Responses

Response by the author, Duane K. Friesen, to Gordon Kaufman’s review of Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City


Since theology is principally concerned with what is ultimately mystery about which no one can be an authority, with true or certain answers to the major questions – I suggest that the proper model for conceiving it is not the lecture (monologue); nor is it the text (for example, a book): it is rather, conversation. We are all in this mystery together; and we need to question one another, criticize one another, make suggestions to one another, help one another. (64)

It is in this spirit that I would like to respond to a number of issues Kaufman raised in his review.

1. To whom is the book addressed? Kaufman assumes that Artists, Citizens, Philosophers is addressed to Mennonites. While I am grateful for his compliment that it is “good to see a Mennonite theologian take up this exceedingly significant subject,” his mistaken assumption is revealed in the rest of that sentence when he says, “[it is] a subject crucial for all of today’s Mennonites if we are to survive (my emphasis) as a distinctive Christian movement.” He assumes that an “Anabaptist theology of culture” is for Mennonites, as if “we” owned this tradition. But my book is not about Mennonites, for Mennonites, or about Mennonite survival. It is indeed deeply influenced by the author’s Anabaptist heritage. But the point of the book is not to set out a “Mennonite” position, but rather to draw upon the non-Constantinian alternative vision of church history (from Jeremiah and the Waldensians to
Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King) to set out an ecumenical vision for the larger church in North America. The vision set out in the book was particularly inspired by East German Christians (largely from within the Lutheran tradition) who used the Jeremiah model in the 1950s and ‘60s to respond to Marxism. I feel that Kaufman keeps me in the Niebuhrian “sectarian” box, whereas the book is an argument about how to break out of that box.

2. Is the book flawed because it is still too traditionally “Mennonite?” Kaufman’s underlying assumption, I suspect, leads him to make two particularly Mennonite points: (1) that the title of my first chapter, “Christians and Aliens,” is a “not too promising, but typically Mennonite, dualistic formulation”; and (2) that my whole program may be “based too largely on a nostalgic vision of the good old days when Mennonites really could live in – and could decisively socialize their children into – the alternative culture and life of their rural communities.” Kaufman seems not to have noticed that what I have set out is increasingly being adopted by mainline Protestant leaders and theologians who recognize that Christians need an alternative vision of the church that “forms” persons into an alternative set of practices that can have staying power and have an impact on the larger society. Let me mention several examples I draw on extensively in the book: Larry Rasmussen (Reinhold Niebuhr Chair at Union Theological Seminary), who wrote Moral Fragments and Moral Community; Walter Brueggemann (Calvinist tradition; Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary), who wrote Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles; and Martin Luther King. Cornel West (quoted on page 307) says of King: “Let us not forget that the great American prophetic figure of our time, Martin L. King Jr., was a child of the black church – an individual product of the major institutional product of black people in this country.” Robert Bellah (et al.) argues that the church must become an alternative “community of memory” to counter the corrosive individualism of American culture. Bellah and his co-authors in Habits of the Heart point to examples of the church in modern American urban culture where such a vision is being put into practice. Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas are in this stream as well when they argue for the establishment of communities of virtue grounded in a narrative tradition (though I criticize Hauerwas for not emphasizing the church’s prophetic mission outside its boundaries). My own view is that the Mennonite churches that seem most to embody this vision are not living in
rural enclaves but in urban centers like Kansas City, Los Angeles, Toronto, Seattle, Chicago, Denver, and Winnipeg. I have learned a great deal from Kaufman, and I acknowledge that in my book. However, the position from which I suspect he is responding to me grows out of his minimalist ecclesiology. I do not think he adequately considers the church as one of the primary institutions of moral formation as a base for engaging the larger culture. Ecclesiology grounded in an embodied Christology and a trinitarian God is integral to a theology of culture, but Kaufman gives no attention to these chapters in his review. Thus I am not sure that he has fully understood my position.

3. **What does it mean for the church to be central in the engagement of the larger culture?** Kaufman fails to understand the implications of my ecclesiology for how one engages the larger culture. He does not grasp how my view of the church “could ever be a model for the wider society . . . other than some kind of theocracy seeking to rule the world.” He acknowledges that I do not intend this, given my recognition of religious pluralism. Kaufman misses a key part of the argument where I discuss the concept of “analogical imagination” in chapter 7, “The Dynamics of Dual Citizenship.” A Christian understanding of citizenship is based on **two** principles: (1) a model of the church which serves as a vision for the “good society”; and (2) A commitment to participation in the larger culture through a process of analogical thinking that seeks to “translate” that vision into applications to a pluralistic society. I suggest a number of normative axioms that might apply to the larger society based on this vision such as religious liberty, nonviolent conflict resolution, democratic structures of decision making, and an understanding of economic justice that respects the dignity of all persons because it is grounded in a corporate vision of the church where the well-being of the whole body entails the practice of mutual aid. I am impressed by how persons in the mainline Protestant traditions have affirmed this analogical process. For example, Alan Geyer (Methodist theologian and former editor of *Christian Century*) and Donald Shriver seek to apply the concept of forgiveness to the political arena (see references to their work on page 160 of my book).
4. How is our particular identity as Christians in a pluralistic world of other faiths related to the universal claims of Christ upon us as Christians? Kaufman asks how I can affirm the “universality” of Christ in a Christian vision of life and at the same time “respect difference and not attempt to absorb the other into our own perspective” (262). It would help if he accurately quoted my position without taking my more nuanced wording out of context. I state: “Genuine faith entails commitment to that which is regarded as ultimate.” Kaufman uses part of that sentence, “genuine faith entails commitment to,” and links it to a phrase four sentences later where I am not stating my position but introducing several biblical quotations with “the universal claims of Christianity.” By joining these two phrases Kaufman is stating my position as “Genuine faith entails commitment to . . . the universal claims of Christianity.” It seems to me there is a significant difference between taking a “witness” to Christ as the ultimate point of reference in a dialogical process of engagement with other religious views, and making a universal claim for the universality of Christ upon us as Christians?

In his book, In Face of Mystery, Kaufman has his own universal normative vision for engaging different religious views: open-ended conversation and dialogue. Yet this very vision of life arises out of the particular circumstances of history: a liberal enlightenment view of inquiry, the ideal of a modern university. These concepts of open-ended inquiry and tolerance are not universally shared by all human beings. They appear only at a particular time and place in history. It also makes a world of difference as to the content of Christology (which Kaufman does not discuss in his review). The kenotic Christology of servant love in Philippians 2 suggests not a triumphal, arrogant engagement with the other, but a dialogical process of loving relationship that entails repentance, humility, and openness to listening and learning from the other and being changed by the other. I am convinced that commitment to a Christology of an embodied Jewish Jesus who taught and practiced love of enemies and the other is not an impediment to dialogue in a pluralistic world.
It is rather a more adequate and honest basis of engagement than so-called universal reason, which in fact is another type of historical particularity.

5. **How adequately is the Western philosophical tradition treated?** Kaufman is critical of my last chapter, “Philosophers, Christian Faith and Human Wisdom,” because there is “no discussion here of particular philosophers or the important place held by the philosophical tradition in Western Culture.” He does not acknowledge that I set as my goal at the beginning of this chapter to consider a much broader understanding of the word “philosophy” – its root meaning, “the love of wisdom.” This includes not just the Western philosophical tradition, but practical wisdom, empirical wisdom, and the wisdom that can be learned from other religious traditions. His criticism is especially misleading in as much as he does not consider the extensive discussion of the Western philosophical tradition throughout my book (and also in the extensive endnotes): (1) the engagement with Plato, Justin Martyr, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Whitehead, Rawls, Walzer, Durkheim, Freud, Otto, Hick, Tillich, Barbour, Murphy, Lakotas, MacIntyre, Wittgenstein, and others; and (2) the engagement with topics such as definitions of culture, epistemology, the nature of religion, historical consciousness, the meaning of the Enlightenment, natural law, postmodernism, process categories, dualism, the human/nature relationship, aesthetic theory, philosophy of science, political philosophy, moral formation, criteria of truth, relativism, and other topics.

6. **What is the role of the Bible?** In his analysis of chapter one, Kaufman wonders what “authority” the Bible has in my theology. Let me call attention to my discussion of how the Bible is authoritative in my theological method (80-81). I might add here that, as we construct theology for our time (I have been influenced significantly by Kaufman’s method), we need to do so in continuity with the tradition. A modern house in tune with contemporary architecture will still have many features in common with houses built centuries earlier, such that we will recognize the contemporary house as a house. I find biblical scholarship very engaging and a rich resource for the contemporary construction of a theology of culture. As I say in summarizing H.R. Niebuhr, “revelation . . . is not contrary to reason, but is the way in which the story of God’s action makes our lives intelligible” (80). The Jeremiah model (“seek the
peace of the city,” Jeremiah tells the exiles) is a compelling model because it “makes sense,” not simply because it is in the Bible and therefore authoritative for us. Also, given the ecumenical agenda of my book, we must search for common metaphors and stories that can link the church in many lands and cultures. From a strictly pragmatic point of view, there is little future in a theological construction that speaks to a narrow academic elite but has cut the roots to the historical tradition of the ecumenical church.

7. **Does the book cover adequately crucial topics?** A theology of culture can only be suggestive. It takes many of us to engage the wide range of issues we are confronted with. I acknowledge that my discussion of science is much too brief, and the significance and impact of technology needs to be taken up. Consider, for example, the topic of scientific knowledge in genetics and our growing technological capacity to use that knowledge either for good or ill. To engage that issue adequately would require a book in its own right. Or, consider the impact of global market capitalism, a topic for another book. I hope that my book suggests an approach to this topic (through both where I got it right and where I did not) that will stimulate a wide ranging discussion among many people who desire the Christian faith to contribute to the “peace of the city.”