

"The possibility of nuclear holocaust is the premier issue which our generation must address. Let us, then, get on with it."--AAR presidential address' last sentences, Gordon D. Kaufman (Feb/Mar/83 HARVARD DIVINITY BULL., p.10). This thinksheet is about metooistic theology-hype aping media-hype (especially Jon. Schell's NEW YORKER series) on "nuclear holocaust."

1. Strict constructionists hold that "Holocaust" (Nazi extermination camps, especially as expressing Nazi desire to provide "the final solution" for "the Jewish question") should not be extended to other horrors. I am even stricter: holocaust means "everything burned" in sacred offering, and the Nazi effort fails twice here: (1) The sacred dimension is bastardized into the demonic when the word is used to describe Auschwitz, and (2) The Nazis came nowhere near overcoming all the obstacles to killing all the Jews on earth. But inflated media-rhetoric seized on "holocaust" and "genocide" as code words for Nazi mass killing, and theologians (who should have fought for language purity) egged on the screamers. Now a Harv. Div. Sch. prof. is adding his lungs-power to inflate further the term "holocaust" by adding "nuclear."

2. Jon. Schell + Gordon Kaufman are screaming about a future literal holocaust, believing that (1) humans have the power to eliminate their species (if not also life on earth) and (2) will do it if we don't stop them. Of the two fallacies, the first is Faustian and the second Promethean. Theology should puncture ballooning assumptions of all kinds (Luciferian, Promethean, Dionysiac, Apollonian, Faustian, et al), but Kaufman promotes them (as do thousands of other nuclear nervous-Nellie noophiles and peaceniks).

3. Fallacies? Yes, and with fragile underpinings. A few questions: (1) No nuclear war hovers except within White Power (i.e., between USA, in which nonwhites have almost no power, and USSR, whose non-White majority has little chance of ever placing a rep in the Politburo): why do white folks insist on talking as though their destiny were the destiny of humanity? No, there are no non-White areas nuclear-targeted; and the radiation fallout has been grossly exaggerated, given the explodable megatonnage before effective EMP (electromagnetic impulse, which will knock out all chips and therefore all further firings of nuclear weapons).... (2) Increasingly improved multiple confirmation systems are making accidental USA/USSR war increasingly improbable: why doesn't the antinuke rhetoric take this fact into account?....(3) After WWI, the winds of heaven (their variability being unpredictable) controlled the winds of war vis-a-vis chemo-war (i.e., poison gas), but the USSR seems to have been using chemo-war from the air in situations in which no USSR citizens are on the ground: is it not probable that nukes will be used (as Hiroshima) by USA and/or USSR in extreme situations in the Third World where white folks are not endangered? In the light of the history of armaments, I consider this virtually certain....(4) Is Reagan over-eroding the economic and social-quality base of the USA by impoverishing us to build nukes? Who knows? I think so, and I say so; but I, like everybody else, can't know. I do know (1) that all politicians achieve and maintain power by persuading their constituencies that they, the politicians, are good news for their people; (2) that this persuasion requires a constant bombardment of the public psyche not only positively but also negatively, i.e., that "the enemy" is ready to pounce; (3) that as regards USA and USSR, there is truth in this pounce theory, both nations being dangerous both to each other and to the Third World; (4) that at least some Third World powers lust for nukes, as nationalism naturally lusts for violence-threat potential; (5) that nukes are already in the hands of some Third World powers. Our President and Congress have to keep guessing.

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4. The trendy temptation: I've done enough surfing in Hawaii to know how important is one's choice of wave. Theologians ride psycho-waves (Zeitgeist and Denkszwang), which is necessary (as "sitting where they sit") and seductive (saying what they want said, as a price paid so one can say what one wants to say). Accordingly, one should not be surprised that Kaufman takes this occasion to promote his historicistic atheism: theism, he says here, impedes the creation of symbols appropriate and adequate to the new world-situation created by the-fact-not-yet-in-being, viz., "nuclear holocaust." Instance: "The personalistic (sic) conception of God, so powerfully presented by the traditional images of Christian and Jewish piety, seems less and less defensible in face of the issues humanity today confronts." God is dead, again. I predict that this atheism will not succeed in riding the antinuke wave all the way in to the beach. Fear-based rhetoric and action only seems more powerful than love-based rhetoric and action. And antinukism is fear-based, producing paranoia, the socio-emotion politicians find easiest to manipulate.

5. In teaching the subject, I frequently used Kaufman's SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, which is (as its subtitle professes) radically historicistic. I accept historical consciousness as (1) biblical, the Western time-sense, and (2) Enlightenment* (believing that ideas are history-contexted in their emergence and changes). But I reject historicism's nothing-but fallacy, viz., that ideas/movements/institutions are nothing but history-products: I believe in the continuously working Creator/Revealer/Redeemer God of Moses and Jesus, synagogue and church. Kaufman's relativization of the biblical witness destroys theology except as a secular hermeneutic discipline participant in the pan-human enterprise of using all human resources of past and present to understand the human situation today and to shape the future....My Buddhist colleagues at U. of Hawaii argued that they had escaped the burden of theism, to which I replied that--given life's complexities, ambiguities, and mysteries--it's improbable that the easier paradigm (in this case, Buddhism's atheism) is the truer. Note that the 1983 Harv.U.Press's LIVING WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS accuses Schell of escapism.... *But I cannot accept the general reductionism (as Kaufman does) in Enlightenment thinking: the word *Aufklärung* (explaining away and so "clearing up"; the light metaphor--elucidation, enlightenment--is not in the root, and its addition displays the arrogance of the reductionists, who see themselves as bringing light to the benighted; whereas, in many respects, they reintroduced the old darkness).

6. Self-contradiction: Kaufman says we theologians should be able to contribute to the nuke debate because of our expertise with mystery and limits, but his radical historicistic humanism is intolerant of both mystery and limits. This combines easily with a pathetic cryptoConstantinianism, the notion that by manipulating private fears (privatism) one can or at least may effect Luddite (i.e., negative) social control of technology--a notion for which there's not a shred of historical support. Further, to increase the room and power of his assumptions and arguments, over and over again he stresses that the present situation is so new as to make past history virtually irrelevant (including, of course, theism!). I argue that (1) nuclearism is only a quantitative augmentation in the history of weaponry, and (2) "the people" do not want peace now any more than they ever have (though rhetoricians now as always use the myth of bad leaders / good people, the people/leaders dialectic proceeds at the same socio-moral level)....(What do the people want? Most folks most of the time want to be left alone; some sometimes fall into hopelessness and want nothing; some want "peace" because violence would disadvantage more than advantage them; some want war because of their faith or at least hope that it will reward them with liberation and/or land and/or prosperity.)

7. Nuclear weapons are absolutely wrong, as all church pronouncements say. When, if ever, are they relatively right as threat/action?