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What Is a Theological Model?

Introduction

How does one reflect theologically on the experience of human creativity? How does one reflect *theologically* on anything at all? We can define theological reflection very broadly as the human activity of making sense of the world. This activity can be so pervasive and commonplace that we take it for granted until we are confronted with a crisis in which the world seems meaningless and purposeless. It is helpful then to offer a more descriptive definition of this activity:

> Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring our individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious tradition. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as from those of the tradition. . . . Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.[1]

This definition may sound overly conceptual and heady, but the reality of theological reflection is not. It is tempting for Christians to focus our theological reflection upon words and concepts because they are more abstract and easier to analyze. However, we cannot "program" ourselves by assenting to a set of intellectual beliefs. Healthy theological reflection takes into consideration our embodied, cultural, and social interactions with the world. Bringing our experience into conversation with the Christian tradition requires that we do justice to these aspects of our humanity. As James K. A. Smith puts it, human persons are "liturgical animals" whose worldviews are shaped on the register of the imagination.[2] This means that, although propositional statements may be needed to articulate a worldview, things like metaphors are the real building blocks of worldviews.

To bring the Christian tradition into conversation with the experience of human creativity, we will explore several theological models. Theological models are more than a conceptual framework for intellectual inquiry. They engage the imagination. A theological model for human creativity is like an invitation to join in the creative vision God has for the world, and to embody this vision in one's own creative work.

What, exactly, is a theological model? Here is a concise definition: *a theological model is a systematic metaphor that aims toward the apprehension of reality, opens new and interesting avenues for thought, organizes relevant data from scripture and tradition, and shapes human experience.* Knowing more about theological models will help us to

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1. Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 51.
2. James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

think more carefully about how they mediate our experience of human creativity.

A Theological Model Is a Systematic Metaphor

A theological model is a metaphor rich enough that it can be *systematized*.[3] Dorothy Sayers's book *The Mind of the Maker* is an example of a theological model that is close to the main interests of this project. Sayers uses her understanding of the creative process in writing and drama as a model to illuminate many basic Christian doctrines.[4] She discusses the Trinity, the incarnation, human free will, divine providence, and more in terms of human creativity. She also reflects upon the creative process by allowing those same Christian doctrines to mediate her reflections. Although the experience of creativity is rich enough for Sayers to construct a theological model, it is not the case that every metaphor can be a model. But every model is a metaphor. So then, what is a metaphor?

One might think of a metaphor as language used in a new and unusual context.[5] Metaphors borrow language that we use in one context, and then ask us to consider how that language may apply in a different context. A *theological* metaphor borrows language from human experience and uses it to speak about God. For example, Christian theologians use many metaphors to speak about God. Statements such as "God is my rock" or "the Lord is my shepherd" are metaphors that shed light upon the nature of God. The most interesting, and often most valuable, metaphors are those that help us to think about something familiar in a new or different way.

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3. See Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102.
4. Third ed. (London: Methuen, 1941).
5. Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 28–29.

Some have suggested that all theological language is metaphorical. Even more radical, some have suggested that all thinking is metaphorical. Sayers, for example, writes that "we can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things."[6] According to this view, metaphors do not belong only to the humanities, but they are also "evident in all fields and at the most basic level of their understanding and conceptuality."[7] While it may be the case that metaphors are very common, it is too hasty to assume that all theological language is metaphorical. There is also the possibility that language used to refer to God can be univocal or equivocal.

Some suggest that theological language can refer to God in a *univocal*, or much more direct, manner. Keith Ward, for example, argues that wisdom is attributed to God in this way because "it is a hypothesized extrapolation of human wisdom to its highest conceivable degree."[8] According to Ward, the only difference between divine wisdom and human wisdom is a matter of degree; they are fundamentally the same sorts of things. While theological metaphors also assume a similarity between divine and human contexts, it does not follow that the goal of a theological metaphor is to arrive at propositional statements that refer univocally to God and humanity. A theological metaphor is not like a kernel of content dressed up in fancy wrapping paper. Metaphors avoid reduction to propositional statements because they both refer and do not refer to their objects. For this reason, theological metaphors are always indirect, and they come with the recognition "built in" that God is beyond human categories.[9]

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6. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 17.
7. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1983), 35.
8. Keith Ward, *Creation and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 152.
9. Janet Soskice writes "Models and metaphors are prized . . . precisely because of their adaptability; they are always tentative, always qualified." See "Knowledge and Experience in Science and Religion: Can We Be Realists?" in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common*

Some have argued that God and humanity are so fundamentally different that one can only speak *equivocally* about God. Language about divine creativity is sometimes assumed to be equivocal. For example, in what is apparently an attempt to seal off the act of divine creation from any notion of creaturely causation, Karl Barth writes:

> In contrast to everything that we know of origination and causation, creation denotes the divine action which has a real analogy, a genuine point of comparison, only in the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father, and therefore only in the inner life of God Himself, and not at all in the life of the creature.[10]

While Barth reminds the reader that divine creativity is of a kind ultimately beyond the capacities of creatures, he nevertheless confuses the matter by suggesting an analogy between "creating" and "begetting." If both of these are "not at all in the life of the creature," then it begs the question of how Barth can know whether they stand in analogical relation to one another.

Theological models are different from univocal and equivocal language about God in at least two important respects. First, they allow for human participation in theological language; that is, in a metaphorical statement about God, human experience always mediates one's knowledge of God. The incarnation grants humanity the capacity to speak meaningfully about God because God has chosen to reveal himself in the person and work of Christ. Far from evading human participation in theological language, as Barth sees the issue, the incarnation suggests that human participation is an indispensable element of theological language. As Trevor Hart argues, the incarnation is an entering into the fullness of what it

Quest for Understanding, ed. Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 177; McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 123.

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation* III/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 14.

means to be a human and "this means, of course, that we cannot ignore or circumvent the familiar and ordinary associations that words and realities taken up into the service of divine revelation have for us. We begin, and remain, within the sphere of the human in theology."[11]

Second, the human language and experience taken into the service of a theological model is, itself, illuminated and challenged. Stanley Grenz reminds us that the Christian concept of God emerges from a "dialectical movement of thought involving, above all, theology proper and anthropology." These two contexts, Grenz suggests, work together in a kind of conversation to come to an understanding of who God is. In this process, our understanding of what it means to be human also changes. He writes:

> Nevertheless, anthropological conceptions and articulations are themselves dependent on a transcendent ground that stands in judgment over both our anthropological theology and our theological anthropology. Hence, this aspect of the theological conversation may be viewed as a double—or reciprocal—movement from the divine to human and from the human to divine.[12]

Theological models are bi-directional. Although they may primarily move from the human to the divine, they also reflect back upon the human experience and language in which they are rooted.

11. Trevor Hart, "How Do We Define the Nature of God's Love?" in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 99.
12. Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 9.

A Theological Model Aims toward the Apprehension of the Reality

Sometimes it is assumed that theological models *only* help us to speak about God and that the point of a theological model is to apprehend something about God. However, if theological models are bi-directional, as I think they are, then this understanding of theological models is incomplete. Theological models not only help us to speak about God; they help us to speak more generally about *reality*. With this in mind, the next question we must consider is: Do theological models help us to speak *truthfully* about reality?

In response to this question, one can say that theological models function *heuristically*. By this it is meant that models can provide a grid through which relevant data are sorted, valued, and organized in order to come to a clearer understanding of one's object of knowing. The heuristic function of models is especially clear in cases when the object of one's knowing is obscure. As Michael Polanyi suggests, in these kinds of situations, such as a darkened room, "we send out thrusts of our imagination to explore what a thing may be."[13] We enter a darkened room under the hypothesis that a bear is sitting in the corner to discover either that the bear is a pile of clothes on an armchair, or, less likely, that we are about to become a midnight snack. The activity of knowing occurs upon the commitment of the whole person to a hypothesis (we may genuinely fear the bear!), and the proof or disproof of this hypothesis is only demonstrated as it is tried out. As Gunton argues, "It is not that metaphor *precedes* discovery, helping to make it possible, but rather that new language and discovery happen together, with metaphor serving as the *vehicle* of discovery."[14]

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13. Michael Polanyi, "What Is a Painting?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 10 (1970): 234.
14. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 31.

In light of the heuristic function of theological models, it is wise to avoid two extreme positions on whether models refer to a reality beyond themselves. First, one could take a naïve realist position. The naïve realist assumes that models describe how things are in themselves. Soskice writes, "A theological naïve realism would assume there to be no difficulty in describing God by the same terms we use of observables; that God simply and truly gets 'angry,' 'hardens his heart,' or is the 'king of heaven.'"[15] On the opposite extreme, the idealist assumes that models make no claims about "external reality," but that they are a projection or imposition, which have their source in human needs.[16] In between these two extremes lies a great deal of variety that could be classed as critical realism because it is committed to the explanatory power of models, but at the same time recognizes that all language is provisional, indirect, and socially conditioned.

The critical realist can say that theological models help him to speak truthfully about reality, but he cannot say that they grant him access to absolute certainty about that reality. The critical realist may, however, still responsibly claim objectivity in method and investigation. According to Soskice,

> the realist argument is possible because we dispense with the empiricist dogma that reference is fixed by unrevisable description and adopt instead a social theory where reference is established partly by sense of terms, but largely by speakers' use of those terms in particular situations.[17]

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15. Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 119.
16. Ibid., 20. She admits that her description of idealism is a straw man, but she points out that idealist assumptions can be found in some philosophers of religion as well as historical relativists such as Paul Feyeraband and Thomas Kuhn. For another example see Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing a Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981). In *Actuality of Atonement*, page 41, Gunton argues that McFague's use of metaphor collapses into idealism.
17. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 151.

Soskice's "social theory" assumes that there is a *fiduciary* element in all knowing. In other words, the objectivity of one's knowledge about God is dependent upon the knower's trust in a much wider community's experience with God.[18] Gunton attempts to strengthen this claim to objectivity by arguing that there is a "harmony" between language and the cosmos, and between language and God.[19] His argument for using metaphors to refer to God could be bolstered by suggesting that the incarnation is the theological ground for the harmony between language and God. Nevertheless, Gunton still recognizes the irreducibly social and fiduciary aspects of human knowing:

> The primary way of our fixing the reference of God is, indeed, through the telling of the biblical narratives *in light of previous uses of them by the Christian community*.[20]

To responsibly claim objectivity in the use of a theological model, a passionate commitment toward the reality one seeks to know is also required. On this point, the arguments of Gunton and Soskice could be strengthened by the Polanyian concepts of commitment and indwelling. Polanyi believes that within a responsible commitment, "there is no trace . . . of self-indulgence. The discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his service for revealing it."[21] In the framework of commitment, "The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must."[22] Thus, as Walter Thorson neatly summarizes,

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18. Ibid., 159.
19. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 37.
20. Ibid., 47.
21. Michael Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge, 1967), 25.
22. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1958), 309.

"'objectivity' is not the removal of personal involvement, but its responsible exercise"[23] through commitment.

   Polanyi's concept of indwelling further elaborates his notion of commitment. To explain the concept of indwelling it is helpful to borrow Polanyi's example of a blind man walking with a cane.[24] Polanyi observes that a cane allows the blind man to attend *focally* to the world around him while he remains *subsidiarily* aware of pressures made on his hand by the cane. The blind man uses the cane to make sense of his world, but to do so he must indwell the cane. The act of indwelling entails that the blind man commits to the cane. By indwelling it, the blind man's sense of self is extended along the cane as if it has been taken into his body. As Polanyi writes:

> Every act of personal assimilation by which we make a thing form an extension of ourselves through our subsidiary awareness of it, is a commitment of ourselves; a manner of disposing ourselves.[25]

Similarly, it could be suggested that Soskice's social theory of religious language implies that speaking "objectively" about God requires the speaker to indwell his or her religious tradition. Theological models are uniquely suited to this notion of indwelling because they are capable of alluding to and drawing upon a wide variety of other metaphors and models that have been used and reused by Christians throughout the centuries.

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23. Walter Thorson, "The Biblical Insights of Michael Polanyi," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 33 (1981): 129–38.
24. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 61.
25. Ibid. Emphasis mine.