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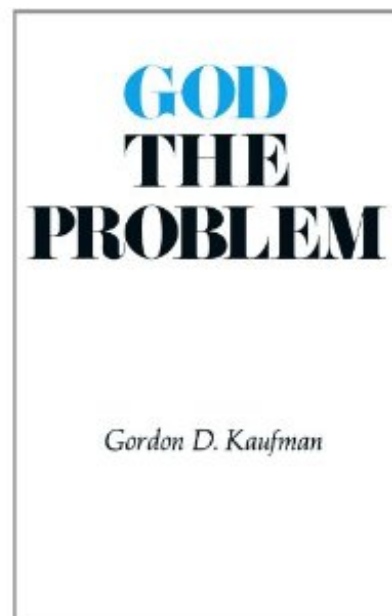
Is God a Problem? Modern Theology Faces its Alternatives

Their obituaries may have been published side by side, but — in the truest sense — Gordon Kaufman and John Stott were never on the same page.



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The Christian Century, the venerable voice of liberal Protestantism, juxtaposed two significant obituaries in its August 23, 2011 edition — and both on the same page. The magazine published a respectful obituary of evangelical titan John R. W. Stott, identifying him as “a renowned and prolific author credited with shaping 20th-century evangelical Christianity.” After reviewing his 90 years of life and ministry, the magazine quoted S. Douglas Birdsall of the Lausanne Movement, who described Stott in this way: “The church was his great love. World evangelism was his passion. Scripture was his authority. Heaven was his hope. Now it is his home.”



The magazine’s other obituary marked the death of Gordon Kaufman, a professor of theology at the Harvard Divinity School for more than three decades, who died at age 86. Kaufman, the magazine reported, “had a profound influence on rethinking theology in naturalistic terms, arguing for a vision of God as the ‘profound mystery of creativity.’”

Kaufman influenced generations of liberal theologians through his writings and teaching, serving as president of both the American Theological Society and the American Academy of Religion.

As a seminary student, I was assigned to read Kaufman's 1972 work, *God the Problem*, a book that set forth Kaufman's effort to bring Christian theology in line with modern thought. A frustrated seminary student in my class posted a sarcastic cartoon on the classroom wall, with the cover of Kaufman's book changed from *God the Problem* by Gordon Kaufman to *Gordon Kaufman the Problem* by God.

The book is nothing less than a treatise for a purely secular theology. The entire concept of God, he wrote, "is problematical to men in many different senses and ways." As he explained:

For the Judeo-Christian tradition, God has been the primary and fundamental reality with reference to which all of life — indeed all of creation — was oriented and understood. To our modern empirical, secular, and pragmatic temper, however, it has seemed increasingly dubious, ever since the Enlightenment, whether it is necessary or even reasonable to believe in such a transcendent Reality; human life can be adequately understood as an emergent from evolving nature, and the meaning of human existence can be found in the cultural values produced by man's creative genius and the social interaction of which love is the profoundest form. Is not talk about God simply a vestige of earlier stages of man's historical development which, however appropriate and necessary in its own time, is no longer relevant or useful in ours?

Kaufman argued that an entire array of intellectual problems made belief in a personal God impossible on modern terms. Human beings now consider themselves autonomous and belief in God "raises serious problems for man's sense of moral autonomy." He went so far as to argue that belief in God might be "in itself morally dubious."

On the other hand, even the most secular among us have a hard time letting go of God entirely. Modern humanity cannot believe in the God of the Bible, he insisted, but we still require some intellectual referent that can be called "God." Kaufman's answer to this problem was to construct a notion of God as symbol. Having rejected the idea of a God who objectively exists or a personal God who engages his creatures, Kaufman argued that the human imagination is the proper source for a doctrine of God.

Devising a naturalistic doctrine of God was just practical, Kaufman argued. Since human beings seem to need a God as referent, humans should just construct a symbolic reality to meet their need for moral validation and the sense that life is meaningful. Of course, those who construct a concept of God as mere symbol know that they are doing

so, and their references to God are more poetic than anything else.

Some of Kaufman's theological colleagues criticized his use of the word "God" in this sense as confusing — and understandably so. If God is nothing more than "a construction of the human imagination," then why use the word at all?

In one of his last books, *God-Mystery-Diversity*, Kaufman took a shot at conservative Christian theologians:

Conservatives may still wish to maintain that it is possible and necessary to give an authoritative and binding definition of Christian beliefs and praxis, and that theologians should proceed on that basis, but such positions express a kind of romanticism about how things used to be. History has moved Christian faith beyond that sort of possibility, willy-nilly, and theologies alert to their own historical situatedness can no longer proceed easily on such assumptions. Theologians can no longer take it for granted that there is a fixed body of beliefs simply to be interpreted and explained. On the contrary, a major task for theologians today is to ascertain just which beliefs and concepts inherited from tradition are still viable, and to determine in what ways they should be reconstructed so they will continue to serve human intellectual and religious needs.

This is where the revisionist methodology of liberal theology inevitably leads. Doctrines are no longer considered to be true statements of fact, but only reflections of "human intellectual and religious needs." Since these needs are supposedly changing over time, doctrines must change as well. God is just a symbol, and doctrines are symbolic as well.

In their own ways, Gordon Kaufman and John Stott represent the stark alternatives that face the Christian theologian today. We will either embrace a theology established upon the knowledge of the self-revealing God of the Bible, or we will see theology as a project to be developed by the human imagination. We will choose between the affirmation of the triune God of the Bible or the claim that God is merely a symbol.

In other words, the obituaries of Gordon Kaufman and John Stott represent more than footnotes in Christian history. These were men who represented two very different and irreconcilable understandings of God, theology, and the Christian faith.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

John Dart, "Liberal Theologian, Mentor, Gordon Kaufman Dies at 86," *The Christian Century*, August 23, 2011, p. 17.

Adelle Banks, "John Stott, 90, Was Major Shaper of Evangelicalism," *The Christian Century*, August 23, 2011, p. 17.

Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

Gordon Kaufman, *God-Mystery-Diversity: Christianity in a Pluralistic World* (Fortress Press, 1996).

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