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Models of God

Ted Peters

What is conceptually the most satisfying way to model the divine? Such a question presumes that multiple ways of conceiving the divine are available and, further, that some are better than others. In what follows I would like to describe briefly nine conceptual models of God – atheism, agnosticism, deism, theism or monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, and panentheism – and then I would like to proffer support for what I believe is the most satisfying model, eschatological panentheism.

As prolegomena, I will begin with a philosophical and theological justification for employing the model method in theology. Philosophical hermeneutics, philosophy of science, and reliance upon the prophetic awareness of divine transcendence each in their own way support the model method in theological reflection.

I will write as a Christian theologian trying to explicate religious symbols within the Christian tradition. Philosophical criteria are relevant for determining what is more or less satisfying, to be sure. Yet, I will turn to theology for the foundations upon which a conceptual model of God is to be constructed.

Hermeneutics, Models, and Explanatory Adequacy

Before reviewing the extant models of God, let me offer some methodological preliminaries to justify applying the idea of "model" to conceptions of the divine.

My first methodological commitment leads me to embrace a hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of religious symbols. In my judgment, theological discourse is best thought of as a conceptual reformulation of what appears at a more

T. Peters (✉)
Graduate Theological Union and Institute for Theology and Ethics,
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, CA, USA
e-mail: TPeters2ct@aol.com

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primary level of discourse, namely, the language of biblical symbols. Following the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer[1] and Paul Ricoeur,[2] I acknowledge that symbols are alive in tradition, and symbols provide the irreducible foundation upon which concepts are constructed. Such conceptual construction follows three stages: (1) pre-critical or naïve symbolic language; (2) critical deconstruction of symbolic language in the face of a prophetic revelation of divine transcendence; and (3) post-critical re-construction of a worldview in which all things are oriented to God.

This hermeneutical process I call "explication." The theologian explicates the symbolic language of scripture or liturgy or history. The intellectual references of symbolic language are judged to be finite and partial and inadequate when placed before the mystery of divine transcendence. Religious discourse is rendered perspectival and historically conditioned, not absolute or literal. Naïve or literal references to God are denied. Then, upon the foundation of conceptual relativity, a worldview is constructed in light of the explicated meaning of the basic religious symbols. This means that models of God are inescapably speculative in character, not literal in reference. They appear at the level of second order discourse.[3]

My second methodological commitment is to the idea of model and its corollary drawn from the philosophy of science, critical realism. Models in theology follow precedents set in science. Science begins by making observations. Yet, the actual world scientists observe leads the scientific researcher through models toward theory construction, toward an explanation of what is observed. Models serve this explanatory task.[4] A "theoretical model," says Ian Barbour, "is an imagined mechanism or process, postulated by analogy with familiar mechanisms or processes and used to construct a theory to correlate a set of observations."[5] A theory consists of a conceptual model that has gained substantial supporting evidence.

Theoretical models in science are evaluated for their fertility. To be fertile, a theoretical model in science has to have three features. First, it has to provide an

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 2nd edn., 1965); English trans. By Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2nd rev. edn., 1994).

[2] "What we need is an interpretation that respects the original enigma of the symbols, that lets itself be taught by them, but that, beginning from there, promotes the meaning, forms the meaning in the full responsibility of autonomous thought." Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, tr. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) 349–350.

[3] David Tracy describes theology as "second-order reflective language reexpressing the meanings of the originating religious event and its original religious language to and for a reflective mind." *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 409.

[4] "Broadly speaking, a model is a symbolic representation of selected aspects of the behaviour of a complex system for particular purposes. It is an imaginative tool for ordering experience, rather than a description of the world…[models in science] are mental constructs devised to account for observed phenomena in the natural world…such models are taken seriously but not literally." Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper, 1974) 6–7.

[5] Ibid., 30.

explanation for the observations. Second, it has to be predictive and progressive. It has to suggest further experiments that can be done to gather more data or observations – that is, it needs to promote a progressive research program. Third, it must be falsifiable, at least in principle. This means that the model must be subject to revision or even replacement by a better model. Models do not provide literal descriptions of objective reality; rather, they provide "provisional ways of imagining what is not observable."[6] This means scientists are typically realists. They are not naïve realists but critical realists – that is, they presume their models refer to the objective world; but these models are speculative rather than literal in their descriptions. So, science does not ask for apodictic or even literal truth; rather, it asks for the most useful – most fertile – model.[7] "Fertility" is to the scientist what "satisfying" is to the philosopher.[8]

When theologians employ the idea of the model in similar fashion, theologians recognize the presence in tradition of parallel models which seek to explain the same thing. Gustaf Aulén's widely read book of 1931, *Christus Victor*,[9] which compares three historic models (types) of atonement, provides a pioneering example. H. Richard Niebuhr's six models of how Christ relates to culture[10] or Avery Dulles' list of models of the church[11] have established the modeling principle within theological methodology. Key is that the model method acknowledges at the conceptual level we can construct internally coherent models that differ from one another yet explicate the same primary level of symbolic discourse.

My third methodological preliminary is use of explanatory adequacy to measure the relative merit of competing models. The question I pose to each model of the divine is this: does this model offer a more comprehensive accounting or more fruitful illumination of the basic human experience brought to articulation in the fundamental religious symbols? I exact four component criteria: (1) applicability: does this model apply to contemporary human experience? (2) comprehensiveness: can this model, in principle, cover the widest scope of reality and orient it toward the divine? (3) logic: does this model satisfy the basic principles or reason? Does it

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[6] Ibid., 7.

[7] Critical realism is not actually entailed in the idea of model, even if it is a natural partner. One could employ models and still embrace a strictly utilitarian understanding of their scientific value. Something like critical realism is fitting for theology because theology's object, God, requires non-literal referential ascriptions. Arthur Peacocke argues, "Critical realism in theology would maintain that theological concepts and models should be regarded as partial and inadequate, but necessary and, indeed, the only ways of referring to the reality that is names as 'God' and to God's relation with humanity." *Theology for a Scientific* Age (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 14.

[8] "Fertility" most directly summarizes the second of these features, namely, evoking a progressive research program. Here, I use "fertility" to represent the composite of all three.

[9] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, tr. by A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

[10] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

[11] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Double Day, Image, 1978).

avoid self-contradiction and avoid fallacious reasoning? (4) coherence: do the various parts of this model fit together so that they imply each other?[12]

Due to the brevity of this paper and the necessity for keeping descriptions of each model short, I do not plan on laying this template of explanatory adequacy on each model. I will compare and contrast the various models, however, at a more general level of abstraction. My conclusion will be that the model of eschatological panentheism should be more satisfying to the theologian than competing models.

Exodus 3:14

Constructing an explanatorily adequate concept or mental model of God is like building a house. We need construction materials. We need to put them together in a reasonable way. Once we have erected the house, then we need to step back, look at it, and consider whether we will paint it a different color or put on an addition.

What are the construction materials? First, the foundation is laid with biblical symbols, and perhaps insights from the Christian tradition. Second, our conceptual house needs many windows open to the mystery of transcendence. God is mysterious. Even when God confronts us with revelation we are left with an unfathomable mystery. Yet, build we must.

Although it is difficult to rank in importance various passages within Scripture, we cannot begin thinking about God without reminding ourselves of what happened to Moses when confronted by the mystery of the burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai. This is a moment of revelation; and it provides us with both primary symbolic discourse as well as a window open to transcendent mystery.

In this account, Moses sees a burning bush which is not being consumed by the fire. He is puzzled. Out of the bush comes a voice. The voice commissions Moses to become a prophet who will lead the enslaved Hebrew people out of Egypt into liberty. This is Moses' call vision, the moment when he gets his vocation. Our word 'vocation' (like 'vocal') means literally 'a calling'. Moses' calling is to mediate the Sinai Covenant between God and the people of Israel.

Moses considers accepting his call, which includes returning to Egypt and leading the Hebrew people. But, Moses does not quite get the picture immediately. So he quizzes the strange voice in the bush, "If they ask me who sent me, what shall I reply? What is your name?"

This is a dramatic moment, far more dramatic than most modern readers of the Bible at first realize. Here is why. In the ancient world, people believed far more

[12] These criteria of explanatory adequacy are a modified version of Alfred North Whitehead's description of speculative philosophy evaluated by logic, coherence, applicability, and adequacy. Differing from Whitehead, I make adequacy the covering concept and substitute comprehensiveness for his adequacy. See: *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 3–4.

than we do today in the power of words. Words and realities belonged together. To know the name of something was to have power over it. This is why witches and sorcerers were thought to have power; they could pronounce curses and devastating results would happen.

In Moses' era, to pronounce the name of a god in a liturgy was to gain power over the god. Priests like sorcerers could make the gods do human bidding, it was assumed. So, when Moses asks the one speaking in the bush for a name, we have arrived at a threshold moment. If the voice would give Moses a name, then Moses like a sorcerer would gain power over the voice.

How does the voice in the bush respond? Very cleverly. The voice says, *'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14). We translate this as "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." What we find here is the Hebrew verb, 'to be'. If we stop quoting the voice and render what is said in the third person imperfect causative intensive form, we get what has been called the Tetragrammaton (four letter word) יהוה or *Yhwh*, which we today write, *Yahweh*, sometimes *Jehovah*. The point is that the word we sometimes use for God's name, Yahweh, is not a name at all. It simply says, "God is" or "God will be what God will be" or "God will cause to be whatever will be." It is a form of a name that is no name. By the term Yahweh, Moses will have no power over the voice. The voice will remain mysterious and elusive.

The voice goes on to tell Moses that this word is okay to use when identifying the sovereign God of Israel. "This is my name for ever, and this is my title for all generations" (Exodus 3:15). The prophet Ezekiel reports repeatedly God saying, "And they will know that I am Yahweh." But, Yahweh is not literally a name. Yahweh is more like a cipher, a place holder, a title, an identifying word. In the final analysis, the God of Israel does not have a name in the same way that we have a name.[13]

In explicating this symbolic discourse, we arrive at the constructive significance: no one of us, nor any creature in creation, can get power over the mysterious Holy One of Israel. Jewish and Christian theologians in the later tradition went on to describe God with the Latin phrase, *a se*, as being-unto-itself, or totally and utterly independent. In constructive theology, this is known as God's aseity.

Today's theologians like to speak of God in contrasting terms, as transcendent, meaning beyond our reach or understanding, plus immanent, meaning God is present within our domain or realm as creatures. The dynamism of the God of the Bible's symbolic speech is that the transcendent and incomprehensible God becomes an immanent partner with the covenant people.

The result of the Moses story is that we refer to the God of Israel with titles rather than names. We refer to God or address God as Lord, Father, Holy One, and such. Even our English word 'God' is not a name. It is a translation of the Greek word, theos, which simply refers to the gods of the ancient Greek pantheon. God remains

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[13] Among the divine names, none "exhausts" God or "offers the grasp or hold of a comprehension of him. The divine names have strictly no other function than to manifest this impossibility." Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 106.

nameless even for modern Christians. The use of titles rather than a name preserves in our understanding the mystery and power of the God who transcends us yet calls us into covenant. It helps guard against conceptual idolatry.

Emmanuel: God with Us

With Jesus, something else dramatic happens. The mysterious God beyond all names enters time and space and takes up residence with us creatures. NRS Matthew 1:23 "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us'." Jesus is the name of a baby boy; yet as Emmanuel he also has a title, "God with us." The God of the beyond has become intimate with us. Theologians call this the incarnation which means God took on flesh in the person of Jesus.

Now, the New Testament can be a bit confusing when it comes to how it uses the word 'God'. On the one hand, 'God' can refer to the first person of the Trinity, sometimes spoken of as God the Father. Jesus can pray to God the Father as if he and God have distinct wills: NRS Matthew 26:39 "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." On the other hand, 'God' can refer to the entire Trinity, inclusive of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus can say, NRS John 10:30 "The Father and I are one." Some systematic theologians have tried to straighten out the confusion by using 'God' exclusively for the Father and 'Godhead' for the Trinity. But, this idea has not caught on.

So, we continue to live with an ambiguity. It is a minor confusion that creates relatively few problems.

What is so important when thinking theologically is that the mysterious God of Israel has become present in the finite and personal conditions of ordinary human life. Even though Yahweh of Israel is being revealed in the person of Jesus, the mystery almost increases rather than decreases. How can an *a se* divinity whose power transcends all that is human enter into such a humble incarnate state? What is revealed is that God is not merely a spiritual or immortal entity in contrast to us physical and mortal creatures. We now speak of God on both sides of the ledger, both the divine side and the human side.[14] The God of Israel is free to become human, and this only adds to the original mystery.

Built right into every healthy concept of God must be a tension between the beyond and the intimate, the sublime and the mundane, the transcendent and the

[14] This is a point where general philosophical descriptions of monotheism or classical theism are insufficient to account for the distinctively Christian experience with the divine. Christians experience the a se God of Israel as free, free even from what philosophers might dub the divine nature. God is free to become human and to take humanity up into the divine life. Karl Barth, among others, insists that the Christian understanding of God must include the "humanity of God" revealed in the Christ event. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1968).

one's fears and symbolizing one's hopes. They are one-sided transactions. There is no one on the other side to hear our pleas and supplications."[15]

The most aggressive form of atheism on the current scene is purveyed by Oxford's evolutionary gadfly, Richard Dawkins. Dawkins says he is not denying the existence any specific divine figure such as Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Baal, Zeus, or Wotan. Rather, he is denying all of them at once. All belief in such divinities can be swept up into a single "God Hypothesis," which Dawkins attempts to falsify. "I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us." Dawkins advocates "an alternative view: any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution."*[16]

The kind of God which Kurtz and Dawkins repudiate is a super-human being with intelligence, a god who is responsible for the world's origin and who listens to our prayers. To be an atheist is to deny the existence of such a being.

Could a Christian concede to Kurtz and Dawkins that such a being does not exist; and, with this denial in hand, could one then proceed to affirm the God of Jesus Christ? One could imagine a form of rejection of such a supernatural being while still maintaining belief in the God of Israel. One could construct a model of God without embracing a picture of reality with super-human beings, or even being itself, for that matter. Paul Tillich, for example, holds that God is being-itself; therefore, God does not "exist" in the sense of one being among others.[17] Jean Luc-Marion goes further. He affirms belief in God while denying a classical metaphysics of being. God is "anterior to the Being of beings."[18]

Does atheism provide an adequate model for Christian theology? No. The denial of the reality of God is impossible to reconcile with the Christian response to a divine creator and redeemer. Even though Tillich and Marion might agree with atheists such as Kurtz or Dawkins that God does not exist as one super-human being among others, the universe devoid of divinity that the atheists wish to live in is incommensurate with what a theologian would require.

Another problem with the atheist denial is that it fails to recognize the two levels of religious discourse. The primary level of symbolic discourse uses images of a super-human being, such as God as Father, while certainly denying that God is literally a father. This heavenly father hears our prayers. Any conceptual model at the second level of religious discourse – the level of theological model construction – must interpret what is said at the first level. The conceptual model must provide a way of

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[15] Paul Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1986) 22.

[16] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) 31, Dawkins' italics.

[17] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 volumes: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963) I: 235.

[18] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 82.

immanent. On the one hand, the God of Israel is majestic. NRS Psalm 93:4 "More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD!" On the other hand, we can find God sleeping tenderly in a Bethlehem manger. NRS Luke 2:7 "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Without both the beyond and the intimate, we do not have the distinctively Christian idea of God.

God as Trinity

The Holy Spirit adds to God's presence in our personal and communal life in a non-physical way. The Holy Spirit places the suffering and rising Christ within our hearts to comfort and empower us from within. As Spirit, God is Emmanuel or "God with us" just as Jesus is "God with us" in the flesh. The Trinity has become the emblem of the Christian understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent. NRS Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"

Since the work of Thomas Aquinas, systematic theologians have become accustomed to dividing discussions of the divine into the unity or oneness of God, on the one hand, and the Trinitarian nature of God, on the other. Again, for the sake of this paper's brevity, we will follow only the first path, not the Trinitarian path. To walk that path, we now turn to the first in our series of models, atheism.

Atheism

The term atheism puts the privative 'a' in front of 'theism' to mean belief that no god exists. Although there were very few atheists in the ancient world, there were some, as the Psalmist acknowledges. NRS Psalm 14:1 "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'."

In our post-Enlightenment culture, atheism is associated with naturalism or secular humanism allegedly based on science. Marxists and Maoists are the chief examples. Science is not itself atheistic, but naturalism or secular humanism is. The essential belief is that physical nature is the only reality, and nature is self-explanatory. The only knowledge that counts as knowledge comes from science, and science makes no conceptual room for God to create the world or to act in the world. From the point of view of an atheist, what religious people believe is false knowledge or old fashioned superstition.

In analyzing prayer, philosopher Paul Kurtz denies transcendence to the object of religious devotion. "Prayers to an absent deity…merely express one's longings. They are private or communal soliloquies. There is no one hearing our prayers who can help us. Expressions of religious piety thus are catharses of the soul, confessing

understanding that God hears prayers. Even if it uses language such as "being-itself" or that which is "anterior" to being, it cannot rightfully deny that God hears prayers. Christian theologians may reject a literal reference to a heavenly father with ears who hears prayers; nevertheless, this is not a rejection of the referent to which this symbolic language points. God is real, even if the reality of God does not literally match the image of the super-human being with intelligence.

Agnosticism

This word, agnosticism, places the privative 'a' in front of the Greek word for knowledge, gnosis. An agnostic is one who affirms that he or she does not know whether a god exists and, further, that it is in principle impossible to know for certain. It was Thomas Huxley, a friend of Charles Darwin, who gave the modern world this term. He associated it with evolutionary science. As a scientist, we cannot know let alone prove whether or not the God of Christianity exists.

Can a Christian theologian rightfully claim to be an agnostic? No, even though a mild sympathy for agnosticism could be mustered. As we noticed in Moses' conversation with the voice in the burning bush, God is mysterious. Even in revelation, God is mysterious. When we get to know God, the mystery remains. So, it is not unusual for a thoughtful Christian to say "I'm agnostic" about one or another matter regarding God.[19] Yet, despite the mystery, a person of faith trusts in the God who cannot be fully known. Faith is first trust, and only later does understanding or knowledge grow.

Deism

Deism is an English word based upon the Latin for God, *Deus*. It has a specific conceptual meaning. Methodologically, deism draws its belief from natural reason alone rather than supranatural revelation. Doctrinally, deism affirms a single God who created the world at the beginning out of nothing. God created matter and energy. God also established the laws of nature, the same laws of nature that scientists can discover. Once the world was established, the God of deism withdrew. God went on permanent vacation, so to speak. God no longer intervenes in the world. The laws of nature take care of everything.

Among the implications of deism are the elimination of miracles and the evaporation of petitionary prayer. Because God does not intervene in natural events, what we believe to be miracles must in fact be natural events that we only interpret as

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[19] Doubt can be "part of the intellectual process of religious belief." Geddes MacGregor, "Doubt and Belief," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, edited by Lindsay Jones (14 Volumes: New York: MacMillan, Gale, 2005) 4:2424.

extraordinary. Because God does not intervene, we cannot expect God to end a drought with rain, heal the sick, or save us from other adversity. Divine transcendence is affirmed, but the intimacy of God shared with the faithful person in prayer is sacrificed.

Deists were very influential in Great Britain, France, Germany, and colonial America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were impatient with the denominational wars in Europe; and deism became a religious position associated with reason and the Enlightenment. Freemasons openly embraced deism, as did Unitarians. The pyramid pictured on the obverse of the US dollar bill depicts the all-seeing eye of the deistic God. Mozart's *Zauberflöte* (Magic Flute) is dedicated to deism.

Can Christian theologians be deists? Some have found Christian commitments and deism compatible.[20] Deists affirm that God creates the world from nothing, as does most of the Christian tradition. And, thoughtful Christians can be rationalists. Yet, deism presents a problem. The God of Moses and Jesus is an active God, one who is immanent and involved. The God Christians worship comes to us as Emmanuel, God with us. Deism is unsympathetic to this emphasis within the Christian understanding.

Pantheism

Our word pantheism places 'pan' meaning 'all' in front of the Greek word for belief in God, theism.[21] Pantheism is the belief that all things are divine. The being of God and the being of the world are co-spatial and co-temporal.

Pantheists distinguish between plurality and unity. Our everyday experience seems to indicate that the world is plural, made up of a wide diversity of things. Each one of us, as a subjective person, seems to be an individual, one person among others. However, this is an illusion. Down deep, below the level of perception, all things are only one thing. That one thing is the divine reality. The spiritual task is to get beneath the surface illusion and discover the deeper unity, to realize that even you as an apparently independent self are at one with the All, the divine whole of reality. "I am Brahman" (*aham Brahmasmi*), said the Advaita philosopher, Shankara.[22]

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[20] See: Allen W. Wood, "Deism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 4:2251–2252.

[21] The term 'pantheism' goes back to John Toland (1670–1722).

[22] "I am Brahman," aham Brahmasi, points to the ultimate and essential oneness of individual self and of Supreme Self (atman), and the comprehensive reality behind them both, Brahman. Interestingly, within the Advaita tradition, two versions of Brahman have appeared; nirguna Brahman, the sublime divine reality so transcendent that it stands beyond all attributes, and saguna Brahman, a concept of the divine which includes attributes similar to the personal God of theism. Of these two, the founding exponent of Advaita, Sri Shankaracharya (788–820 CE), commonly known as Shankara, embraces only the first. Despite myriads of gods and goddesses in Hindu practice, nirguna Brahman has become the dominant Hindu concept of ultimate reality, of the truly divine.

It is sometimes difficult to tell if a pantheist believes the divine is transcendent or not. If the divine is co-extensive with the world, then the divine is finite or limited just as the world is. Yet, an element of transcendence peeks through with the idea of levels of reality. The deeper level is more real than the superficial level. Even though on the surface the world may look ordinary, down deep it is sacred. The created world is a manifestation of the underlying being of the divine reality. We creatures and all living things are actually divine. We are a part of God. Could we describe this deeper level where all separate things are united into one thing as a form of transcendence?

The Hindus in India call the All or unity of reality *Brahman*, and the illusion of multiplicity *maya*, in Sanskrit. When Hindus speak of the gods, devas, they mean intermediate entities such as Shiva or Vishnu who represent Brahman to our finite and limited human minds. Brahman is a reality that lies beyond the gods. What is transcendent for a Hindu is Brahman, more primary than the gods, so to speak.

In our own era in the Western world, pantheism is on the rise. New Age Spirituality has incorporated pantheism. The New Age emphasizes the sacredness of all things.[23] This translates into ecological ethics. By emphasizing that the planet earth is divine and hence sacred in its depths, some ecologists argue that we should leave nature alone. We should withdraw our attempts to transform nature through technology, because this is a form of profaning what is sacred. Rather, we should acknowledge that the natural world is intrinsically valuable and protect the ecosphere from further deterioration.

Can a Christian theologian be a pantheist? Certainly not, if the God of Israel is equated with Shiva or Vishnu. These Hindu gods are less than ultimate. They merely mediate Brahman, which is more ultimate. Well, then, can a Christian theologian equate God with Brahman? No, not quite. Both Brahman and God are ultimate, to be sure. Yet, there is a decisive difference. Brahman is impersonal. God, according to Christian theology, in sharp contrast, is personal. We speak of the Trinity as made up of three persons. In fact, in Western civilization our concept of a human person is in large part derived from the Christian understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as persons. Our relationship with God is interactive, interpersonal. We are not manifestations or extensions of the divine life in an illusory creation. Rather, we are a separate reality being brought into the divine life through the work of redemption.

God for the Christian stands against the world while loving the world. The world is not a manifestation of the divine, for Christians. The world is a creation, something God created from nothing. God relates to the world as something other-than-God. The God who tran-scends the world loves the world; and love requires that the world be other-in-relationship to God. God does not love the world as an extension of God's own being.

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[23] See Ted Peters, *The Cosmic Self: A Penetrating Look at Today's New Age Movements* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

Even so, one aspect of pantheism is attractive to Christian eyes, namely, the idea that the sacred is everywhere present, that we need only look beneath the surface to see the presence of the ultimate divine reality. Christians agree with Hindus and New Agers on this point. However, the New Age version of pantheism which renders all of nature sacred and decrees technology to be profane presents a problem. For Christian theology, nature is not sacred. Only God is sacred. God may be present everywhere in the world of nature, to be sure; but this does not make nature itself sacred.

Polytheism and Henotheism

Polytheism is belief in many gods, as the prefix 'poly' implies. In its most primitive or basic form, polytheists believe spirits inhabit and direct the forces of nature. Native Americans before the arrival of the Europeans believed in the manitoos, spirits belonging to various species of animals they would hunt. Jesuit missionaries from France in the sixteenth century tried to convey what Christians mean by God, and found it a challenge. They invented the concept of the "Great Spirit" who is the source of all the elemental spirits. The natives resisted joining the Christian church, but they loved the idea of the Great Spirit. The concept of the single Great Spirit spread from tribe to tribe across the continent and became a major part of Native American religion.

In biblical times the polytheism of Greece and Rome framed the experience of the first Christians. The gods were associated with natural forces. Zeus in Greece, renamed Jupiter in Rome, was the sky god with the thunder bolt as his emblem. Aphrodite in Greece, renamed Venus in Rome, was the goddess of love; and her son, Eros or Cupid, is still seen on Valentine cards with an arrow aimed right at your heart.

Henotheism is polytheism with an emphasis on loyalty to only one of the gods, or in the superiority of one's own god over the gods of foreigners. In the ancient world when one nation would conquer another, the statues of the native gods would be torn down and replaced with statues of the conquerors. Change rulers, change gods. In the biblical story of Ruth, Naomi in Moab tells Ruth she will follow her back to Israel. Naomi's words have become the song, "Whither thou goest," sung today at weddings. KJV Ruth 1:16 "And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Note that when Ruth moves to Israel, she will worship the God of Israel. Change countries, change gods. This is henotheism.

The Hindus combine pantheism and polytheism. Every individual Hindu can select which god to worship, because the worship of a god is a means to a further end, namely, the acknowledgement of Brahman. The various gods are subordinate to Brahman. The plurality of gods funnels down into the unity of the one, Brahman.

Can Christian theologians rely on a polytheistic or henotheistic model to conceptualize the divine? No, not likely. Already in New Testament times the Christians realized that their belief in the one God of Moses and Jesus could not be reconciled with the nationalistic gods of the various peoples, nor with the nature gods of polytheism. Such divine figures were less than ultimate, less than transcendent; and they tended to bless the tyranny of established peoples and governments. In response, Christians steadfastly avoided ascribing symbols or pictures of God the Father for more than a 1,000 years, because they wanted to avoid any resemblance between their concept of God and that of Zeus or Jupiter. From the Christian point of view, the gods of polytheism are too ordinary, too this worldly, to match the sublime majesty of the Holy One of Israel. Only a transcendent God can stand in judgment against human tyranny as we find it in social strictures, peoplehood, or nationalism.

Theism or Monotheism

If Christians would be compelled to join a club of believers in God, they would most likely join with other monotheists such as Jews and Muslims.[24] The word 'theism' simply means belief in God; and 'monotheism' confirms belief in one divine reality, not many. What is distinctive to theism has to do with God's relationship with the world. According to theists, God is *a se*, totally independent and totally free. Without God, the world would not exist.

Further, most theists claim that God created the world out of nothing. Without God, the Big Bang could not have banged. Even today, the world of nature is utterly dependent on the will of God to sustain it in existence. Should God change the divine mind and withdraw support, all of reality would suddenly drop into nonbeing and we would not even be aware of the loss. Everything, including our consciousness, would blink out of existence.

Conversely, the fact that we wake up in the morning and celebrate the singing of the birds is a gift of God's grace through creation.

The key element in this model of God is creation out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo* in Latin. [NRS] Romans 4:17 God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." Because God begins with nothing and then creates the

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[24] One problem with joining a club of monotheists is that the alleged divine nature promulgated by monotheism accounts solely for divine transcendence; and the emphasis on divine immanence revealed in the incarnation is difficult to account for conceptually. A related problem is that the club of monotheists gives precedence to the unity of God, rendering subordinate what is revelatory for Christians, namely, the Trinity. So important is this that Karl Barth places the revelation of the Trinity in the methodology section of his Church Dogmatics, prior to the section on God. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 Volumes (Edingburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1962) I:1.

world, we have testimony that God is all-powerful. Biblical symbols such as Lord and King suggest that we construct a model of God with aseity and omnipotence.[25]

There is more to theism. In contrast to deism, God for the theists is active. Rather than let the world just run itself, the God of theism monitors nature and history in such a way as to ensure that over the long run the divine will is done. God daily provides for the world; and theologians use the word 'providence' to describe God's continued activity in the world.

Theists tend to believe in miracles and also in prayer. Miracles are rare, because God's main way of providing for the world is through matter, energy, and the laws of nature. Theists are close to deists here. Yet, God may intervene from time to time in an act of special providence. This is a miracle. Miracles are invisible to science, because they cannot be reduced to an incident within the laws of nature as those laws are currently in effect.

On the issue of the miraculous, we may divide theists into supranaturalist and naturalist camps. The supranturalists emphasize the interventionist quality to divine action; God's causal activity could be distinguished from the causal nexus of the natural world. Other theists attempt to avoid supranaturalism, however, contending that divine action is compatible with the world's causal nexus. God still acts, but divine actions are not discernible as separate efficient causes. For this latter group, "miracle" is word seldom used even when affirming that God acts.

Similarly, theists pray for rain and healing and comfort and world peace. When theists pray, they expect God to listen and to incorporate such prayers into the divine will for one's personal life as well as for the entire creation. The language of prayer as well as the language of worship is typically personal in character, treating God as a person. Conceptual models of God which rely upon metaphysical or ontological discourse attempt to retain the personal, even if interpreting it at a level of abstraction that is suprapersonal.

Recently, some American evangelical theologians have been proposing open theism.[26] By 'open' they mean God is open to an inter-dependent relation with the

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[25] Wesley Wildman distinguishes between determinate entity and ground-of-being theisms. "Determinate entity views assert that God is an existent entity with determinate features including intentions, plans, and capacities to act…By contrast, ground-of-being theologies challenge the very vocabulary of divine existence or non-existence. They interpret symbolically the application to ultimate realities of personal categories such as intentions and actions, and regard literalized metaphysical use of such ideas as a category mistake." "Ground-of-Being Theologies," in Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 612–613. As we saw earlier, contemporary atheists reject determinate entity theism. They do not seem to address ground-of-being theism. If they did, they probably would reject this as well.

[26] See: Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2001) and "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," *Dialog* 44:3 (Fall 2005) 237–245. Philip Clayton tries to tie open theism, process theology, and Trinitarian atheology "… kenotic trinitarian panentheism is a view that open theists can, and should, accept. Yet, at the same time it also retains the most fundamental contributions of process theology. The being of God is not identical to the events in the world…almost no process theologian actually accepts a full identity between them…there are a number of viable ways for process thinkers to be Trinitarian theologians." "Kenotic Trinitarian Panentheism," *Dialog*, 44:1 (Fall 2005) 254.

world. God begins with aseity and freedom; but then God sacrifices this independence. God decides freely to limit the divine self. God decides to limit the exercise of divine power. This divine self- limitation opens up freedom for the world to engage in self-organization and even to fall into sin and evil. By being open, God then abides with the fallen world and works within the world for its redemption. What open theism demonstrates is the impulse within theistic models of God to emphasize divine involvement in the world of creatures.

In summary, in contrast to deists, theists believe God acts in the world. In contrast to polytheists, theists believe there is only one divine reality. In contrast to pantheists, theists believe God is personal and that God is qualitatively different from the world; God loves the world as one person would love another. What theists or monotheists achieve is an adequate conceptualization of divine transcendence; yet, it is difficult to move coherently within this model of God toward divine immanence. Although most Christians over the centuries have been theists, this concern for immanence has led some to consider other options, such as panentheism.

Panentheism

How might we explicate what Saint Paul says in NRS Acts 17:28? "For 'In him [God] we live and move and have our being'." Now, which model best interprets what is said here? The model of panentheism stands ready.

As the word panentheism indicates, what is affirmed here is that all things exist within God's being.[27] The entire world of nature and history exist within God's being; but they do not exhaust God's being. There is a little bit of God left over, so to speak.[28]

Sometimes panentheists use a human analogy. They say that God relates to the world like our mind relates to our body. Our mind is totally dependent on our body to exist, of course; yet, our thinking seems to transcend our body at certain points. Our mind can look at our body and even guide our body. The world is God's body; and God is the mind of the world.

This means that God did not create the world out of nothing. Panentheists reject *creatio ex nihilo*. They prefer the idea of continuing creation, creatio continua, to emphasize the shared temporal relationship between the world and God. Continuing creation for the panentheist is similar to providence for the theist.

This further implies that the world must have existed backwards in time just as long as God has. And, the world will continue to exist into the future as long as there

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[27] The term 'panentheism' goes back to K.F. Krause (1781–1832), an interpreter of Hegel and Fichte. See: Charles Hartshorne, "Pantheism and Panentheism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 10:6960–6965.

[28] Panentheism "differs from much traditional theism insofar as the latter stressed the mutual externality of God and the world, with God conceived as occupying another, supernatural, sphere. It differs from pantheism when pantheism is understood to be the identification of God and the world." John B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969) 80.

is a God. According to panentheism, God loses aseity, loses independence. The world and God are mutually inter-dependent. Similar to pantheists, panentheists believe that everything in the world is connected to everything else; and everything is connected to God. God's being and the being of the world are inseparable.

The God of panentheism is finite, not infinite. Big, maybe, but not infinite. The physical body of God is co-extensive with the physical make-up of the universe. Only the mind of God transcends the physical plenitude. Ontological transcendence is sacrificed.

This also means that God cannot love the world as we would love another person; rather, God must love the world as we would love our own body. God's love for the world is a form of self-love.

Process theologians and some contemporary feminist theologians find panentheism attractive. They object to the cultural connotations of theism, where God is pictured as an omnipotent King or Lord or Father. These symbols of dominance have tended to reinforce hierarchical thinking and patriarchy over the centuries. Feminists object as well to the idea of creation out of nothing, because it implies total power over the world. Panentheism provides an attractive alternative model for feminists, because it pictures God as connected, as more relational.[29] The love of God for the world according to the panentheist is an extension of God's love for God's own body; and feminists find this a good model for a woman. A woman should love others as an extension of her own self-esteem and self-care.

From the point of view of most theists, panentheism is an unacceptable model for explicating the biblical experience with the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ. The chief complaint is that the image of interdependence between God and the world compromises God's freedom and omnipotence, eliminating divine aseity. Yet, what is attractive to Christian sensibilities is panentheism's emphasis on divine involvement in the world of creatures.

I tend to side with the theists against the panentheists. What cannot be surrendered is God's freedom and power. God needs both freedom and power to exact redemption, to raise the dead, and to usher in the new creation. The world is more than other to God. It is estranged. Our world of creation is estranged from its creator; and the biblical promise is that this estrangement will be overcome. The death of Jesus on the cross symbolizes the distance between God and the world; and the resurrection of Jesus symbolizes the divine promise that this distance will at some point be overcome. The oneness of God and the world is today a promise, tomorrow a reality. If panentheism can become a satisfying model for interpreting the biblical language about God, then it can do so only eschatologically.

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[29] "Theology, as the way in which we interpret existence in a world where God is for us, will be expressed in relational language," writes Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki. *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3. She adds: "It is not theology about feminist issues, but it is feminist theology." Ibid., vi, Suchocki's italics.

Eschatological Panentheism

Now, I would like to try constructing an experimental model of God that combines some of the best features of theism and the best features of panentheism. This model will side with theism in affirming that God is *a se*, independent, free, and omnipotent. It will also side with panentheism in emphasizing relationality and connectedness. This model will affirm both creation out of nothing as well as continuing creation. Then, in addition, it will fold in two characteristics of God described in the Bible but not yet built into the above models, namely, God's promise to act in the future and, further, that this future act will be redemptive.

Let us put together three passages from Scripture which are not normally associated. The first is from the creation account in Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." In this new model, "very good" will apply to the future, not the past. The second passage is Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." The new heaven and the new earth God promises here are actually our present heaven and earth in their final and perfected form. God's future redemption will be the completion of the creation begun back in Genesis 1. The third passage reminds us that God remains mysterious even in revelation. It is 1 Corinthians 13:12, "now we see in a mirror dimly." Because we see God only in a mirror dimly now, our concept of God must be a construction, and a blurry construction at that. Still, we'll do our experimental best.

Here is the key principle of this new model: God creates from the future, not the past. God creates by giving the universe a future. More. God's creative work is also God's redemptive work.

Here is what it means. God starts with redemption and then draws all of creation toward it. Or, perhaps better said, God's ongoing creative work is also God's redeeming work. Only a redeemed creation will be worthy of the stamp of approval we read in Genesis, "very good."

The first thing God did for the creation way back at the beginning – back in Genesis or back at the moment just prior to the Big Bang – was to give the world a future. To have a future is to have being. To lack a future is to lack being. The very definition of the creation includes its future.

At creation, God gave the world a future in two senses. The first sense of the future is openness. The gift of a future builds into physical reality its dynamism, openness, contingency, self-organization, and freedom. The bestowal of this kind of future is the bestowal to reality of the possibility of becoming something it had never been before. God provided the condition that made and still makes ongoing change in our world possible. And, what God did at the beginning God is continuing to do every moment, every second. At the very moment you are reading this, God is dispensing to our world a future that is open for variation, creativity, and newness. God unlocks the present from the grip of past causation. And this frees the present for newness in the future. God is unceasing in serving the world in this manner.

The second sense of the future is fulfillment. God gave the world a promise that, in the end, everything would be "very good." Creation is not done yet. God is still creating the world. When it is finally completed, then we can say, "very good." Anticipating fulfillment, we want to say that future-giving is the way God both creates and redeems the world.

It should be obvious that this model does not limit the concept of creation to a single act back at the beginning, back at the Big Bang or back in Genesis 1. John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I.XVI) that we should not limit God to being only "a momentary Creator," but recognize "the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception." This means both creation at the beginning and continuing creation can be affirmed. Still more. God has not yet completed his creative work. God's creative work will be completed when the world is redeemed.

This model differs from deism, according to which God created the world once upon a time and then went on vacation to let the world run on its own. Instead, this model says that God's creative act of imparting an open future is an ongoing one. Affirmed here is creation from nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. Yet, also affirmed is the creative power by which God brought being out of nonbeing; this continues to sustain the world today.

Now, what about the name, eschatological panentheism? The term eschatology originates with the Greek word for 'last things', for the final consummation of God's entire drama with the creation. When the New Testament mentions the Kingdom of God or new creation or resurrection, it is talking about eschatology. This is the future dimension.

As we noted above, most Christian theologians in the past have conceived of God according to the model of theism, or monotheism. This model requires that God and the world be different, separate, independent of one another. Yet, as we look forward to the future God has promised, we look forward to a world in which God dwells fully. That future world – the one God declares to be "very good" – will enter and remain within the divine life. The creation will no longer be other. It will dwell within God's own personal and interactive life. The term 'panentheism' is the best one to describe what God promises. We may be theists today, but panentheists tomorrow.

Concept of God	Creator?	Active in the world?	Aseity?
Atheism	No	No	No
Agnosticism	No?	No?	No?
Deism	Yes	No	Yes
Pantheism	Yes	No	No
Polytheism	No	Yes	No
Henotheism	No	Yes	No
Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panentheism	No	Yes	No
Eschatological Panentheism	Yes	Yes	Yes

Conclusion

"It is precisely the emerging threefold understanding of Israel's God that prevents a move towards the high-and-dry 'god' of Deism on the one hand, and the low-and-wet 'god' of pantheism on the other, together with their respective half-cousins, the 'interventionist god' of dualist supernaturalism, and the 'panentheist' deity of much contemporary speculation," writes New Testament historian N. T. Wright.[30] As mentioned above, in another setting we could have walked the path toward Trinitarian theology. In this essay, however, we have followed the path toward eschatological panentheism, building on the dialectic between divine transcendence and immanence. Wright's allusion to the dry God and the wet God remind us that this dialectic must be maintained in any satisfying model.

This dialectic between transcendence and immanence is best accounted for by eschatological panentheism, in my judgment. Especially when measured by the criterion of comprehensiveness within the goal of explanatory adequacy, eschatological panentheism more fully accounts for the primary level of discourse – the biblical symbols – conveying both divine beyondness and divine intimacy. On this basis, I contend that eschatological panentheism is the most satisfying model at second level discourse for Christian constructive theology.

Much more could and should be said about God. We have provided here only the briefest description of some of the conceptual models of God articulated in the minds of Christians and some non-Christians. In the two millennia of Christian tradition, theism has become the preferred model for conceptualizing God. The reality of God in Godself, however, is not reducible to the theistic model, or any other model for that matter. God is fundamentally mysterious. [NRS] Romans 11:33 "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" writes St. Paul. The virtue of the model approach to theology is that it allows that mystery to remain while conceptual thought rises up from primary symbolic discourse.

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[30] N. T. Wright. *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Volume III of Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 735–736.