



Protestant Theological University

Theologian, Teacher, and Friend

Boer, T.A.; Childress, James F.; Ottati, Douglas F.; Cahill, Lisa Sowle; Schweiker, William

Published in:
Journal of Religious Ethics

DOI:
[10.1111/JORE.12384](https://doi.org/10.1111/JORE.12384)

Published: 01/01/2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Boer, T. A., Childress, J. F., Ottati, D. F., Cahill, L. S., & Schweiker, W. (2022). Theologian, Teacher, and Friend: Tributes to James M. Gustafson. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 50(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/JORE.12384>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons). You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

This publication might have been made available through the PThU Research Portal under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the PThU website: <https://www.pthu.nl/over-ptthu/bibliotheek-ptthu/diensten/article-25fa-taverne-amendement-end-user-agreement.pdf>

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us providing details, and we will investigate your claim and remove access to the work if necessary: bibliotheek@pthu.nl.

Downloaded from the PThU Research Portal (Pure): <https://pure.pthu.nl>.

THEOLOGIAN, TEACHER, AND FRIEND: TRIBUTES TO JAMES M. GUSTAFSON

James F. Childress, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Douglas F. Ottati,
William Schweiker, and Theo A. Boer

ABSTRACT

James M. Gustafson, who died in 2021, has influenced generations of theologians and ethicists. In this article, five students, colleagues, and friends provide short reflections on what Gustafson has meant for their work as scholars of theology and religious ethics.

KEYWORDS: *Gustafson, theocentric ethics, theological ethics, Christian ethics*

Jim Gustafson was—and remains—my teacher. In a recent autobiographical essay, I noted that my most important courses at Yale Divinity School and Graduate School “include theological ethics with James Gustafson, for whom I also served as a teaching assistant and whose teaching style I have tried to emulate. Gustafson’s teaching was marked by careful, fair analysis and assessment in close readings of major primary works, and imaginative and rigorous identification of different patterns of thought—always appreciative, but also critical” (2020, 411).

Gustafson did not seek to make “disciples,” that is, acolytes who followed in his intellectual footsteps. Diversity—not discipleship—marks his community of doctoral students. As a teacher and mentor, he sought to enable and empower his doctoral students to function as independent Christian or religious ethicists working in their own distinctive ways (see Cahill and Childress 1996).

James F. Childress is University Professor Emeritus at the University of Virginia where he was the John Allen Hollingsworth Professor of Ethics, Professor of Religious Studies, Professor of Public Policy, and Professor of Research in Medical Education in the School of Medicine. James F. Childress, jfc7c@virginia.edu.

Lisa Sowle Cahill is the J. Donald Monan, S. J., Professor of Theology at Boston College. She is a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Society of Christian Ethics. Lisa Sowle Cahill, lisa.cahill@bc.edu.

Douglas F. Ottati is the Craig Family Distinguished Professor of Reformed Theology and Justice at Davidson College. He is a past president of the Society of Christian Ethics. Douglas F. Ottati, doottati@davidson.edu.

William Schweiker is the Edward L. Ryerson Distinguished Service Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School and is a past president of the Society of Christian Ethics. William Schweiker, w-schweiker@uchicago.edu.

Theo A. Boer (Rotterdam 1960) is Professor of Healthcare Ethics at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen, Netherlands. His doctoral dissertation (1997) was an analysis of the work of James M. Gustafson. Theo A. Boer, taboer@pthu.nl.

Not only did Gustafson excel in the classroom, but many of his writings also reflect what he described as his “pedagogical intention.” In a “comparative analytic genre,” he seeks to illuminate alternative positions and what follows from adopting any one of them (Gustafson 1996, xvii). His “pedagogical intention” drives *Christ and the Moral Life* (1968), a favorite book for me, and not simply because Stanley Hauerwas and I assisted in proofreading it and checking references (Gustafson 1968, xi). This book studies ways in which theologians have explicitly or implicitly interpreted Christ’s significance for the moral life. While the book is best viewed as an exercise in Christian moral philosophy with a “pedagogical intention,” it concludes with a “modest effort” at a constructive, systematic statement of the claims that Christian theology can legitimately make about Christ and the moral life (1968, 10). Gustafson supplemented this effort in subsequent writings on moral discernment-in-context *versus* principle (1965; 2007). I have returned to the latter text many times in framing some of my own work (Cahill and Childress 1996; Childress 1997).

A fundamental metaphor for Gustafson’s work, over time—and for his impact on my work—is “intersections,” a term featured in his pedagogically intended book by that title and in other works (Gustafson 1996, 2004). We can think about intersections both as points of interaction and as processes of interaction. Throughout his career, Gustafson related theological ethics to other disciplines—initially, various social sciences and later biological and natural sciences, as well as clinical medicine. He played a major role in the formation of the Hastings Center, originally known as the Institute for Society, Ethics, and the Life Sciences. He often focused on theological ethics *and* these other sources of knowledge, but over time he came to favor the metaphor of *intersections* in order to emphasize the value of moral and intellectual traffic moving in both directions.

Intersections are important to and within communities of moral discourse, another of Gustafson’s major categories. He often focused on thick communities, such as churches, but other, thinner communities can also engage in moral discourse at the intersections. In academic contexts, negotiating intersections of disciplines—for instance, theology or philosophy and the relevant sciences—is essential for grasping humanity.

Gustafson’s most important systematic, constructive project is his two-volume *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. The first volume *Theology and Ethics* (1981b) presents his theological perspective, the second *Ethics and Theology* (1984) presents ethical implications. In a review, I describe Volume I as “a rich, stimulating, and challenging approach to theological ethics” (Childress 1983, 138). While *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* has affinities with different Christian theological positions, it is “distinctive and original,” and even “radical” (1983, 138).

Central to this work is Gustafson’s view—expressed well through the metaphor of intersections—that theology, as a “construal of the world” (Julian Hartt’s language), must be tested by human experience and by relevant social and natural sciences, which provide essential insight into the world. Theology cannot be incongruous with what we know through the sciences.

Throughout *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, as well as elsewhere, Gustafson interprets the relations of theology and ethics, and of religion and morality, through the language of *qualification*. For instance, Christianity can qualify ethics, or theocentric piety can qualify natural piety (see Gustafson 1975b, 1981b, 1984, see also 1975a). Over against anthropocentric perspectives, he uses the metaphor of parts and wholes to elaborate how his theocentric perspective qualifies ethics. “Human correction” is understood as enlargement, that is, viewing ourselves as parts of larger wholes, while discernment is an “informed intuition” that sees “parts in relation to a whole” (Gustafson 1981b, 338). To oversimplify, Gustafson’s main normative framework is what I would call part-whole consequentialism: “To discern how things are to be appropriately related to their relations to God requires serious consideration of larger contexts of which foci of attention are a part, i.e., how the parts are related to larger wholes and thus the consequences of action for wider, long-range consequences” (1984, 310; see also 312).

No doubt aspects of this valuable but insufficiently appreciated work can be challenged (see Childress & Boley 1987). His part-whole consequentialism could be modified in light of recent philosophical debates about rule consequentialism. It also appears to offer inadequate protection for respect for persons and informed consent in research involving human participants. Further, at many points, it tends to obliterate the distinction between obligation and supererogation—hence, many acts of self-sacrifice (that is, sacrifice of the part) become obligatory in order to benefit the whole. Moreover, Gustafson’s appeal to natural moral experience as a test is at times in tension with his recognition that human experience needs qualification and correction from a theocentric perspective.

Gustafson’s greatest and most enduring impact on my work has come through the way he modeled processes of participation, encounter, and interaction at vital intersections (for more on “participation,” see Gustafson 2016). At the crossroads of ethical reflection—for instance, first-order reflection about what to do in medical ethics or in public policy or second-order reflection on how to understand the human—it is again crucial for the traffic of ideas, involving theology/philosophy and relevant sciences, to move in both or several ways. Gustafson’s metaphor of intersections captures a badly needed academic and ethical perspective and spirit and represents an approach that is essential, however difficult it may be to realize.

-James F. Childress
University of Virginia

An indelible lesson of James M. Gustafson as teacher and as theologian is that one’s theology and one’s existential identity are closely intertwined. Both are formed within historical communities in which one participates with limited perspective and incomplete control (Gustafson 1961, 2016). This has consequences. First, theology is not worth much without intense and unsparing interrogation. Gustafson had no use and little patience for pastoral platitudes, theological evasions, or trump-card dogmas. Second, faith, also critically examined (2004), is theology’s sustaining power and its final proving ground. Gustafson modeled in

scholarship and classroom that critical examination is a necessary premise, and not the demolition, of authentic theology and faith.

This made Gustafson exceptionally attractive to the Catholic doctoral students flooding historically Protestant divinity schools in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which had engaged Catholics with “the modern world” in ways that could seem cataclysmic. Catholic students resonated with Gustafson’s energizing pluralism of authorities, among which accountability to the realities of human suffering and the testimony of the sciences stood out. With his even-handed and ecumenical approach, he led them to appreciate the theological profundity of Calvin and Barth, while gaining fresh appreciation of Aquinas and Catholic social teaching.

An insight of lasting value is that no one theological tradition, much less single theologian, can be appreciated without a broader perspective on his or her claims, context, truthfulness, and limits. The relativity of one’s own theological convictions is a given. Although Gustafson was rigorous and adamant, he sought always to think, write, and teach in “the grace of self-doubt” (Gustafson 2004). He neither recruited nor tolerated fans, followers, or disciples of his viewpoints. The theologian’s virtues should be the believer’s virtues, as framed by Augustine and Calvin: piety, gratitude, and humility before the awesome power of God.

Gustafson’s key and enduring message is that “the center of gravity of the affections and of our construing of the world is the Deity” (1984, 314, compare 164). But what this meant or means was conveyed paradoxically over his life and corpus. Gustafson’s “theocentrism” is most starkly and even shockingly captured in the closing pages of the second volume of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*: “We desire to manage and manipulate the ultimate power that has brought the worlds into being, sustains them, bears down upon them, and determines their ultimate destiny. . . . But God will not be manipulated. God will be God” (320). Nature was a vital source for Gustafson’s knowledge of God; of relationships within the planetary environment; and of human beings, our capacities, and our destiny (1994). He resorted particularly to the sciences to deflate unwarranted, self-gratifying, “anthropocentric” depictions of divine providence, Christ, grace, and eschatology (1984, 266–68).

This was hard to accept for many. In 1985, Gustafson’s good friend and sparring partner, Paul Ramsey, a Methodist, lamented: “I feel lonely at the drawing of a theological enterprise that does not center on the things we thought we shared with you . . . namely, prayer, worship, liturgy, the confessions of the church, and going to the Lord’s table” (Beckley and Swezey 1988, 238–39). Gustafson insisted that it was *as a* “faithful religious person” that he interpreted Christian piety as he did. Gustafson’s theocentrism coheres with Calvinist “assurance,” that radical stance of *pietas* before the sublime and abiding God that can coexist with full awareness that not all of God’s purposes work to one’s own benefit.

Yet the theocentrism of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* is not the only theocentrism of Gustafson. In his last published work, an essay in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* called “Participation: A Religious Worldview,” Gustafson offers a strikingly different confession of faith. As he puts it, biblical narratives

of Jesus and the prophets “fill my spirit with” God’s love for creation and humanity, God’s desire for the well-being of all creation. This leads Gustafson to “gratitude and devotion, indeed love for God” (2016, 170). For Gustafson, the “religious affections” (from Jonathan Edwards) and “a sense of the divine” (Gustafson 1994) were always more important than doctrines and systematized theological claims, enabling relation to, if not understanding of, the divine. The religious affections are inspired by nature, worship, and aesthetic media such as music, art, and literature. Like John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, Gustafson found in nature particularly (Gustafson 1994, 2–6) a “school” of piety (Calvin 1953, II.6.1) and the “sweetness” of divine plenitude (Edwards 1962, 60). Theologians should not too confidently make sense of God intellectually. There are aspects of God’s relation to humanity and other creatures that can be reconciled more successfully by the religious affections, formed and tested within ecclesial life.

Gustafson never retracted the stern theocentrism of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, nor attempted to explain away his own seeming inconsistencies. For Gustafson, God is always and ever a mystery. That is of course a theological truism, but one Gustafson found theologians to disregard frequently. Multi-sourced revelations of the divine are plural and sometimes nonconvergent. Gustafson’s “theocentrism” was in effect his faith’s persistent self-examination. “Put most simply,” he testifies in his last essay, “my life is grounded in the experience, and thus the theology, of all things being in God and God being in all things” (171)—wisdom for every generation of theologians.

-Lisa Sowle Cahill
Boston College

James M. Gustafson’s influence on my scholarship has been especially strong. I wrote my dissertation with him on his teacher, H. Richard Niebuhr, and I work within the Christian tradition in which he stood—a more or less revisionary Reformed Protestantism. Moreover, following graduate school I spent many years teaching with Charles M. Swezey, who studied with Gustafson at Yale and then wrote his dissertation on Gustafson’s work at Vanderbilt.

Let me mention three debts. First, the relationship between theology and ethics. This is a theme that laces through many of Gustafson’s works and also furnishes the subtitles of his two-volume *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. Gustafson taught me that theology and ethics are intertwined with a manner of living or practical stance. Christian ethics helps to test and extend that stance; it formulates and explores the disposition of Christian piety and faithfulness in the actual world. Aside from ethics, theology relinquishes an inherently critical and practically engaging dynamic that a living Christian faith should never lose. But an ethic also can be shaped by a theological vision of all things in relation to God that interprets the possibilities, limits, and tendencies of persons and communities, as well as of the world’s interrelated ecology of gifts and challenges. A theological vision elicits basic attitudes, such as gratitude, repentance, and hope. It supports

moral norms, such as justice, and at least some of which, such as love of enemies, seem distinctive to a Christian ethos. These are reasons why I tried my hand at a systematic theology of a pragmatic cast.

Second, as a teacher and a writer, Gustafson emphasized familiarity with Christian tradition, broadly conceived. This can make for a firm connection with Bible and church; it was also represented by his storied seminar on Aquinas and Barth, and his concern that Protestant and Roman Catholic ethicists recognize their convergences as well as their distinctives. For me, Gustafson's interest in a Reformed Christian sub-tradition that runs through John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and H. Richard Niebuhr was crucial—call it a Christian historicism, a sense that theology and ethics are always a view from *somewhere*.

Third, the relationship of theology and ethics and the emphasis on a more or less flexible Reformed Protestantism form the context in which I have grappled with Gustafson's theocentrism. Reformed theology insists that we know human life and the world more truly when we view them in relation to God. Consider the opening lines of Calvin's *Institutes* and his claim in the Geneva Catechism that the human being's chief end is to know God, or Edward's treatises on *The End for which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, or H. Richard Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism*. Indeed, one way to read Gustafson's sustained attention to the sciences and to interdisciplinary reflections is as an intensification of a Reformed claim that God is the source of all truth, which comes through in Calvin's appreciation for the arts and sciences as God's gifts and Edwards' insistence that natural philosophy is the study of the manner of God's acting in the world.

Considerations such as these led me to frame an ecumenically inclined Reformed theology keyed to the apprehension of God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer in conversation with contemporary knowledge and views. Nevertheless, two features of Reformed theology have led me to recalibrate some elements of theocentrism. The first is Christology. I find Gustafson's statements about Jesus Christ as the incarnation of theocentric piety suggestive but incomplete, and so I have tried to present a fuller Christology in *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision* (Ottati 1989) and in *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Ottati 2020). The second feature is Christian humanism. Recall Calvin on a "Christian philosophy" keyed to the dicta "Know God" and "Know thyself." Ponder Puritans such as William Perkins and Richard Baxter on calling vocation, "the public good," and the divine commonwealth. Consider Barth on "the humanity of God." If the chief end of human participants in God's world is to know God truly, and if the Christ reveals genuine humanity, then knowing God in Christ should bring renewed life and also help us to be more humane. An important question for me therefore became: "Can one frame a Christologically shaped theocentric and Reformed Christian humanism that articulates a good hope for redemption and also meets distinctive challenges (e.g., pluralism, poverty, and environmental degradation) in our time?" With John de Gruchy (and influenced too by William Schweiker), I believe the answer is "Yes."

Turn now to the less definite and more difficult part of the editors' assignment: How will Gustafson's work impact students in the future? Predictions are hazardous, but I expect a significant part of his influence will come through the teaching of his students and then also the teaching of their students. I certainly hope something of his spirit as a teacher will be passed on—including an emphasis on intellectual rigor and a demand that students think for themselves. These traits may work against the influence of Gustafson's own theology because they encourage students to advance diverse interests and constructive positions. A climate more favorable to other currents in theological ethics may also result from the decline in the United States of the comparatively liberal Reformed Protestantism that Gustafson represents. Perhaps his influence will live on mostly among Roman Catholic theological ethicists.

To the extent Gustafson's impact continues I expect these emphases to be prominent. First, the best theological ethics is conjunctive; it really does try to hold together theology *and* ethics as well as ethics *and* theology. Second, the basic business of theological ethics is to understand and to frame a practically disposing and personally involving vision of human life and the world in relation to God. Third, as it tries to advance faithful living, theological ethics advocates, but it also entails critical thinking and engages other disciplines and perspectives.

-Douglas F. Ottati
Davidson College

Between one human being and another, this is the highest: that
the pupil is the occasion for the teacher to understand himself;
the teacher is the occasion for the pupil to understand himself.

—Soren Kierkegaard

Brilliant teacher and theologian, skilled mentor, learned colleague, and dear friend: these are the ways James Gustafson influenced my life and career. They are also how he can and should continue to shape the fields of theological and religious ethics. In this brief remembrance, I consider his influence and impact on the field, on his students, and on me personally. As these reflections progress, they become, I must admit, more personal.

Gustafson's students will remember the insights and challenges that his seminars presented. He seemed to know the entirety of Christian thought, and he brought his erudition to bear, sometimes lightly and sometimes with a sharp edge, on every thinker and text read in a course—and every student, too! He had a passion for the topic and demanded that every thinker be treated with respect and interpretive good will. Never one to teach his own books, Gustafson's theology—a sense of the divine as a powerful and sustaining Other and the responsibility people bear in complex, shifting contexts—came through in how material was presented. The seminars took place, as it were, *coram deo*. Of course, his

theology stands on its own. Yet his emphases on theocentrism, responsibility, and attention to what is going on in contexts that include the biological and physical universe must continue to inform work in theological ethics. In his teaching, the focus was on what a theological or religious stance meant for the conduct of life before the deity (as he would put it). Doctrinal finery or confessional purity cannot be held at the expense of truthful advances in knowledge. The demand that one's thinking be realistic, truth-seeking, and practical has deeply influenced my thought. If the obligation and task of genuine thinking is lost, theological and religious ethics risk becoming the playground of academic disputes and fads. Vague and unrealistic positions can lead to grave moral and religious damage.

"JMG," as Gustafson signed his notes and letters, was a skilled mentor. He held the reins loosely, as it were, and let me and others run with ideas and the concerns that motivated us as scholars and thinkers. He would also tighten them, at times quite firmly, if he thought a project was off track or outside of his own competence. For me, this tightening meant dropping a thinker from my dissertation! (I admit that this thinker returned in the published book version.) At times he also picked up new competencies as students forged new directions, say, in theories of interpretation and feminist thought. Gustafson was not interested in copies of himself or in making disciples. He conveyed profound respect for a student's mind and project and sought to foster creative work. He read dissertations carefully and with good will, even when he disagreed. Like many others, I have been influenced by this kind of mentoring and in a time when so many scholars look for disciples or require adherence to some academic orthodoxy, I hope that Gustafson's style of mentoring will continue to influence the field.

Late in my graduate studies, I would, from time to time, sit in his office and discuss theological and ethical matters. After those days and until around the time of his death, Jim and I carried on correspondence by letters and emails, spoke by phone, and met at the Society of Christian Ethics and elsewhere. During the conference on his work at Washington & Lee University, the papers from which were later published, we talked between sessions on questions and criticisms he faced. Years later, he read my books and other students' as well. Jim always gave a frank and honest assessment of my work as well as the religious and moral vision motivating a text. We could, and did, disagree on points, some profoundly so, and yet that never threatened our relationship. The Methodist in me treasures free will more than his Congregationalist-Calvinist soul could abide. Likewise, my theological humanism questioned the strictest formulations of his theocentric ethics, yet he expressed to me profound appreciation of my stance. What this learned colleague taught me, and what I hope has continued impact on the field, is that true intellectual engagement, genuine dispute, and conversation, are aspects of inquiry and research.

Over the years, Jim and I became friends and shared many details of our lives. I was able to visit him at his home in New Mexico after his wife Louise's death. We talked through the day and into the night. He gave me some of his

books that have pride of place in my Divinity School office. During my visit, we spent a day touring the area, and his love for and grasp of the landscape and geology about us was wondrous. His thirst for knowledge and love of nature remained enduring. He would often say, in a phone call, that he was not up on the latest work in theology or ethics and then rattle off an impressive grasp of currents in the field. Little wonder that while he was active, he led the field in virtually every development of thought and method. The man's piety, thought, and life melded into a whole, an integrity of life, that he shared with his friends. That is a gift I will always treasure. One of the best tributes we can pay to James Gustafson is for our field to remain a place where former mentors and their students can become genuine friends in the love of the intellectual life and thus be the highest occasions of self-understanding.

-William Schweiker
The University of Chicago

In the early 1980s, through writings such as *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, *Christ and the Moral Life*, *Can Ethics Be Christian?*, and *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, James M. Gustafson had an established name in North American theological ethics.¹ For any ethicist, that would be an impressive record to look back upon. But Gustafson's perhaps greatest impact—at least when it comes to Europe—was yet to come. In an article, published in 1980, in which he mentioned that he was moving “toward the end of [his] career,” Gustafson introduced a new term: “theocentric ethics.”² To many for whom “Christocentric theology” had been a constitutive part of their education, “theocentric ethics” sounded remarkably familiar. Without becoming overtly modernist or liberal it presented a major alternative to Barthian thinking.

Theocentric ethics marked a shift in Gustafson's thinking and was no doubt closely linked to a personal crisis at the end of the 1970s. Despite the many continuities in his works, theocentric ethics reflects several remarkable transitions: from anthropocentrism to theocentrism, from descriptive to normative ethics, and from a focus on theology and sociology toward dialoguing with more disciplines.

With the concept of theocentric ethics Gustafson skillfully combines a number of elements. First there is his theological realism. Although Gustafson never loses his eye for its congregational and narrative aspects, theocentric ethics is more realist than anything else: “to say something theological is to say something about how things really and ultimately are” (1981a). Second, this realist position is reached by combining different sources. Gustafson is one of the pioneers of what his Uppsala University colleagues Holte et al. call a

¹See Gustafson 1961, 1968, 1975b, and 1978. For a complete bibliography of his works, see Gustafson 2007, 231–53.

²See Gustafson 1980. It appeared in *The Christian Century's* long-standing series, “How My Mind Has Changed.” See also Gustafson 1981b and 1984.

“combination theory”: combining different sorts of knowledge into one coherent theology (1983, 88). Gustafson identifies four such sources: Scripture and tradition, philosophy, scientific knowledge, and human experience. Third, this yields Gustafson’s well-known critique of the anthropocentrism found in different theologies and “isms.” Any theology, no matter if it calls itself orthodox, pietistic, political, emancipatory, liberationist, biocentric, ecocentric, or for that matter any other adjective, must ask itself to what degree it uses religion instrumentally rather than seeing the Divine and natural realities as ends in themselves. “The Almighty has his own purposes. God will be God!” (Gustafson 2002, 112). Fourth and finally, this theocentrism is full of personal religious involvement. The reader of Gustafson’s oeuvre is impressed with expressions of reverence and gratitude for the Divine source from which all realities stem, and which makes possible their continuing existence, flourishing, and development: “Soli Deo Gloria!” (2007, xii). Gustafson defines his preferred term “piety” (rather than faith) as “a fundamental stance toward what is given in the world and human life: it is an attitude or disposition of respect, awe, and even devotion” (1981a, 5). Piety contains, among other things, senses of dependence, gratitude, direction, obligation, remorse, and possibility.

Under the influence of input from findings from the natural science, this theocentric piety is increasingly expressed in non-personalist God-language. Whereas earlier Gustafson referred to God as loving (1975b, 102), “love” in a theocentric context rather refers to God as the ultimate ground for *human* love. Even when it comes to the unity of God, there is a tension with his view of God as the “One beyond the Many” (H. Richard Niebuhr). “The powers that sustain us and bear down upon us” (Gustafson 1981b, 195) tend to become less personal, more related to the variety of things—both beneficial and threatening—as they occur and develop in contrary directions. “God, the orderer of life, is a threat to human well-being; God is enemy as well as friend” (1984, 35, 42). Now, “I do not say that God is against man. But the sense in which God is for man must be spelled out in a carefully qualified way” (1981b, 181). Accounting for knowledge from the natural sciences has another important implication for Gustafson. In light of the unimaginable dimensions of time and space—spatiotemporally, humans are a negligible detail in the universe—he rejects the view that humans represent the highest value in the universe as we know it.

The impersonal character of God and the relativizing of the special value of humans are aspects of theocentric ethics that some find hard to accept. Why would the findings from the natural sciences lead to a *theo*-logy in which “God” is hardly distinct from the course the universe takes and is bound to take? The view that God, “the powers that bear down upon us and sustain us,” does not consider humankind worthy of special concern does not seem to follow from the multisource epistemology that is found in theocentric ethics (1981b, 195). The natural sciences certainly pose challenges to a personalist theology. But are they compelling enough to abandon it?

It is doubtful whether Gustafson ever fully harmonizes the inner tensions in his theology. According to Gustafson's Uppsala colleague Anders Jeffner, a religion consists of three elements: theoretical convictions about God, humans, and the universe; a central value system; and a basic attitude. On the first two levels, Gustafson adopts a rather impersonal theology and rejects the "consolations of traditional religion." But perhaps the main continuity between Gustafson's theology and the Reformed tradition is found in their basic attitude (Jeffner 1992; Boer 1997). In letters and phone calls—even toward the end of his life—he speaks about God in personal terms (Boer 2022).

In 2015, Gustafson wrote to me that in light of so much injustice in the world, "God, who in the biblical and Christian story, is a loving redeeming person, must weep and mourn without ceasing." "God be with you, Theo. And be with God!" he wrote in 2016. And in November 2020, shortly before his death, he wrote that he was "grateful to God for a good life."

Luther has described faith as "consoled despair." Gustafson's piety is, in a way, consoled. Traditions and narratives, as well as ongoing individual devotion and communal worship, are not just an *addendum* to the theoretical aspects of Gustafson's theocentric ethics. Rather, they form the cement that keep his theology from losing hope. Gustafson invites people to be personally involved with God in spite of a seemingly empty and hostile universe. And that is exactly the calling of an academic theology in the 21st century.

-Theo Boer
Protestant Theological University

REFERENCES

- Beckley, Harlan, and Charles Swezey, eds.
1988 *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics: Interpretations and Assessments*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Boer, Theo A.
1997 "Theological Ethics After Gustafson: A Critical Analysis of the Normative Structure of James M." In *Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics*. Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Publishers.
2022 "The Legacy of James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics." *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 76.2 (June): 99–113.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle, and James F. Childress, eds.
1996 *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Calvin, John
1953 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 1. 1845. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Childress, James F.
1983 "Review of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. Vol. 1: *Theology and Ethics*, by James M. Gustafson." *Ethics* 94.1 (October): 136–8.

- 1997 "Narrative(s) Versus Norm(s): A Misplaced Debate in Bioethics." Edited with an Introduction by Hilde Lindemann Nelson. In *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics*. 252–71. New York: Routledge.
- Childress, James F., and William H. Boley
1987 "Review of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective. Vol. 2: Ethics and Theology*, by James M. Gustafson." *The Journal of Religion* 67.3 (July): 392–95.
- Edwards, Jonathan
1962 "Personal Narrative." 1740. In *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, edited by Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, 57–72. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Gustafson, James M.
1961 *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community*. New York: Harper and Row.
1965 "Context versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics." *Harvard Theological Review* 58.2 (April): 171–202.
1968 *Christ and the Moral Life*. New York: Harper and Row.
1975a *The Contributions of Theology to Medical Ethics*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
1975b *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1978 *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1980 "A Theocentric Interpretation of Life." *The Christian Century* 97.25 (July 30–August 6): 754–60.
1981a *Say Something Theological!*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1981b *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective. Vol. 1: Theology and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1984 *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective. Vol. 2: Ethics and Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1994 *A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
1996 *Intersections: Science, Theology, and Ethics*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
2002 "'The Almighty Has His Own Purposes: From Politics to Theology.'" In *The Relevance of Theology: Nathan Söderblom and the Development of an Academic Discipline*, edited by Carl-Reinhold Bråkenhielm and Gunhild Wingvist Hollman, 101–12. Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University.
2004 *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
2007 *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays in Theological Ethics*, edited by Theo A. Boer and Paul E. Capetz. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
2016 "Participation: A Religious Worldview." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44.1 (March): 148–75.
- Holte, Ragnar, Hans Hof, Jarl Hemberg, and Anders Jeffner, eds.
1983 *Etiska Problem*. Stockholm, Sweden: Verbum.

Jeffner, Anders

- 1992 "A New View of the World Emerging among Ordinary People." In *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology*, edited by Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco van den Brom, and Marcel Sarot, 137–45. Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Publishers.

Ottati, Douglas F.

- 1989 *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- 2020 *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.