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Models and Representations in Science

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Hans-Peter Grosshans

What do models represent in theology?

Hans-Peter Grosshans

Seminar für systematische Theologie, Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Universitätsstraße 13–17, 48143 Münster, Germany

Modelling is popular in many areas of our contemporary life, be it in the geosciences for climate change or in medicine for epidemiology, as we have seen in recent years. In theology, it is a very old scientific intellectual practice. If we distinguish between theology and religion—a distinction relevant in theology in the 18th century at the latest and has since remained relevant—then the term "religion" refers to the more material aspects of religion (including its practice), such as praying, praising God, singing religious songs, performing rituals, doing acts of kindness such as helping one's neighbour, feeding the hungry, giving to the poor, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, and so on. Theology, then, as opposed to religion, is any kind of reflection—academic or non-academic—on religion and faith.[1]

As in other sciences, the plausibility of theological models depends on the symbiosis of material and theoretical aspects, i.e., religious life or practice and theological reflection—a symbiosis similar, for example, to that in other experimental sciences and mathematics (as we find it in the natural sciences, as well as in economics). Science in general is "a means of increasing our knowledge of empirical phenomena by explaining them in terms of theoretical entities". The specificity of theology here is to be "a means of increasing our knowledge of the phenomena of the human condition by explaining these phenomena in terms of the relationship between man and God"[2] or, to put it more generally, in the horizon of transcendence.

Theology, as a reflection on the practice of the Christian faith, developed very early in the history of Christianity. As I have shown elsewhere, theology can be understood as a uniquely European way of dealing with religion.[3] In Christian theology, the models were constructed early in its history. Since then, models have played an important role in theology.

In fact, models were built within religious practice itself. One example, which has received recent attention, is the understanding of the temple in Jerusalem as a model of the cosmos. Such a concept was worked out in the priestly writings—an important tradition of the Pentateuch in the

[1] Cf. Pieter J. Huiser, Models, Theories and Narratives. Conditions for the Justification of a Religious Realism, Amsterdam 1997, 62.

[2] Ibid., 63.

[3] Cf. Hans-Peter Grosshans, Europa und die Theologie – der besondere europäische Umgang mit Religion, in: Europa? Zur Kulturgeschichte einer Idee, ed. by Tomislav Zelić, Zaneta Sambunjak and Anita Pavić Pintarić, Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) 2015, 121–136.

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Hebrew Bible—in which the Temple in Jerusalem is understood as a model of the cosmos (a concept that was then realised in the new Temple after the return from the Babylonian exile). In visiting the Temple of Jerusalem, human beings experience a specific understanding of the cosmos and their own place in it: a cosmos where heaven and earth are transcended by the divine Creator, who relates in a specific way to his creatures and who, in his transcendent invisibility, is concretely present in the Temple of Jerusalem, as he is present in all his creation. We find a similar modelling of the cosmos and the relationship between the divine and human in Christian conceptions of church buildings and the liturgies that take place within them.[4]

Similar modelling can be found in many areas of religious practice. However, in this article, I want to concentrate on models in theology. The examples of the use of models in religious practice only show that models in theology are also relevant to religious practice. They also show that there is a close connection between religious practice and theological models—at least in Christian theology.

To address the question asked in the title of this article, what models in theology represent, I would like to reflect on what is the most well-known model in Christian theology: the Trinitarian model of God.

The Trinitarian model of God, in the form in which it has become the standard model for Christian talking about God and faith, was developed in the 4th century. The most important contribution came from three theologians in Cappadocia, present day Turkey: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Their Trinitarian model of God more or less concluded a long discourse on the Christian understanding of God.

The main challenge for the new religion of Christianity at this time was how to understand the relationship of Jesus Christ to the divine. Was he himself divine? Was he a human being inspired by the divine spirit? Questions like these also necessitated a model of the witness of Jesus Christ in the biblical texts, which led to different Christological models. All these questions became urgent when a discourse ensued surrounding a claim made by Arius that there was a time when Jesus Christ did not exist. According to Arius, even if Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had come into being long before the beginning of the universe, he would still have to be regarded as a creature of God who was not characterised by an originless and causeless eternity, as was the case with God by definition. Understood within the conceptualities of the 4th century, Jesus Christ was finally conceived in Greek

[4]Originally, the specific Christian church building was a model of the relationship between transcendence and immanence, between the transcendent divine and the human. This becomes interesting when we come to more Platonic understandings in religious practice. In Orthodox Christianity, the liturgy of worship is understood as corresponding to the heavenly worship in the direct presence of God. In fact, the model here is the heavenly worship, which is copied in all worship on earth with the divine liturgy.

as *homoousios*—of the same essence—of the Father (ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί), while at the same time holding firmly to monotheism, to the singular unity of God.

Actually, the criticism that we are faced with a contradiction or at least a paradox was already part of the discourse given the differences in Greek and Latin terminology. In this distinction, one can see a semantic irrationality between different languages. The Latin equivalent of the Greek *homoousios* was *consubstantialis*. In Latin, the Greek *ousia* became *substantia*. There is a similar asymmetrical equivalence in the terms used for the three realisations of the one God. In Greek, the formula was: μία οὐσία—τρεις ὑποστάσεις: the one divine essence has three hypostases (realisations resp. actualisations). In Latin, the basic Trinitarian formula was: *Tres personae—una substantia divina*: three persons—one divine substance.

The interpretive problem was that the Latin *substantia* was actually a translation of the Greek *hypostasis*. The Romans therefore considered the Greek understanding to be polytheistic: a belief in three gods. On the other hand, the Latin *persona* was πρόσωπον in Greek, meaning a mask of a face used in the theatre to play a particular role. The Greek-speaking theologians therefore regarded the Roman understanding of God as a simple monotheism that ignored the complexity of the divine reality.

The challenge was then to develop a model of God that did justice to God's unity and complexity. Simply put, the challenge was to develop a model that coherently combines oneness *and* plurality, or diversity.

The need for such a model came, on the one hand, from biblical texts in which the relationship of Jesus to God, as well as the relationship of the Spirit to Jesus and to God, is described as one of intimate closeness and even identity. In the New Testament, for example, there are statements about God sending the Son and the Spirit, but also about the Son sending the Spirit: "When the time was fulfilled, God sent his Son" (Gal 4:4); "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). The Son says that God "will give you another Comforter, who will be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16f.). Then the Son says that he himself sends the Spirit: "But when the Comforter comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth" (John 15:26). Then there are statements in the New Testament that reverse the direction of activity and speak of an event between the Spirit and the Son, in that the Spirit testifies to the Son (cf. John 15:26; 1 Jn 5:6–12), or of an event between the Son and the Father, in that the Son glorifies the Father (cf. John 17:1ff.) and in the end will give dominion to God the Father (cf. 1 Cor 15:24). Ancient Christianity was therefore confronted with the task of "thinking about Jesus Christ as about God: οὕτως δεῖ ἡμᾶς φρονεῖν περί Ἰησοῦ Χριστροῦ ὡς περὶ θεοῦ". The reason for

this is soteriological: "For if we think less of him, we expect less from him" (2Clem 1:1).

The main challenge for building models on these relationships was certainly the brutal execution of Jesus, the divine Son. The divine was by definition eternal and infinite. Death was the opposite, a sign of finitude and temporality. Jesus Christ could not be of the same essence as God and thus be considered divine. Arius' conclusion was then:: the Son could not be *homoousios* (of the same essence) with God the Father. The Son is dissimilar to the nature and character of God the Father, being by nature "mutable" and endowed with "freedom of will" like all other human beings. The Son's moral self-determination thus makes him actually (but not necessarily) "unchangeable".

The initial trinitarian models of God concentrated strictly on monotheistic oneness, the singular unity of the divine. Various modalist models were often used: in the appearance and activity of the one divine essence there is a succession of Father, Son and Spirit—similar to the three states of water: solid, liquid, and gas. In all these attempts to construct a Trinitarian model of God, the various activities and effects of the Divine as experienced and conceived by human beings were combined with a specific concept of singular unity.

These early Christian models followed the conviction, generally accepted in the first centuries, that there is only "one God". This philosophical monotheism represents the idea of the one world monarchy of the one God. The unity of the world corresponded to the strictly singular unity of God.

The Cappadocian Fathers were thus innovative in the 4th century in that they used basic monotheism while trinitarianly overcoming the monotheistic monarchism. When a concept of singular unity is used, the One cannot be shared or communicated.

Such a concept of singular unity was also popular in political theory and in politics in general. According to Aristotle, only one can and should rule, having multiple rulers is evil. In ancient Greece, of course, one thought of the gods on Mount Olympus, who fought each other as rivals to the detriment of the common good—which had already been effectively criticised by the ancient philosophical critique of religion. In Rome, the Pax Romana ensured the subjugation of other Mediterranean countries since all power emanated from the one (singular) Roman emperor.

An idea of unity that included plurality and diversity did not seem reasonable at the time, neither in terms of political rule nor divine rule. Therefore, some theologians used the modalist model: the one, indivisible God appears in the world in different forms; first as Creator and Lawgiver, then in the form of a human being, who is considered the Son of God and Redeemer of the world, then in the form of the Spirit as the inspiration of

life and the completion of what God began in creation. Father, Son and Spirit were seen as three manifestations of the one unique God. However, the singular One—apart from the three manifestations—remains unrecognisable and inexpressible. Metaphorically speaking, one might say the One God is the eternal and simple light whose rays are refracted in different ways in the world of human beings according to their receptivity.

Another popular model tried to preserve the strict singularity of God by subordinating Jesus Christ to God in such a way that he could not be considered equal to God in any way. The idea here was: Since the one God is incommunicable (because He is indivisible), he needs the mediation of mediary beings. The mediary being between the one God and the diverse world is then called "Son" or "Logos", which is a creature of the one God, through whom God communicates himself through a medium. The basic form of this model is: one God—one Logos (as mediator)—one world—one world monarchy.

To these models—the modalist and the subordinate models—the Cappadocian Fathers constructed their alternative model, which then became the standard model. This model of the Trinitarian God was expressed in the formula: one substance and three persons, respectively, one essence (μία οὐσία) and three realisations (τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις).

This formula was supplemented by descriptions of the relationships between the three persons. The various works or activities of God in relation to the world and human beings were also attributed to one of the persons or hypostases. In the internal relationships, God the Father begets (not creates) the Son and breathes the Spirit. The Son is begotten (passively) by the Father. There was a later addition to the Cappadocian formula, which claimed that the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son. In a sense, the Spirit was breathed by both the Father *and* the Son.

In terms of the acts and activities of the Divine, the creation of heaven and earth was attributed to the Father. Salvation, final judgement, perpetual government and co-creation were attributed to the Son. The renewal of life, the formation of a new form of human sociality, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead and eternal life—in short, sanctification—were attributed to the Spirit.

The concept of *perichoresis* was then introduced to avoid the idea that the three persons of the divine being were acting alone. The *perichoresis* of the three persons (*hypostases*) indicates a mutual permeation, a reciprocal and mutual participation of all three persons in divine activity.

The family categories used (Father, Son) are in a sense metaphorical, following biblical terminology, but adapted to the need of the complex Trinitarian model of God to express the simultaneity of activity (such as

creation) and receptivity (sonship) or passivity (such as suffering) in the Divine.

Throughout the reception history, this standard model has been debated and newly developed in theology and philosophy. In particular, at the beginning of the 19th century, the standard model was adapted to the new philosophy of German Idealism—which then became the main understanding of the Trinitarian model of God in Christian theology. One reason for this development was that, in modern Europe, the concept of God as the highest substance was replaced with the idea of God as an absolute subject. Since German Idealism, the divine unity has been interpreted as that of an absolute, self-identical subject. Accordingly, one speaks of God's "self-revelation" and "self-communication". This conception of God has parallels in the modern conception of human subjectivity: the absolute subject in heaven corresponds to human subjectivity in relation to nature and history, and the personal God corresponds to the bourgeois culture of personality.

But with the conceptual shift from substance to subjectivity, new problems arose for the Trinitarian model of God. The modern concept of subject seems to make the traditional talk of the three persons of the Trinity impossible. Instead of the old formula *una substantia—tres personae*, it became popular again to speak of the one divine subject in three different modes of being. If the one God is the subject (that acts, etc.), then the three persons must be downgraded to modes of being of the one self-identical subject. The three persons, which in the modern sense would be understood as subjects, are dissolved in favour of the one God—and consequently God as a Trinity of persons becomes less important.

The Trinitarian model of God, in this understanding, was developed from the logic of God's self-revelation. But this divine self that reveals itself and its reign cannot be conceived otherwise than as an absolute subject. We find such a reductive model, for example, in the theology of the Protestant theologian Karl Barth in the first half of the 20th century. In the course of the second half of the 20th century, this reductive model of God's subjectivity was vehemently criticised, insofar as it was a recourse to the concept of a singular unity that did not do justice to the true Trinitarian understanding of God. The inspiration for such a critique came from the ancient Greek tradition, which was still alive in Orthodox Christian theology. The starting point for a stricter trinitarian model of God was therefore not the unity, but the three persons of the divine. These three persons were not understood as different modal manifestations of the same absolute subject. Rather, the starting point of a Trinitarian model of God was the three persons, followed by the question of their unity. According to the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, this unity cannot be assumed, but is an "eschatological question about the completion of God's Trinitarian history". Consequently, the "unity

of the three persons of this history ... must be understood as a communicable unity and as an open, inviting, integrating unity".[5] The correct term for this kind of unity is unanimity or concord. And so, according to Moltmann, it is a matter of the "unity of the three persons among themselves, or: the unity of the three-in-one God".[6] Then the Trinitarian model of God is about personal, not modal, self-differentiation. Only persons can be united in unanimity or agreement, not modes of being. The unity of the Trinity is then communicative and consists in the communion of the divine Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The unity of the three divine persons must then be perceived in the mutual relationships between them. As mentioned earlier, the theological term for this mutuality of relations is the *perichoresis* of the divine persons (mutual permeation).

Another Protestant theologian, Eberhard Jüngel, summarized this concept in the following way: the triune God is the "community of mutual otherness".[7] In this Trinitarian model of God, instead of sameness, otherness forms a unity—a unity of otherness in itself and in its activity. Regarding the latter, a classical element of the Trinitarian model is that the works of the Trinity are indivisible (*opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*), but nevertheless the various activities of the divine are attributed to the respective divine persons (although all three persons are always involved in each divine activity)—also taking up an idea of early Christian theology.

An important feature of the Trinitarian model of God, emphasised in its modern version, is the involvement of the observers, i.e., the believers, who see and believe themselves to be involved in the divine activities—in the divine creativity, redemption and reconciliation, in the consummation and perfection of human beings to become truly human.

On the one hand, the Trinitarian model of God is intended to make the relational community—and history—between God and God conceivable and accountable, but also the community and history between God and human beings. Therefore, the Trinitarian model also implies that God's activity in relation to human beings—God's history with human beings—is salvific

[5]Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, Trinität und Reich Gottes. Zur Gotteslehre, Werke, Vol. 4, Gütersloh 2016, 167: „Die Einheit des Vaters, des Sohnes und des Geistes ist dann die eschatologische Frage nach der Vollendung der trinitarischen Geschichte Gottes. Die Einheit der drei Personen dieser Geschichte muß folglich als eine *mitteilbare Einheit* und als eine *offene, einladende, integrationsfähige Einheit* verstanden werden."

[6]Cf. ibid.: „die Einigkeit der drei Personen untereinander, oder: die Einigkeit des drei-einigen Gottes".

[7]Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, Die Wahrnehmung des Anderen in der Perspektive des christlichen Glaubens, in: ibid, Indikative der Gnade – Imperative der Freiheit. Theologische Erörterungen IV, Tübingen 2000, 205–230, 214; cf. Hans-Peter Grosshans, The Concrete Uniqueness of God. The Contribution of Trinitarian Thought, in: The Unique, the Singular, and the Individual, ed. by Ingolf U. Dalferth and Raymond E. Perrier, Tübingen 2022, 131–146.

and participatory. It implies that God, who communicatively relates to himself in mutual otherness, also relates to human beings in a similar way as others. The inclusion of the observer in the Trinitarian model of God thus expresses that God in his eternity is determined by his temporal history with humanity. Through the incarnate Son, man is present in eternity in the divine as revealed to humanity in Jesus Christ—that is, God does and gives everything for the salvation and perfection of man.

The Trinitarian model of God therefore also has a hermeneutical function in relation to the life situation of human beings, and especially of believers, who think about the Divine in the Trinitarian model, but also about themselves in the horizon of the transcendent Divine. The Trinitarian model of God makes the human situation understandable in such a way that "we find ourselves as human beings created by God and fallen with him, that we are found as such by God through Jesus Christ, and that we are guided by the Holy Spirit to find the right way to the goal and the end of life",[8] as Gerhard Ebeling formulated.

On the one hand, the Trinitarian model helps in understanding God as a relational being in concrete vitality. On the other hand, the model illuminates the life of faith in its richness of relationships and in its concrete vitality.

After this reflection on the Trinitarian model of God, an answer to the question of this essay can be provided: What do models represent in theology?

In Christian theology, models—here exemplified by the Trinitarian model of God—represent, first of all, the texts of Holy Scripture. They are a consequence of the diversity and complexity of these texts on various topics, which require models for their interpretation, providing them a certain consistency and coherence. Modelling a diversity of statements on a given topic in a set of texts is the alternative to ignoring those that seem to be incongruous or disturbing. The modelling of diverse statements in Scripture avoids a reductionist and selective kind of interpretation.

Models in Christian theology also represent the purpose of theology. The aim of theology goes beyond certain texts, although the biblical texts also address the aims of theology using a variety of means, such as narratives, metaphors, myths, confessions, moral advice, and spiritual instruction. In theology, models are constructed through rational reflection. They must be grounded not only in the thoughts and ideas expressed in the biblical texts, but also in rational standards, including the adequacy of the model to the "thing" it is meant to represent. In this paper, I have focused on the example of the Trinitarian model of God in Christian theology. Here we can see that

[8]Gerhard Ebeling, Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens, Vol. III, Tübingen 1979, 545.

the terms used in the model must be clearly defined in order to construct a model adequate to a rational understanding of divine transcendence.

Moreover, models in theology also represent human religious experience and practice. In general, then, models are more oriented to the data given by human religious experience and practice. Models represent the mental awareness of religious individuals and the mindset of believers. The construction of such models can be done in a more empirical way or in a more idealistic way. In empirical theology, for example, believers are interviewed about their religious beliefs and practices using social science or psychological methods. The data collected can then be interpreted and generalised in statements and models. Idealistically, the beliefs and practices are doctrinally reconstructed in order to show what believers should believe and what their practices should be if they were ideally realised.

In the first way, empirically, it is shown how the beliefs and practices of a religion are actually believed and practised. At the beginning of the 19th century, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed statistics as a new subject in theology for this very purpose.[9]

In the second way, the idealising, knowledge is gained about the potential of beliefs and practices for the lives of believers and religious communities. This knowledge then has mainly a heuristic value and is useful for the orientation of the religious life of believers and religious communities—in fact, for the whole of their individual and community life. This second approach was also taken by Schleiermacher in his work entitled "Der christliche Glaube nach den Prinzipien der evangelischen Kirche" (The Christian Faith according to the Principles of the Protestant Church).[10] His approach begins with human consciousness and shows how it is determined by Christian faith when faith is inscribed in its idealising form.

Models in these latter theological approaches represent human consciousness and practice: the religiously determined mental states and religious practices of individuals and communities.

These models must also depict the essence of faith—understood as religious human consciousness—and religious practice. Since in Christianity faith and religious practice are about a human life in relation to the divine and in the horizon of the divine, these models must also concenr the divine. However, in such a subjective and cultural approach, the model of God is not—one might say—direct, but about God as reflected in human consciousness and as related to human practice. Therefore, in

[9]Cf. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Vorlesungen über die kirchliche Geographie und Statistik, ed. by Simon Gerber, Kritische Gesamtausgabe II/16, Berlin/New York 2005.

[10]Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt. Zweite Auflage (1830/31), ed. by Rolf Schäfer, Berlin/New York 2008.

such an approach, in which models in theology represent religious human consciousness (i.e., faith) and practice, the Trinitarian model of God is rather a second-order model. It is a modelling of what appears in the models at the level of faith, religious experience and religious practice, which is multifaceted, diverse and complex. The Trinitarian model of God then relates this complexity to the activity of the triune God and constructs a second order unity of diverse, inconsistent, conflicting, contradictory and incomprehensible life in the horizon of the transcendent triune God. We can say, then, that the theological model of the Triune God represents the horizon that gives orientation to human beings in the twilight of their contingent lives and in all that is generally indeterminable.

What do models represent in theology? There is more than one possible answer, because at least some of them—like the model of God—represent plural realities. The Trinitarian model of God represents the complex God-talk in the texts of the Christian Bible; it represents the reality of God; it can also represent the religious consciousness of believers and their practices in their relations with the divine; it can also represent the complex interpretation of human life in the horizon of the divine or in the horizon of transcendence. It is the challenge of theology to bring these different dimensions together consistently in the complex Trinitarian model of God.