CAN PHILOSOPHY DEFEND THEOLOGY?
A RESPONSE TO JAMES KELLER

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James Keller has recently defended Gordon Kaufman from the criticisms leveled against him by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. I point out that, while Keller does resolve some of the problems with Kaufman's article, in the process he reveals and/or creates some deep tensions in the resulting "Kaufman-Keller view"—tensions which, I maintain, cast serious doubt on the viability of Keller's defense. In closing, I offer some thoughts concerning the difference between contemporary Christian theologians and philosophers.

Gordon Kaufman has explained in these pages why he, and other like-minded theologians, find little to interest them in the work of contemporary Christian philosophers, in particular in the discussions of evidentialism. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann replied by defending the concern of philosophers with orthodox Christian doctrine as this has been historically understood, and criticizing the reasons Kaufman gives for finding this concern misguided. Most recently, James Keller has replied "on behalf of the theologian": he concedes many of the specific points made by Stump and Kretzmann, but maintains that they "have not engaged the issues as Kaufman understands them" (p. 71). In responding to Stump and Kretzmann, he redefines some of Kaufman's assertions and provides supporting explanations for others, so as to show that "a variety of factors may well render theologians like Kaufman justified in having little interest in what philosophers like them are doing" (p. 68). It seems fair, then, to characterize Keller's article as a "philosophical defense of theology." I wish to question whether such a defense is possible.

From one standpoint, Keller's task could be seen as an easy one. It certainly is the case, as he observes (see pp. 74-76), that different people simply find different things interesting for a variety of reasons—some subjects readily engage our attention, and others don't; some hypotheses are live for us and others are dead. For these preferences rational justification often is neither offered nor demanded: "different strokes for different folks." So if he were content to leave his defense of Kaufman at this level, Keller would have little work to do.

But of course, neither Kaufman nor Keller is content to leave it there. The point of both their articles is to show that the theologian is rational to have
these preferences—and furthermore, that his approach to things is in some sense more rational, more intellectually appropriate, than that of the philosophers, for one wishing to address the issues of Christian faith in the closing days of the twentieth century. And it is in trying to show this that I think Keller comes to grief. True, he does meet a number of the objections raised by Stump and Kretzmann, and in the process shows that some of Kaufman’s stances are more reasonable than one might otherwise have supposed. But in the process, he reveals and/or introduces some deep tensions in the position—the “Kaufman-Keller view,” as one might call it—which results from his attempt to provide a philosophical defense for Kaufman’s approach to theology. I think these tensions are serious enough to call into question the viability of Keller’s project.

In what follows I shall present three such tensions in the Kaufman-Keller view. In each case I begin by stating the tension in the form of what I shall term an antinomy (though not in the Kantian sense). Then I discuss briefly the basis of the antinomy in their respective articles, and I conclude with a brief assessment of the issues which are at stake.

1

Evidentialism is unimportant and uninteresting; furthermore, traditional Christian beliefs are lacking in evidential support. That Kaufman views evidentialism as unimportant and uninteresting (given the current intellectual situation) needs no argument; that’s the burden of his article. The second half of the tension arises from Keller’s attempt to defend Kaufman against some charges by Stump and Kretzmann. Keller concedes that “To say that we can know nothing about God is equivalent to saying that God is a being about whom we can know nothing and thus does make a claim about God.” But, he thinks, Kaufman could avoid this problem by saying “that (at least under the present conditions of human existence) we can never show (or perhaps justifiedly claim to know) that our claims about God are true” (p. 72). And in subsequent paragraphs he talks about distinguishing “matters on which we are more justified in being confident from those on which we are less justified” (p. 73).

Keller’s move here makes perfectly good sense. Kaufman, on the face of it, seems to have fallen into a classical sceptic’s dilemma: in the act of denying that we possess knowledge of a certain kind, he has in effect claimed for himself knowledge of the kind he proscribes. Keller’s suggestion is to recast the sceptical claims in terms of degrees of justification and degrees of justified confidence. And this may escape the sceptic’s dilemma; one can perfectly well make the epistemological assertion that a certain class of knowledge-claims is poorly supported, without oneself making any knowledge-claims of that kind.
But of course, no one who takes that line can afford an attitude of lofty indifference towards discussions of evidentialism. Considerations about what sorts of rational support are available for different kinds of knowledge-claims are the meat and drink of these discussions, and rational sceptics (as opposed to mere provocateurs) need to be deeply versed in these matters. But Kaufman is uninterested in such epistemological discussions, so Keller's way out isn't available to him. And whether he can carry through his rejection of dogmatism without becoming dogmatic himself remains an unanswered question.

Our ways of conceiving God and Christ are heavily determined by culturally-conditioned traditions, concepts and worldviews; on the other hand, we are free to modify or reject the traditions we have inherited. These themes are invoked throughout Kaufman's article, but are most concisely stated by Keller: On the one hand, "the theologian may very well regard the traditional doctrines about God which occur in evidentialist arguments as simply culturally conditioned formulations of beliefs by which some Christians express aspects of their faith." And on the other hand, "the theologian may find that other aspects of the tradition or other ways of conceptualizing God and Christ are more relevant or more adequate [than traditional views] to his own Christian experiences" (p. 75).

But why is this a problem? To see the problem, ask yourself why the fact that all our concepts and worldviews are culturally conditioned is supposed to present a problem for truth-claims about God. The answer, emphasized ad nauseam in many discussions of pluralism, is that this culture-dependence shows that the reasons why beliefs are accepted are not the "rational" considerations claimed by traditional philosophers and theologians, but rather the simple fact of one's existence within a particular tradition. (Recall the use made by John Hick of the fact that a very high percentage of religious persons profess the faith that happens to be dominant in the time and place where they live.) We do, in fact, tend to lose interest for just this reason in a thinker whose belief-system is perceived as "merely traditional."

There is a great deal that could be said about this, but for present purposes it suffices to note the second half of the antinomy: Whatever may be the case with those living in highly "tradition-bound" cultures, our own thinking is by no means so tradition-determined that we are unable to make rational decisions about which beliefs to accept and which to reject. I am quite confident that Jim Keller thinks he had good reasons—though not necessarily rationally conclusive reasons—for exchanging the conservative Presbyterianism in which he was raised for the process theology he currently favors. To be sure, a such decisions about rational preferability are always and inevitably made by a historically and culturally situated thinker; there is no
place outside the world where we can stand to get the “view from nowhere.” But I’m sure Keller doesn’t think this is grounds for a general scepticism about truth-claims—and I hope Kaufman doesn’t think so either.

3

We know in reality almost nothing about God and Christ, but we can be confident in our experiential knowledge of sin and salvation. Again, the first part of the antithesis is stressed throughout Kaufman’s article, and especially in the last three pages. But as Stump and Kretzmann observed, Kaufman states pretty confidently that “doing certain things is a sin against God,” thus implying that “he knows enough about God to know that something is a sin against God” (Keller, p. 73; cf. Kaufman, p. 44). In mitigation of this, Keller notes that “it is far easier to determine that certain things are destructive of human beings and of the world they inhabit than it is to determine the nature of God,” and he also claims that “the different conceptual systems people use seem to have far more influence over how they conceptualize ‘the mystery which lies at the base of their humanity’ than it does over what things they consider to be destructive of human beings and other creatures” (p. 73). This fits in, of course, with the predominantly practical emphasis Keller discerns in Kaufman and in other theologians, whom he imagines as saying that religion “is primarily concerned not with giving us truths about God but with mediating our salvation” (p. 71). He also suggests that “The theologian may…feel far more justified in his judgments about what sort of actions and attitudes are harmful to his relationship with the mystery at the ground of his being than he is about how to conceptualize that mystery, for the former judgment can be based on his experience of ruptures in that relationship while the latter is far less directly related to his experience” (p. 73).

What shall we make of this? No doubt Keller is right in thinking that beliefs about what is “destructive to human beings and other creatures” are more widely shared, and less strongly influenced by varying conceptual systems, than are beliefs about God. So if we limit ourselves to “sins” which consist of such destructive acts, Keller’s defense of Kaufman may work tolerably well. Salvation, however, is a very different matter. Keller seems to assume that there is some generic experience of a “God-relationship” or “salvation” which is substantially identical across all religions, though it gets described differently depending on the varying conceptual systems espoused by different faiths. I say he seems to assume this, because it appears to be required if we are to make sense of his assertions—but I find it difficult to accept that this is what Keller really believes.

When I first considered this antinomy, I thought that it might not be a problem for Kaufman himself, but only for Kaufman as modified by Keller. Kaufman does not, so far as I can see, speak directly of “salvation,” and
insofar as he limits himself to sins which consist of acts “destructive to human beings and other creatures,” his ability to identify such sins may not be undermined by his agnosticism concerning God. But in fact, he does not so limit himself. In his concluding exhortation, he speaks of repentance, which in any Christian understanding is a manifestation of grace and a gateway to salvation. He insists that repentance is essentially a “self-renouncing,” which “must include…our claims to certainty of knowledge. If we try to overcome and control the mystery within which we live—for example, through philosophical or theological ideas in which we take ourselves to be in a position to present conclusive evidences and arguments…we sin against God, as we try to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny” (p. 44).

About this I have three comments: (1) As to the substance of Kaufman’s claim, Anselm and Aquinas each thought himself to be in possession of “conclusive evidences and arguments” concerning God’s existence and certain aspects of God’s nature. I would agree with Kaufman that they were mistaken in this belief—but that these epistemological errors (as I take them to be) constituted sin against God is something I find myself unable to discern, nor am I willing to accept it on Kaufman’s authority. (2) It is clear that Kaufman is claiming to know things about sin and repentance which go well beyond acts destructive of human beings and other creatures, so Keller’s defense will not work for him. (3) It is overwhelmingly obvious that conceptions and experiences of how our relationship with “the mystery within which we live” may be restored—and this, surely, is what repentance and salvation are concerned with—vary greatly between religions, and often between different sects of the same religion. To pick up on a suggestion of S. Mark Heim, it may be that only when we see such words as “justice” and “salvation” occurring in their plural forms will we know that religious pluralism is at long last being taken seriously.8

Keller is a philosopher who finds himself sympathetic to Kaufman’s approach to theology; at a minimum, he thinks it merits a more favorable reception than it received from Stump and Kretzmann. He acknowledges certain logical incoherences they have pointed out in Kaufman’s position, and sets out to remedy the situation. As we have seen, he succeeds in this to some extent, but in the process he exhibits even more clearly what appear to be fundamental logical problems with Kaufman’s view. It is possible, of course, that some other philosopher may be able to revise Kaufman’s position so as to avoid these problems, thus providing a successful philosophical defense of Kaufman’s theology. But in view of Jim Keller’s failure to accomplish this, I don’t think the prospects are very bright.

Keller concludes his article with some general reflection on the differences between philosophers and theologians in their approach to these matters, and
I shall do the same. He asserts, correctly I believe, that generally orthodox theological views are more common today among Christian philosophers than they are among theologians. I should like to suggest some reasons for this. For one thing, there is the fact that the major centers of theological study, in leading seminaries and university departments, are dominated by more liberal types of theology, thus creating strong "selection pressures" on younger theologians. Most philosophy departments, in contrast, are not dominated by any type of theology, so such selection pressures are much less prevalent in the experience of younger Christian philosophers. Closely related to this is the different availability of role models in the two disciplines. At present we are blessed with a number of outstanding Christian philosophers who are generally orthodox (as defined by, say, the Nicene Creed) in their theological commitments. In contrast, relatively few leading theologians seem to be of this persuasion. To be sure, factors such as these are in some sense "external," but over the course of a couple of decades they can exert a great deal of influence over the composition of the respective professions.

But I believe there are internal factors at work as well. Without much question, we philosophers have a professional bias in favor of material which is rich in cognitive content. We like to deal with concepts and propositions which we can analyze, discuss, draw inferences from, assess for rational acceptability, and so on. When we bite down, we like to feel resistance. And it is inherently plausible that good theology should offer such resistance. If there is a God, then God ought to be a pretty impressive, unique, and intriguing being, and there ought to be some impressive, unique, and intriguing things to be said about God. Just such things are what we find being said about God in the (broadly) orthodox tradition of philosophical theology, and I suspect that this as much as anything accounts for the fascination of philosophers such as Stump and Kretzmann with the great medievals. (I recall hearing Marilyn Adams observe that the medieval philosophers had a "big object" in their ontology, and we ought to expect it to do some philosophical work for them. And indeed it does.) In contrast, much liberal theology seems sophisticated in its rhetoric and methodology, but thin and elusive in its positive assertions—and I don't think it is unfair to cite Kaufman himself as an example. To be sure, which of all these assertions about God are true remains very much a matter of debate (unless, like Keller's theologians, we are persuaded that truth as such is not very interesting). But for the reasons explained here, I think traditional, orthodox theology will continue to be in a strong position to attract the interest, and perhaps the allegiance, of a great many Christian philosophers.

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NOTES


4. Thus my own title should be understood situationally: I am asking whether a theological approach such as Kaufman's can be defended form the standpoint of a philosophical approach such as Keller's. I am not asking, "Can philosophy defend theology?" in the sense in which this question might have been asked (and answered affirmatively) by Thomas Aquinas.

5. Consider the following from Kaufman: "I want now to explain why (in my opinion) this whole long evidentialist religious tradition, going all the way back to the biblical origins of Christian and Jewish faiths, now confronts questions which demand a rather different approach" (pp. 38-39, emphasis added).

6. This position cannot, as it stands, be straightforwardly ascribed to either man. Keller acknowledged that he goes beyond Kaufman at some points, and the result may not be exactly Kaufman's position (p. 71). And at some points, Keller clearly is offering possibilities or conjectures that he might not want to be committed to himself. The result may best be understood as "Kaufman's position as modified and defended by Keller."

7. Kaufman, to be sure, suggests another possible bearing of the pluralism of traditions on truth-claims: It may be that we find ourselves simply overwhelmed by the variety of ways of conceiving God, and unable (for the moment, at least) to choose between them. "Before we can intelligently talk about 'evidences' with respect to beliefs about God, we must resolve for ourselves a number of important prior issues: How should God be conceived today? What sorts of considerations bear on this issue, and why? What alternative proposals are available to us? What criteria for assessing these can be brought forward? And so on" (p. 41).

I have two comments to make on this. First, if Kaufman thinks recent philosophical theology has not included discussion of alternative ways of conceiving God, he simply reveals his lack of acquaintance with that discipline. Second, when we are considering how God should be conceived today, shouldn't the relevant considerations include whatever good reasons (or "evidences") there may be, with respect to this or that conception of God, to think that God as so conceived might actually exist?


9. "There are theologians who share the doctrinal convictions of philosophers like Stump and Kretzmann and there are Christian philosophers of religion who have doubts about the traditional doctrines and who share the confessional stance of theologians like Kaufman...but right now they are a minority" (p. 77).

10. I hazard the conjecture that this situation may be beginning to change, and will be significantly different within the next ten to twenty years.