of those who must make a faith
commitment in a world of relativity and uncertainty. His *In Face of Mystery* thus attempts to respond to historical consciousness, our awareness of how all our worldviews reflect human standpoints (including the worldview of the Bible). Kaufman struggles to develop an understanding of Christian commitment as a series of steps of faith seeking to make sense of the modern situation. From an Anabaptist perspective, Yoder’s theology addresses the Christian who has already been baptized and committed herself to become a follower of Christ, whereas Kaufman addresses more the person who is not yet baptized and committed, who wants to know what is entailed in making a commitment to make Jesus Christ as the orienting center of faith and life. The very style of their writings is therefore different. Kaufman makes himself personally vulnerable in his writings. Even when they are not autobiographical, which they usually are not, the reader is drawn into a struggle, a quest. Yoder’s writings do not reflect bafflement, mystery, uncertainty, doubt, or struggle. They confidently answer every possible objection or resistance, from within the circle of faith, as to why Christ’s call to discipleship should not be evaded or substituted with something else.

This difference in orientation is also reflected in their conception of the Christian life. Yoder frequently uses the metaphors of command and obedience. Repeatedly he appeals to the authority of the Slain Lamb. We are simply called to obey this way of life; free consent, based on attraction to the way of Christ, is not emphasized. Yet it seems it should be central, if commitment to Christ is indeed a voluntary decision of faith. I resonate both with Kaufman’s positive affirmation and critique in his review of Yoder’s *The Priestly Kingdom*:

What is important in Yoder’s program, in my opinion, is not so much that Jesus be taken as an ‘authority’ who is to be ‘obeyed’ but rather that the story of Jesus be taken as the fundamental ‘paradigm’... on the basis of which the moral norms ordering human life are developed. From the very beginning the human moral imagination has been powerfully attracted by Jesus’ story. ... His insight ... is correct. Seeing Jesus is the important consideration for founding a radical Christian ethic, for this figure can powerfully affect
the human moral sensibility. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Yoder confuses this point by so frequently moving from an ethic basically grounded in this appeal to our freedom and our moral imagination, to the heavy-handed metaphors of heteronomy—of human obedience to divine lordship—and that he doesn’t seem to realize that these involve quite different understandings of human existence, well-being, and fulfillment. It need not be the case that it is ‘The Rule of God’ [which] is the basic category. . . and that Christian morality must be understood primarily in terms of the sovereign ‘lordship’ of Christ (a metaphor that appears repeatedly throughout the book). The important thing, rather, is that we ‘see Jesus’ and thus are enabled in our freedom to turn toward a mode of human existence and action which is truly redemptive in and for this world. Choosing to follow this Jesus need not be heteronomous obedience to (more or less arbitrary) divine authority; it may be a rational and free human choice of what seems truly to be the good.19

Both Yoder and Kaufman believe that christology is the controlling or orienting center for Christian theology and discipleship. Both develop christologies which are linked to ethics and to discipleship, a central emphasis in the Anabaptist tradition, and both are critical of christologies which disconnect the cross from ethics (i.e., substitutionary atonement). Both stress the centrality of the love of enemies and servant love in describing Jesus’ ethic. Both are critical of how, in the history of the church, God language has been used to justify oppression and violence. Kaufman argues that the problem is the God language of the Bible itself which needs to be deconstructed and constructed in new ways, whereas for Yoder the problem is that the church after Constantine substituted other authorities for Christ, or found ways to dismiss Christ as relevant for social ethics.

The style or mode of theological reflection in both writers is strikingly different and reflects their different gifts and training. Yoder employs the methods of historical reason. He makes his claims through numerous references to historical examples and through the use of carefully constructed
exegetical arguments that are conversant with biblical scholarship. Kaufman, trained as a philosophical theologian, attends more toward broad overarching conceptual analysis that can provide intellectual coherence for the position he is describing, as well as for dealing with alternative positions.

Evaluation

I have argued that both Yoder and Kaufman are postmodern in that both acknowledge the particularity and relativity of all human standpoints. Both of them are anti-foundationalists; they believe there is no secure rational and universal foundation upon which theology can be built. At the same time, both reject the destructive implications of an anarchic relativism by addressing normative ethical questions faced by the larger human community.

I need to draw on both Yoder and Kaufman in the development of a theology of culture—both the breadth of Kaufman’s analysis, which can connect one with the intellectual currents of the culture at large (i.e., science and philosophy), and the historically more concrete biblically-oriented vision of Yoder, grounded in an embodied christology and a vision of the church. I do prefer Kaufman’s understanding of the breadth of the theologian’s vocation and of imaginative construction in the light of the symbol God to the more limited role Yoder gives to the Christian ethicist. In Yoder’s 1988 address as president of the Society of Christian Ethics he says:

Our guild’s vocation is vigilance against the abuse of the words or of the logic of the discerning community. We are neither the umpires nor the examiners, the bishops nor the catechists, the evangelists nor the moderators. We are the immune system of the language flow that keeps the body going. Or we are the scribes, agents of communal memory, selecting from a too-full treasury what just happens to fit the next question. Or we are the ecumenical runners, carrying from one world to another the word of what has been suffered, learned, celebrated, confessed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{20}

Though I am much taken with Yoder’s images and can accept his definition of the role of the Christian ethicist as one who serves the church, I value
Kaufman’s broad cultural analysis, particularly his query into what it means to confess faith in God in our time. Yoder simply uses God language as if it were not problematic, while Kaufman considers the serious intellectual and ethical questions surrounding the use of that language. I appreciate the category of “mystery” and Kaufman’s insistence that we be aware that our God talk may be misleading or idolatrous.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss and evaluate Kaufman’s view of God, the central concern of his theology. I think his project of “imaginative construction”–to make sense of God talk for moderns who no longer think in dualistic categories–is an appropriate job of the theologian and a task the missionary has always done. It may be odd to view Kaufman as a missionary, but perhaps his theology could be seen in the Schleiermacherian sense as an effort to communicate the faith to “its cultured despisers.” The question, then, is not whether the faith should be “translated” into modern categories, but how that is to be done. In this regard, I like Kaufman’s use of the word “imagination.”

Yoder and Kaufman are not as far apart as some might claim, as Yoder too emphasizes the missionary role of the church. As noted above, he believes it is possible in a postmodern world to translate the good news of the gospel into the great variety of cultural languages. Yoder’s contribution has been to translate the story of Jesus imaginatively through political language, such that we might “see Jesus” and be challenged to live faithfully by that vision. Kaufman, in a different way, is also a translator of the good news–what it means today, in a world where dualistic categories do not make sense, to confess faith in God, in a God who “in Christ” is bringing reconciliation and is trusting humans with the ministry of reconciliation.

I am much more in tune with Kaufman’s stance on the boundary. As members of an alternative community, the church, Christians also belong to other cultural identities (family, nation, Western culture, etc.). While I argued above for the development of an alternative cultural vision grounded in an embodied christology (cf. Yoder), we must also fully acknowledge that our stance as an alternative human community does not privilege us from the vulnerabilities (both finitude and sin) that we share with other humans. As stated earlier, I miss in Yoder’s writing an acknowledgment of human vulnerability and uncertainty in the face of the plurality of worldviews competing for our commitment. While Yoder presupposes believer’s baptism,
he does not reflect theologically in the light of the difficult decision of becoming a Christian in a world where other options compete for our allegiance. Baptism is the rite of passage marking the movement from one identity to another; it signals the individual’s desire to participate in a new identity, the new humanity that has been formed by Jesus Christ. This desire does not simply arise from an individual’s own self, similar to the desire to join a club or community organization. I do not presuppose the modernist assumption that we can “decide” to become Christians as if we are autonomous agents. The desire for baptism arises out of the power of the gospel, the good news of God’s way in the world, made vivid in Jesus Christ.

A right understanding of baptism requires us to balance the paradoxical relationship between grace, the story that has moved the individual to desire, and free consent, the personal response of faith. We cannot decide without coming to know God’s gracious power, yet grace must be responded to freely in faith. This paradoxical relationship is expressed beautifully by the Anabaptist Hans Denck: “No one can truly know Christ unless one follows Him in life. And no one can follow Him except inasmuch as one has already known him.”

The decision to become a Christian is a response to the gift of God’s grace, the good news. But this good news competes with other paradigms. Kaufman’s theology addresses these other options and seeks to make a case for why a Christian vision can make sense and be a free consent based on faith. This emphasis on free consent to the attractiveness of Jesus is the basis for his critique of Yoder’s stress on the metaphors of Lordship and obedience. Kaufman’s broader framework can make room for Yoder’s creative vision for the church grounded in a political Christ, whereas Yoder’s appeal to the authority of Christ does not address sufficiently the human struggle, the dialectic of faith and doubt, and the necessity of consent.

On the other hand, I appreciate the vividness and concreteness of Yoder’s christology. I have critiqued Kaufman elsewhere for the abstractness of his christology, for not sufficiently describing the historical embodied Christ who is radically sarx within his Jewish cultural and historical context. When Kaufman seeks to connect the Christian faith to the modern human predicament, some see him as an unrepentant Kantian (that was the problem with the christology of his teacher, H. R. Niebuhr). Some argue he attempts to make sense of faith in the light of universal ethical principles of reason—
what modern persons shaped by the Enlightenment can make sense of. As an alternative to appeals to authority in theology (creed, dogma, the Bible), Kaufman substitutes a pragmatic theory of truth—i.e., what kind of ethical consequences flow from holding to a particular view of God, humans, and the world. At times, instead of an ethic shaped by an embodied christology, Kaufman’s understanding of Christ seems shaped by abstract ethical principles derived on rational (Kantian?) grounds. Thus I find the much more embodied and historically concrete christology of Yoder more adequate, though he overemphasizes command/obedience.

I am also not satisfied with Kaufman’s primary use of the abstract language of philosophy for his imaginative construction of theology. I find myself turning to more poetic images, the type of theological thinking in Sallie McFague’s *Models of God*. Sharing much in common with Kaufman with regard to theology’s imaginative and constructive role, McFague explores the rich world of metaphor to develop new constructions of the symbol “God.” We can appropriate, for example, metaphors from the hymn texts of Brian Wren: “Joyful is the dark, holy hidden God, rolling cloud of night beyond all naming, majesty in darkness, energy of love, Word in flesh, the mystery proclaiming.” The poet Jean Janzen is another example of one who uses metaphor to enlarge our image of God by appropriating from Julian of Norwich feminine metaphors: “Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world. Creator, Source of every breath, you are my rain, my wind, my sun.”

Metaphor and story connect theology with ordinary people in the pew, who are not moved by abstract philosophical categories. It is absolutely essential that we who do theology serve the people of God if our theology is going to make a difference in the world. Furthermore, metaphor and story also bring out a holistic view of life, the connection of soul and body, of mind and spirit. A theology of culture must develop a rich language of metaphor to connect “God talk” with the wondrous bustling, confusing, creative pluralism of human culture.

I am grateful for the gifts of John Howard Yoder and Gordon Kaufman, who have contributed to the ongoing process of theological thinking. I appreciate the emphasis in both of them that the aim of theological work is to contribute to our devotion to God and a life of ethical responsibility in the
world. Both of them encourage us not to accept their word as authoritative, but in our own way to think and act faithfully in the presence of the One in whom we live and move and have our being, the One who is present to us most vividly and concretely in Jesus Christ, the fundamental paradigm for our own humanity.

Notes

1 This paper was originally presented as a lecture for the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre at the Toronto School of Theology on Nov. 5, 1997, and discussed with Conrad Grebel College faculty on Nov. 14, 1997.


5 In the chapter on the early church in The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, Troeltsch describes Christ in terms of the purity of his religious idea oriented totally on God and away from the world. We find this same language in Niebuhr. “As the Son of God he points away from the many values of man’s social life to the One who alone is good” (Christ and Culture, 28).

6 Quoted by Yoder in Authentic Transformation, 53.

7 A more complete analysis would show how this duality in Troeltsch and H.R Niebuhr arises
out of the influence of Kant, who made a sharp distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal world. This duality, which then places religion in the arena of the noumenal and other reality in the phenomenal world, has had an enormous influence on theology. Everyone from Kierkegaard (leap of faith) and neo-orthodox theologians like Barth (with his distinction between “historie” and “Geschichte), liberal theologians like Schleiermacher (who grounds theology in feeling) and Albrecht Ritschl (where theology is grounded in ethics) are influenced by this Kantian duality. In all these cases theology seeks a foundation in some kind of reality that is more secure than the phenomenal realm of history. This contributes to a tendency toward a Gnostic Christ, abstracted from his actual, historical, cultural, phenomenal world. This has also had negative implications for relationships between Christians and Jews. The rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus in more recent biblical scholarship is another implication of an attempt to overcome this Kantian residue.


2 It is a mistake to equate Yoder’s position with Stanley Hauerwas’s views. This is often done because Hauerwas attributes such importance to Yoder in shaping his ideas. Yoder is much more ready to see connections between what the church stands for and movements in the culture at large. In some of his recent writings, for example, he has distinguished his approach from Hauerwas’s. In a footnote to “Meaning After Babel: With Jeffrey Stout Beyond Relativism,” Yoder says: “A soft pluralism, when consistent, provides the most livable cultural space for Jews and Anabaptists, as well as for Jehovah’s Witnesses and followers of Rev. Moon. As a civil arrangement, pluralism is better than any of the hitherto known alternatives. As an ecclesiastical arrangement, it is better than the monarchical episcopate. As a marketplace of ideas, it is better than a politically correct campus or a media empire homogenized by salesmanship. For such reasons, Stanley Hauerwas’s characterization of English-speaking justice as a set of ‘bad ideas’ (After Christendom, 1991) strikes me as too simple.”—Journal of Religious Ethics (Spring 1996): 135.

3 The “human” and the “world” are also constructions that reflect the theologian’s particular standpoint. Though Kaufman argues for why his own interpretations are plausible, we should not assume that these are universal categories grounded in a universal rationality.

4 Kaufman, God, Mystery, Diversity, 8.
5 Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 61.
6 Ibid., 284.
7 Ibid., 383.
9 I would like to explore the insights that are coming, especially from feminist theologians,
who are asking about the relevance for theology that we are “spirited bodies” that experience life through and in our bodies. Whereas Yoder has developed images of the politically embodied Jewish Christ and the embodied church which developed concrete practices to deal with conflict around concrete bodily practices like eating and circumcision, Yoder himself as a “bodied” person is not “in” his theological reflection. He reflects as a person “detached” from pain, passion, bodily exhaustion, and suffering. Would it be unfair to characterize Yoder’s theology, once one accepts his premises, as the triumph of rationality over everything else, ultimately a protection against vulnerability?

17 The sociological framework of commitment in a postmodern world is radically different from that of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. A Conrad Grebel or a Michael Sattler chose to become baptized as adults within the relatively homogeneous “sacred canopy” of Christendom. Earlier generations of Mennonites in North America, who grew up in relatively closed ethnic enclaves, would have had a similar experience of a sacred canopy. Today commitment to the Christian faith is in the context of radical pluralism. We existentially experience in our world a multitude of possibilities of belief and action. What does it mean to respond to God’s gracious gift and be “discipled” in an alternative community in a radically pluralistic world?


22 See my essay in the festschrift “Toward a Theology of Culture: A Dialogue with Gordon Kaufman” in Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity.

23 I have discussed with Harry Huebner his view of Kaufman in his essay in the festschrift (see note 22), “Imagination/Tradition: Conjunction or Disjunction.” Huebner reads Kaufman as fundamentally Kantian. I do not think Huebner takes sufficiently into account Kaufman’s historically situated social view of the self which is the grounds for the latter’s position on the relativity of all our worldviews. Kaufman’s “imaginative construction” does not arise primarily out of Kantian skepticism about what can be known about the phenomenal world. It is rather a response to the recognition of the social/cultural/historical/linguistic relativity of all worldviews.