Early in his career, Gordon Kaufman suggested that “the objective of systematic theology is not simply to repeat traditional views but rather to grasp and think through the central claims of the Christian faith afresh, and one should expect this to produce novel or even offensive interpretations.”\(^1\) Although Kaufman shifted from identifying as a systematic theologian to identifying as a constructive theologian, at heart his understanding that theology should be novel, creative, and suggestive never changed. One of the most important contributions that he offers contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite theology is his particular way of using the Christian tradition as a non-authoritative source for theology. Although this has been the root of many critiques of his work, I will argue that his understanding of tradition is helpful for reconstructing two theological dispositions which have had continued influence in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology—noncreedalism and the priority of christomorphic praxis.\(^2\) Kaufman’s constructive method offers a promising direction for theologians who want to interpret faith claims on a comprehensive scale while also engaging cultural developments.

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like pluralism, individualism, and contextualism, which tend to have a corrosive effect on theological systems of all kinds.

**Kaufman’s Constructive Theological Method**

Whether creative theological work is identified as ‘systematic’ or ‘constructive,’ Kaufman’s contribution is instructive for considering the possibilities of Anabaptist-Mennonite theological method because he spent his entire career wrestling with the question of how theology should be done.⁴ In his best-known work, *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman identifies theology’s task as primarily constructive. He uses scripture and the Christian tradition as sources for his theology, but he approaches them non-authoritatively.⁴ The starting point for his theology is that the reality of God is ultimately a mystery, and that all of our concepts of God are constructs of the human imagination. This methodology is based on two key philosophical commitments: historicism and pragmatism.

Given his historicism—his first philosophical commitment—Kaufman is convinced that there are no absolute or universal truths: all theological beliefs and practices are shaped by the time and place of their construction, and as such should be critically reconsidered in light of new developments. This insight—that God-talk has always been historically conditioned and thus relative to its social context—was groundbreaking for Kaufman’s thinking, reframing his understanding of the task of theology

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³ See Kaufman, *Systematic Theology*, for his earliest attempt to write a systematic theology using a method that was historicist and correlational. The limits of this method, particularly its reliance on traditional authority, ultimately compelled Kaufman to rethink how theology should be done. While he abandoned his systematic theology as unsuccessful—primarily due to its uncritical acceptance of a neo-orthodox doctrine of God—his early work is still an important resource because it introduces many of the basic concerns and questions that he returned to over his career. Both this correlational method and his later constructive method are united by a search for a credible way to talk about God that can orient human life in light of historicism. See Gordon D. Kaufman, “My Life and My Theological Reflection: Two Central Themes,” *Dialog* 40, no. 1 (2001): 43-60; idem, “Apologia Pro Vita Sua,” in *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*, ed. Harry Loewen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 134; and idem, “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage,” *Religious Studies Review* 20, no. 3 (1994): 178-79 on Kaufman’s own sense of continuity and change in his work.

from systematics to construction, and shifting in his mind where Christian theologians ought to place their loyalty.

Whereas in his earlier systematic theological method, loyalty to the Christian tradition as ‘unique’ and ‘essential’ was precisely what it meant to be a Christian theologian, in his later constructive method Kaufman argues that “it is a serious mistake to invoke the authority of the major symbols of the tradition as the principal basis for theological work.” While loyalty is still considered a marker of what it means to be a theologian, he shifts the focus of this loyalty from the Christian tradition to ultimate mystery, which Christians call God.

As historicist, Kaufman’s theology is therefore a fundamentally creative activity, a process of imaginative construction. However, the presupposition that every theological claim is provisional and historically contextual is not meant to dissuade people from doing theology. Instead, the recognition that all theology is imaginative construction is intended to liberate Christians to courageously and creatively engage the Christian tradition in light of their own situational experiences.

Pragmatism, Kaufman’s second philosophical commitment, inclines him to judge theological claims not simply by how well they either correspond to Christian scripture and tradition or correlate the tradition to the current situation. It is equally important to judge these claims according to their fruits: do they encourage ethically responsible ways of life or not? Kaufman’s constructive theology, which attempts to make claims about God that are not justified by reference to traditions as normative or authoritative, sharply contrasts with any type of hermeneutical or correlational theological method that interprets the current social context in light of some definitive text or tradition.

Thus, when evaluating the adequacy of a theological claim, the most important question for Kaufman is not how it came to be known but

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whether it empowers people to act more humanely in the world. As he says in *The Theological Imagination*, “all claims to truth made simply on the grounds of religious authority are in question: theological truth-claims are to be assessed strictly in terms of our present needs and our present moral insight (educated as much as possible, of course, by past experience and by tradition).” By rejecting the notion that the origin of a belief has any priority in determining its truth, Kaufman assesses tradition from a characteristically pragmatic perspective.

The importance of results as the criterion for successful theology is made clear in *In Face of Mystery*, when Kaufman explains that “the reconception of the Christian faith and Christian ideas which I have worked out here is not intended as a mere academic exercise. . . . If it cannot (or does not) succeed in doing that [i.e., helping men and women find their way in life in the world today], it must be reckoned a failure.” His theology is thus clearly intended to be practical, not theoretical: “[W]e must remember that our exploration here is not to be grounded primarily in a speculative interest in the question of what is ultimately real but rather in the practical interest of finding orientation for life in face of the problems and evils of modernity—and in the hope that the central Christian symbols may provide us with such orientation.”

While many readers take Kaufman’s historicism and pragmatism at face value as philosophical commitments guiding his theology (and seemingly idiosyncratic ones at that), I suggest that these commitments can be read in line with theological dispositions from the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

**Two Theological Dispositions in Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition**

Before turning to the ways that Kaufman’s historicism and pragmatism can

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9 Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 430.
10 Ibid., 245.
11 For an in-depth study of the philosophical background to Kaufman’s historicism and pragmatism, see Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism*. 
inform Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, I will briefly consider the meaning of noncreedalism and christomorphic praxis in the broader Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.\textsuperscript{12}

Noncreedalism is a distinctive methodological presupposition in Anabaptist-Mennonite theological reflection that involves more than creeds. It is a hermeneutic of suspicion seeking to distinguish between human and divine authority that can be applied to creeds, to confessions of faith, traditions, and customs, and even to the scriptures themselves. For instance, while Anabaptist-Mennonites have had a consistent tradition of confessionalism, unlike creedalism, their confessions did not usually function as independent authorities and have been constantly open to revision.\textsuperscript{13} As Thomas Finger explains, most Mennonites have rejected three characteristic functions of creeds in other Christian traditions. They do not attribute any special significance to early Christian creeds, such as the Nicene. Likewise, they do not typically use faith statements as a basis for defining the boundaries of church membership, nor do they understand their confessions to be universal or without error.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, while Anabaptists produced a wide variety of confessions of faith, starting with the Swiss Anabaptist Schleitheim Confession in 1527, these confessions have focused more on practice than on doctrine, in contrast to the Nicene Creed and other creeds that were primarily doctrinal.\textsuperscript{15}

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\item \textsuperscript{12} While the scope of this essay cannot do justice to the historical diversity and the development of these two themes, or include other important dispositions within the Anabaptist-Mennonite theological tradition, I focus on these specifically because they most closely relate to the emphases in Kaufman’s theological method.
\end{itemize}
Unlike creeds and confessions in the Catholic and Protestant churches that were used to exert ecclesiastical and political authority, confessions among early Anabaptists usually had little external authority over congregations or individuals, and the authority that they did have was derivative. It was dependent on the degree to which a confession accurately reflected the scripture and the extent to which congregations chose to assent to it. As Karl Koop explains, “although the essential commitments of the Anabaptist-Mennonite communities, from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, remained constant,” the social contexts in which confessions were used were constantly changing and the confessions were revised accordingly. Koop observes that “the confessions represent not a fixed, but rather a dynamic and developing theological tradition.”

The resistance to recognizing independent authority in creeds or confessions is indicative of a more fundamental delineation of divine and human authority that influenced some Anabaptists’ interpretation of scripture as well. In his study of early Anabaptist biblical hermeneutics, Ben Ollenburger emphasizes two “pre-understandings” that directed the way many 16th-century Anabaptists read the scripture. One was the drawing of some sort of distinction between the Old and New Testaments, and the other was some version of the principle that a person had to have a prior commitment to Jesus in order to interpret the scriptures correctly.

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16 Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith*, 75-76. Especially in the case of the Waterlanders, Koop notes that their confessions had “representative, rather than constitutive authority” (75-76).

17 Koop, “Introduction,” 10, 14. In *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith*, 79-80, Koop explains that “in most instances confessions of faith were not considered ‘first-order’ commitments of the Christian community” like scripture, worship, or prayer. Instead they functioned as ‘second-order’ documents, “as heuristic constructions, assisting the process of articulating the content and implications of the faith.” In “Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition,” Finger surveys the recurrent use of confessions from the 16th to the 20th century.

For instance, although Menno Simons considered the whole Bible to be authoritative, he used the life and teaching of Jesus and the apostles as the interpretive key for understanding the whole.\textsuperscript{19} For him, “Any teaching, interpretation, or even Word of Scripture which is contrary to ‘the intention of Jesus Christ’ is false.”\textsuperscript{20} The southern German Anabaptist Hans Denck would not even call the Bible the ‘Word of God,’ since God’s word was only truly Christ himself.\textsuperscript{21} In his “Recantation” Denck explains that “The Holy Scriptures I hold above all treasures, but it is not as high as the Word of God.”\textsuperscript{22} Thus, for some early Anabaptists even the scriptures themselves had to be tested using the interpretive criterion of faithfulness to the words and practices of Jesus, who was the sole and final authority for Christian life and action.\textsuperscript{23}

By relegating all human authority under the absolute authority of God in Jesus Christ, noncreedalism is closely related to a second important Anabaptist-Mennonite theological disposition: the priority of discipleship, or christomorphic praxis. Unlike a christocentric faith that focuses on correct doctrines, ideologies, or creeds, a christomorphic faith focuses on the ethical responsibility that Christians have toward others, through practices that conform one’s life to the model of Jesus.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} Ollenburger, “Hermeneutics of Obedience,” 51.
\textsuperscript{21} Walter Klaassen, \textit{Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant} (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973), 19, and Jan J. Kiwiet, “The Theology of Hans Denck,” \textit{Mennonite Quarterly Review} 32 (1958): 3-27. Kiwiet explains that for Denck, Christ is the Word of God, both as the historical person Jesus whom Christians can imitate, and as an inner experience of God that empowers Christians and makes the imitation of Christ possible. For Denck, “Christ is identical with the Word of God and is the only power by which we can fulfill obedience to God” (18).
\textsuperscript{24} David Tracy explains that “there is no serious form of \textit{Christian} theology that is not christomorphic. This is a more accurate designation of the christological issue, I believe,
J. Denny Weaver suggests a way of thinking about Anabaptist discipleship that gives more shape to this idea of christomorphic praxis. Interpreting the views of Sattler, Grebel, Denck, and Balthasar Hubmaier, he argues that the Anabaptist practice of discipleship is best expressed as “solidarity in Christ.” He explains that these figures each understood discipleship to be the imitation of Christ, in which disciples continued to participate in the work of Christ as Christ also continued to empower their activities. As Weaver defines this kind of solidarity, the Jesus of the gospels is the head of Christ, and the church functions as the body of Christ.25

When christomorphic praxis is prioritized, the Anabaptist interpretation of scripture becomes even more distinctive. This is because, in addition to judging the Bible in light of Jesus’ life and teachings, there is a concurrent belief that the gospels themselves cannot be properly understood except as one attempts to follow him. As Ollenburger explains, key figures in the early Anabaptist movements generally agreed that “knowledge of Christ comes in walking with Him, and only then can one understand what is written about Him.”26 In practice this meant that many early Anabaptists would not turn to religious or scholarly authorities to understand the scriptures. Instead, as Walter Klaassen describes it, the scriptures could only be properly interpreted in the “gathered disciple-community.”27

This ideal of the church as a hermeneutical community continues to serve as a model for many today who think that Anabaptist-Mennonite biblical interpretation should be deeply entwined with a commitment to living as the body of Christ.28 In this way the community of disciples forms
a locus of authority that, at least in ideal terms, can “avoid authoritarian interpretation on the one hand, and uninformed individualistic imagination on the other.”

Of course, communities of faith are rarely if ever ‘ideal.’ John D. Roth suggests that there was great diversity in the actual practice of early Anabaptist biblical interpretation, and that the hermeneutical community may never have been more than an ideal. Besides the diversity of practice, Lydia Neufeld Harder argues that it is important to account for the ways that power relationships and authority structures within the hermeneutical community can privilege the contributions of some members more than others. Yet, even if it has not always been realized, this ideal of the Anabaptist church as hermeneutical community envisions christomorphic praxis as the

_Biblical Interpretation_, 151-64: “viewing the congregation as a hermeneutical community is an important contribution” to contemporary biblical hermeneutics because “the hermeneutical question is shifted from ‘What does the text mean to me?’ to the more basic question, ‘What does the text mean to us?’” (153). Nadine Pence Frantz, in “Biblical Interpretation in a ‘Non-Sense’ World,” 153-66, recommends a “Believers’ Church hermeneutic” as an alternative to “hermeneutics in the modern period, which separated the processes of understanding, interpretation, and application and spoke of practice as the application of an insight or principle…. Integral to the Believers’ Church hermeneutic is the role of the local congregation as the interpretive community, which means that the confessional community of faith is actively involved in discerning the meaning of the text” (159-60). For a range of perspectives on Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics, see the other essays in Swartley, _Essays on Biblical Interpretation_.

29 Klaassen, _Anabaptism_, 80.


condition for the possibility of understanding the Bible.

To summarize, at the heart of this interpretation of Anabaptist views of creeds, confessions, and scriptures is a fundamental concern never to confuse human authority with the absolute authority of God. This is what I would identify as a noncreedal disposition in at least some forms of Anabaptist theological reflection. According to this interpretation, there is also a tendency in some strands of Anabaptist-Mennonite thought to judge faith and the Bible according to their fruits or the degree to which they conform to the life of Jesus. This practical view of the Christian life is what I would call a christomorphic disposition in theological reflection. In analogous ways, Kaufman's theology also starts with these two dispositions, but by doing theology in conversation with historicism and pragmatism, his work offers creative possibilities for Anabaptist-Mennonite theology.

Kaufman’s Method as a Distinctive Form of Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology

Kaufman’s early theological identity and career was significantly shaped by the Mennonite tradition. Yet even though his later theology is less explicitly Mennonite, the historicist and pragmatic principles guiding his constructive theology function in analogous ways to the Anabaptist-Mennonite theological dispositions toward noncreedalism and christomorphic praxis. Although some contemporary Mennonites do not recognize Kaufman as a part of their theological tradition—thinking of him more as a liberal protestant or even a post-Christian theologian—he never rejected his Mennonite roots as a source of theological inspiration and was a lifelong ordained minister in the Mennonite Church. The common misunderstandings of his theological location seem to be based in part on the assumption, which he never held,


that one cannot be both an Anabaptist and a liberal theologian.34

For instance, John Howard Yoder concluded that even Kaufman’s early work had parted ways with Anabaptist theology, especially in its willingness to accept and respect the contradictory convictions held by other Christian denominations. Yoder laments that Kaufman acquiesces to a “peculiar equiprobabilism of American denominational etiquette,” a faux-respect that does not take differences of opinion seriously enough, when they are in fact contradictory understandings of God’s commands.35 Kaufman, objecting to this characterization, responds that what he is really doing is rejecting religious authoritarianism: “Yoder [argues] that I have rejected the all-too-great authority of the church in the Anabaptist tradition in the name of the mass-church tradition; it would be more correct to say I am rejecting the common authoritarianism of both these lines in the name of ‘liberal’ traditions rooted in the Enlightenment and modern democratic experience.”36 Kaufman clearly sees no contradiction in his theology being informed by both theological liberalism and Anabaptist thought.

Although Kaufman felt little need to justify the congruence between his theology and his Mennonite faith, as a liberal Mennonite theologian he weaves together Enlightenment and Anabaptist traditions in innovative ways. A. James Reimer, although skeptical of Kaufman’s historicism, suggests that his work does stand in continuity with the prophetic and ethical dimensions of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.37 Reimer says:

In short, it seems to me that, while Kaufman’s ‘historicism’ is much more explicit and radical than the ‘historicality’ of Bender, Friedmann, and Yoder, there is still a continuity among the four which harks back to the left wing of the Reformation with its voluntarism, protest against all forms of human heteronomy,

36 Kaufman, Nonresistance and Responsibility, 115, n8.
and its emphasis on an historical, ethical, and eschatological kingdom of God.\(^{38}\)

While Kaufman’s constructive method is not the only way or even a common way of doing Mennonite theology, it offers a promising direction for a culturally engaged theological method that should not be hastily dismissed.\(^{39}\)

For instance, like the noncreedal disposition in Anabaptism, Kaufman also begins his theology with a suspicion of human authority. He is especially concerned with what he calls ‘idolatry’—the confusing of human beliefs about God with the reality of God.\(^{40}\) For him, the symbol God, properly understood, is that which “unmasks the idols,” by disclosing the relativity of everything that is not God. In In Face of Mystery, for instance, Kaufman argues that “theologians [should] understand themselves to be responsible first and foremost to God (and Christ), not to the churches that are the historical bearers of this symbolism, nor to the traditions in and through which this symbolism has been handed on to us today.”\(^{41}\) A true understanding of the function and “meaning of the symbol ‘God’” as the ultimate point of reference, whereby all human viewpoints are shown to be relative, “demands such a stance.”\(^{42}\)

Like Hans Denck, but from a distinctively historicist perspective,

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\(^{39}\) James C. Juhnke, “The Mennonite Tradition of Cultural Engagement” in Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity, 23-36, argues that Kaufman’s work rightly belongs to a Mennonite tradition of ‘culturally engaged pacifism.’ However, this tradition was marginalized after the Second World War as Mennonite theologians such as Guy F. Hershberger reinterpreted Mennonite social responsibility in terms of “biblical nonresistance,” an insular and disengaged pacifism critical of methods of nonviolent resistance implemented by Mohandas Gandhi and others.

\(^{40}\) See Kaufman, Theological Imagination, 275-76; Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 9-11. Kaufman’s historicist noncreedalism is also influenced by the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. See H. Richard Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays (New York: Harper & Row, 1943), 21, 33-34. In this understanding, being faithful to the continuing development of the tradition requires only giving one’s ultimate loyalty to that which is truly absolute, i.e., God. Uncritically devoting oneself to anything less amounts to idolatry.

\(^{41}\) Kaufman, In Face of Mystery, 440.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
Kaufman distinguishes between the reality of God and human words about God.\textsuperscript{43} For this reason he thinks that uncritical interpretations of the Bible are theologically irresponsible. By merely accepting the world-pictures of the past, theologians fail to seriously engage the questions of how God is best understood in our world today and what a Christian’s responsibility should be.\textsuperscript{44} While Kaufman does not reject the Bible as a source for theology, he believes it should not be regarded as an inherently authoritative source. If the Bible is understood in historicist terms, as the contextual reflection of human communities on their experiences of God, then Kaufman’s historicist interpretation of the scriptures and tradition can be read as a constructive adaptation of the historic Anabaptist suspicion of the human authority that can usurp divine authority in creeds and in the scriptures. To make the Bible absolutely authoritative is to confuse human words about God with the reality of God—a mystery that cannot be circumscribed by the human imagination.

Like the christomorphic disposition in Anabaptism, Kaufman also judges all theological claims according to the fruits they bear. He is concerned that in christocentric theologies even “the image of Christ is reified to the point of idolatry.”\textsuperscript{45} As an alternative, his own theology is strongly theocentric, and his christomorphism emphasizes a radically inclusive way of life—that how one lives is far more significant than what one believes.\textsuperscript{46} Kaufman identifies christomorphism with practices like the love of enemies, nonresistance, and kenosis, which are “paradigmatic for understanding what it means to regard God as ‘love’ (1 John 4) and for defining the radical stance that is (should be) normative for Christian life and action.”\textsuperscript{47} As Scott Holland points out, an advantage of prioritizing christomorphism is that it enables Christians

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\item \textsuperscript{43} See, for instance, Wiswedel, “The Inner and the Outer Word,” 184, who paraphrases Denck’s view that “he who is not in a right relationship with God, who is not permeated by His Spirit nor filled with His love, cannot understand the Scriptures, but ’makes of it an idol.’”
\item \textsuperscript{44} Kaufman, \textit{In Face of Mystery}, 223.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 390. See Kenneth Nordgren, “God as Problem and Possibility: A Critical Study of Gordon Kaufman’s Thought toward a Spacious Theology” (Ph.D. diss., Uppsala University, 2003), 248.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Kaufman, \textit{In Face of Mystery}, 390–91.
\end{itemize}
“to form coalitions and even ‘community’” with people from other walks of life who share the same goals, and to be open to genuine friendship with and appreciation of those who inhabit other religious or non-religious worlds.\(^{48}\)

In both these ways Kaufman’s constructive method not only offers new insights on these dispositions in Anabaptist thought, it is also a timely contribution to theological method. This is because, as I will explain below, societies governed by the authority of traditions are being steadily transformed by pluralism, individualism, and an increasing awareness of the perspectival nature of truth claims. Underlying these changes is a larger process of detraditionalization, whereby social authority is shifting from traditions to the subjective judgment of individuals. In light of this process, the insights that Kaufman’s theology brings to noncreedalism and christomorphic praxis are important for understanding how to do theology in detraditionalized society.

**Shifting Role of Tradition in Society**

In countries like the United States and Canada, the ways that people relate to traditions are changing considerably. There has been a steady shift of authority from external traditions to the subjective determination of individuals, a process that Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and other social theorists describe as detraditionalization.\(^{49}\) To understand the significance of detraditionalization for contemporary theological method and the reasons that Kaufman’s constructive theology is effective in this context, I will take the example of a group of Mennonites, studied by the sociologist Joseph Smucker, who left their rural communities for the city because they found the commitments to traditional community life too restrictive.\(^{50}\) But first, I must briefly examine how traditions function in societies, in order to show how people’s relationship to tradition is changing, and how it is not.

\(^{48}\) Scott Holland, “Einbildungskraft: 1. Imagination 2. The Power to Form into One,” in *Mennonite Theology In Face of Modernity*, 252.


Traditions function in society in two major ways: they regulate life and they orient life.\textsuperscript{51} Traditions function \textit{regulatively} when serving as norms that justify the status quo, legitimate the authority of community leaders, or secure hierarchical boundaries. In an exclusive sphere of influence, traditions can be elevated as authoritative, indisputable guides for the present and future. Traditions function \textit{orientationally} by providing symbolic material that people draw upon to understand who they are and how they relate to one another. In this way, traditions are the building blocks of individual and collective identities.\textsuperscript{52}

Traditional societies, where much of one's identity is given at birth, have often been characterized by both regulative and orientational forms of tradition. For instance, Joseph Smucker explains how in traditional Mennonite societies, the ideal is that “religious life can be practiced only within a community where self-will is submerged.”\textsuperscript{53} This vision of community is not compatible with individualism. According to Anthony Giddens, traditional societies are by nature exclusive: insiders participate in the rituals and accept the truths of a given tradition, outsiders do not. These kinds of distinctions create a strong sense of communal identity and destiny. Tradition in this sense serves as a “medium of identity” providing adherents with a feeling of ontological security. This shared tradition serves as the basis for the trust necessary for community life.\textsuperscript{54}

However, the process of detraditionalization has significantly altered the conditions under which individuals and groups create and maintain their identities. In contrast to the traditional, rural communities that they came from, when the Mennonites in Smucker’s study moved to the city their religious identities were no longer a given. The regulative authority of their

\textsuperscript{51} My categorization of tradition as regulative and orientational adapts social theorist John Thompson's useful schema for differentiating four distinctive but interrelated parts of a comprehensive understanding of how tradition functions in society. Thompson calls these parts the \textit{normative}, \textit{legitimating}, \textit{hermeneutic} and \textit{identity} aspects of tradition. See John B. Thompson, “Tradition and Self in a Mediated World,” in \textit{Detraditionalization}, eds. Heelas et al., 92-93.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{53} Smucker, “Religious Community and Individualism,” 274.

tradition ceased to function in their new, detraditionalized social context. If they were to still identify as Mennonite, the meaning of that identity was now largely a matter of choice and personal preference. As these Mennonites found when they moved to the city, in detraditionalized societies people are increasingly required to actively create their identities and to succeed or fail as individuals. As Ulrich Beck explains:

Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied, no longer can be, they must be made. Even where the word ‘decisions’ is too grandiose, because neither consciousness nor alternatives are present, the individual will have to ‘pay for’ the consequences of decisions not taken. . . . In the individualized society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on.

The open-endedness of possibilities and the complexity of modern bureaucracy make nearly every aspect of life a matter of individual discernment and personal initiative.

However, increasing individualization does not come at the expense of tradition as a whole. Unlike traditional societies, where the regulative and orientational functions of tradition work in unison, in detraditionalized societies the regulative function is in steep decline but the orientational function still plays an essential role. For instance, when the urban Mennonites formed a church, they had to decide for themselves what community meant in their new social context. By combining a familiar ethic of service to others with a new unbounded concept of community, and by redefining church as a support group for their vision, they drew on traditions orientationally, but not regulatively, to construct a new Mennonite identity compatible with the secular, technological, and individualistic values that drew them to the city.

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in the first place.\textsuperscript{57}

Although they may not have thought of it this way, these Mennonites were, out of necessity, engaging in a collaborative form of constructive theology. They were able to reconstruct their place and purpose in a new social environment while creating a new and distinctive urban Mennonite identity.\textsuperscript{58} This group is just one example of how some Anabaptist-Mennonite communities are already transforming themselves in response to the larger social process of detraditionalization.\textsuperscript{59}

The biggest change for theology in detraditionalized societies is that traditions can no longer be assumed to have regulative authority, even among those who identify with a religious tradition. To do theology effectively in this context, it is especially important that one’s theological method reflects Christians’ experiences in a significant way. As I will explain below, Kaufman’s constructive theology offers a way for Christian communities to participate in a collaborative form of constructive theology, by adopting noncreedalism and christomorphic praxis as criteria for judging traditions and theological claims. Moreover, it does not presuppose a view of tradition as regulatively authoritative, a view that no longer holds true for many Christians in detraditionalized societies.

\textbf{Importance of Kaufman’s Method for Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology Today}

If theologians want to address the social context in which many Christians live today, they must develop new ways of doing theology that do not rest on a belief in the inherent authority of tradition. Yet prominent contemporary

\textsuperscript{57} Smucker, “Religious Community and Individualism,” 277.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 284, 286-87.

\textsuperscript{59} Detraditionalization is not limited to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition; it has significant consequences for religious traditions of all kinds. See, for instance, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, \textit{U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant}, June 2008, http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf. It illustrates how the United States is an example of a society that is largely detraditionalized, but many people still see themselves as religious and even more continue to hold some belief in God. Yet these beliefs do not necessarily offer adequate orientation for their lives. The biggest influence for them is practical experience and common sense (5, 8, 23, 60-62).
theological methods are remarkably similar to those employed in the past.\textsuperscript{60} Theologians continue to do hermeneutical forms of theology, interpreting their current social context in light of some definitive text or tradition, with tradition serving as the authoritative foundation for theological claims. While disputes have always erupted over what should be counted as a legitimate authority (canons) or how the authorities should be properly interpreted (councils), the inherent authority of tradition itself has largely remained an unquestioned assumption.\textsuperscript{61} However, in detraditionalized societies, this hermeneutical form of theological method is decreasingly adequate to the task of theology, since fewer Christians actually experience traditions as external authorities to which they should conform their lives.

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's classification of theological methods is a helpful way to understand how Kaufman's constructive theology offers an alternative to other typical ways of doing theology. Fiorenza distinguishes between theological methods that involve a ‘hermeneutics of authority’ or a ‘hermeneutics of experience’ in contrast to ‘reconstructive theologies.’ He notes that for most of Christian history up through the modern period, theological methods have been primarily hermeneutical in character. However, hermeneutics alone is no longer a sufficient basis for a theological method informed by historicism. He explains that historical-critical methodology demonstrates how traditional theological authority is deeply conditioned by the social and political assumptions from which it arose. Moreover, it is not just traditional authority that is historically dependent. It is also increasingly implausible to posit an ‘unencumbered self’ free from social, cultural, and religious conditioning: “just as one can no longer appeal to classical authorities without at the same time asking the interpretive question, so too one cannot simply appeal to personal experience to confirm interpretation. Personal experiences are themselves interpretive and have


themselves influenced the interpretation.”62 Far from being universal, human experience is contextually conditioned, diverse, and perspectival. Thus, if the background theories (such as detraditionalization) underpinning contemporary life are very different from those that informed a tradition, then interpretation of the tradition is not enough; it must be reconstructed in light of current theories in order to remain meaningful.63

The theology of David Tracy is an important example of hermeneutical theology. In *The Analogical Imagination*, for example, he argues that the task of systematic theology is to interpret the “Christian classic,” which he defines as the “event and person of Jesus Christ” as it has been received through text, symbol, and doctrine.64 Although Tracy recognizes that systematic theological work can no longer be unself-critical in a pluralistic world, for him theology is still basically a hermeneutic task of correlating the authoritative classics of a tradition with the contemporary situation.

Kaufman and Tracy each propose a version of ‘public’ theology, but by compartmentalizing systematic theology as specialized to speak only to the public of the ‘church,’ Tracy ends up shielding the sources in his theology from full critical scrutiny. Kaufman observes that “systematic theology is here held to be almost exclusively hermeneutical in character: its task is interpretation of the Christian tradition; in particular, of the ‘classics’ of that tradition. These are taken as a kind of theological given which is simply to be accepted, never decisively criticized or revised, certainly not in major features to be rejected.”65 He is concerned that Tracy’s strict separation

63 Ibid., 133-34.
65 Gordon D. Kaufman, “Conceptualizing Diversity Theologically, Review of *The Analogical Imagination*, by David Tracy,” *Journal of Religion* 62, no. 4: 297. Making a similar critique, Linell Cady is not convinced that Tracy presents a truly ‘public’ theology. While he “concentrates upon defending the public character of theology against those who construe it as merely a parochial form of apologetics,” he “assumes at the outset that the texts and symbols of a tradition are truthful, [thus closing] off the possibility of radical critique and reconstruction of a tradition.” Rather than defending the conclusion that Christian texts and traditions are truthful “through sustained substantive argumentation,” Tracy’s hermeneutical theology prematurely closes off public discourse. Cady notes that “The difference is crucial: it determines whether a theology rooted in a tradition is indeed a circular, parochial form of reflection or an
between fundamental and systematic theology creates an artificial wall behind which the theologian can simply engage in renewed interpretation of the tradition, without questioning whether certain beliefs or practices might actually need “radical surgery or reconstruction.”\footnote{Kaufman, “Conceptualizing Diversity Theologically,” 298.}

Another hermeneutical theological method based on the authority of tradition is the postliberal method of George Lindbeck. In \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}, he suggests a return to a hermeneutic of authority, but with a twist. Rather than interpreting religious doctrines as propositional truth-claims that must be interpreted, he sees them as grammatical rules to be followed. While the theologian’s job is to interpret how and when these rules apply, she cannot question the authority of the rules themselves.\footnote{George Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age} (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 107.} From this perspective, theology’s primary focus becomes the intratextual hermeneutics of the Bible and the Christian tradition, and its task is to redescribe reality from the biblical perspective rather than interpreting the Bible through extra-biblical categories.\footnote{Ibid., 135.} As Linell Cady explains, although Lindbeck “appropriates a postmodern framework,” it is “not to serve as a device to interpret and critique [the Christian] tradition” but to defend it from criticism or reinterpretation.\footnote{Linell E. Cady, “Resisting the Postmodern Turn: Theology and Contextualization,” in \textit{Theology at the End of Modernity}, 90.} Thus, Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic method’ does not so much move beyond modernism as it tends to invert the modern turn to the subject.\footnote{Fiorenza, “Crisis of Hermeneutics,” 121.}

In quite different ways, Tracy and Lindbeck each continue to grant the Christian tradition authoritative status in their theological methods. The problem is that while they discuss the contemporary situation, they make claims based on a presumed authority of the Christian tradition that is not necessarily shared by their audience. If theology is to connect with the lived experience of Christians in detraditionalized societies, it must do more than interpret the current situation in light of traditional authority. 

needs to be written and argued in a way that connects with the de facto constructive theology that many Christians are already engaged in within their personal lives and local congregations.

While Kaufman never used the term “detraditionalization” in his work, he understood the changing social tides, and intuitively provided a model for a distinctively Anabaptist-Mennonite way of doing theology in a detraditionalized context. He offers an alternative possibility for theological method: to fundamentally transform the relationship of theology to tradition. This option is important as it strives to make sense of peoples’ lived experience from a Christian perspective as they face emerging ethical challenges. As Christian communities embark on constructive theologies of their own, Kaufman’s work is a model that individuals, congregations, and denominations can use to make informed judgments about their own theological reflection. For Christian communities, like Smucker’s urban Mennonite church, Kaufman offers a valuable resource—a way to do theology that is neither authoritarian nor individualistic. Instead, by reconstructing Anabaptist theological dispositions, his method contributes two important criteria that Anabaptist-Mennonite communities can put into practice in a collaborative method of theological construction.

Kaufman’s first contribution is historicist-noncreedalism. By starting with the assumption that no human word or tradition is absolute, historicist-noncreedalism is a way to continue to use scripture and tradition in theology orientationally but not regulatively. In his *In Face of Mystery* he neatly sums up a historicist-noncreedalist use of tradition:

> So we must move forward, becoming as aware as possible of the traditions which have shaped us and of their limitations and strengths, adopting from them whatever we can and adapting them to the new circumstances in which we find ourselves, as we seek to reshape them—imaginatively to reconstruct them—so they can better provide orientation for the new world into which we are moving.\(^7\)

Like some early Anabaptists who even tested the scriptures against the words and actions of Jesus, he also maintains that “it is impermissible for

\(^{7}\) Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 133.
theologians to take any religious tradition’s authoritarian claims about God as an unquestioned foundation of theological work: all such claims must themselves be critically examined to see whether and in what respects they may be idolatrous.”

Kaufman’s second contribution is pragmatic christomorphism, which provides a nonauthoritarian alternative for making truth-claims about traditions. Rather than asking whether a belief or practice has precedent in an authoritative source like scripture or tradition, a criterion of pragmatic christomorphism asks instead whether a tradition is humanizing or not. For Christians, this humanization takes on its most paradigmatic form in the symbol Christ, which “represents both what is genuinely human and that which ultimately grounds our humanization, God.” Thus, despite his rejection of traditional authority, Kaufman still seeks to establish norms transcending the whims and preferences of individual choice. By resisting the hyper-individualistic temptation to discard norms altogether, his theology offers an alternative to both traditionalism and individualism: the possibility of orientation for human life without the authoritarian structure.

These two criteria can serve as norms for Christian communities as they seek to reconstruct traditions as a basis for maintaining identity in changing social contexts. Like the urban Mennonites, Kaufman too seeks to expand the notion of community, arguing that the church’s primary concern should be to “enter into community with those with whom we are speaking, and where estrangement or separation exist to seek reconciliation with them. It will be, in short, not to make claims for ourselves or our truth against our neighbors, but to love and accept our neighbors as ourselves.” Far from compromising the essentials of the Christian faith, the deemphasizing of obscure and divisive theological issues for the sake of building a more humane world is “directly expressive of those essentials.”

In line with Kaufman’s more expansive and inclusive notion of Christian community, George Rupp proposes the paradigm of ‘communities

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72 Ibid., 28.
74 Ibid., 39.
75 Ibid.
of collaboration.’ He argues that while traditional forms of community have often been built on exclusive identity markers like blood-ties, geography, or ideology, in a globalized society it is not only possible but desirable to construct communities that are not exclusive in these ways. Inclusive identity can be built among a group of people when they share responsibilities and commitments in the completion of common tasks. These communities of collaboration are formed around commitments to one another in the achievement of shared goals, rather than in commitments based on a shared history.

Kaufman’s constructive method is important because it presents a model for how theology can be done collaboratively by theologians and in communities of faith. Collaboration offers a historicist and noncreedal basis for Christian community that is consistent with the changes ushered in by detraditionalization, since communal identity is not formed on the basis of exclusive categories like the authority of a particular tradition. It is also consistent with pragmatism and christomorphism, since it is practical, inclusive, and focuses on Christians’ ethical responsibilities toward others. The identities of collaborative communities are defined by their practice and their shared experience. Kaufman’s constructive method is clearly not the only way that Anabaptist-Mennonite theology can be done in detraditionalized societies. For those Christians who choose to live according to the regulative authority of tradition, his theology may make little sense. Yet, for communities and theologians who seek to do Mennonite theology in detraditionalized society, a method like Kaufman’s is an essential contribution.

Conclusion
By carefully considering Gordon Kaufman’s use of tradition in his theological method, I have argued that, on the one hand, if theology is to continue to use traditions as a source in detraditionalized society, then these traditions should be assessed using the criteria of historicism and pragmatism. On the other hand, I have argued that Kaufman’s theological commitment to historicism and pragmatism can bring new insights to bear on two Anabaptist-

Mennonite theological dispositions: noncreedalism and christomorphic praxis. It opens up the possibility of a collaborative, communal theological method that resists both authoritarianism and individualism.

Although traditions may need to be reinterpreted, reconstructed, or even rejected in light of the changing social context of Christian life today, wrestling with these central pieces of the shared theological heritage will continue to be an essential task of Mennonite theology. In this respect, Kaufman’s constructive theological method has much to offer the current discussion, since Kaufman models how a Mennonite theologian can engage the Christian tradition in a distinctively Anabaptist way while also engaging the larger world in which Mennonites live.

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