MODELS CLARIFIED: RESPONDING TO LANGDON GILKEY

by David E. Klemm and William H. Klink

Abstract.   We respond to concerns raised by Langdon Gilkey. The discussion addresses the nature of theological thinking today, the question of truth within the situation of pluralism, the identity and difference between theological models and scientific models, and the proposed methods for testing theological models.

Keywords: pluralism; revelation; scientific models; symbol of God; theological models; theology.

We want to thank Langdon Gilkey for his thoughtful comments on our article "Constructing and Testing Theological Models" [Klemm and Klink 2003; see pp. 495–528 in this issue]. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to his comments, because Gilkey in many ways embodies the ideal reader for this essay. Very likely, no one else possesses his depth of familiarity with (1) the theoretical and methodological "nexus of science and religion" (the subtitle of his book on *Nature, Reality, and the Sacred* [1993]), (2) the history and scope of theological thinking (cf. *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* [1969]), and (3) the specific forms and content of Paul Tillich's theological thinking (cf. *Gilkey on Tillich* [2000] and many other writings). Out of this depth of understanding, Gilkey raises some important questions about our essay; in what follows, we go through the issues he has raised one by one.

First, Gilkey questions our characterization of theology today as caught within the "stark dichotomy" between the contradictory options of

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confessional theologies and radical, secular theologies. He wonders whether our characterization of a dichotomy does justice to the wide range of theological efforts since the time of the "giants." Fair enough; we admit to presenting these extremes by way of antithesis, with some exaggeration. Nonetheless, these two poles are in fact significant gathering points with which the major voices in theology today identify themselves. Our intention is to show the pitfalls of both and from this to locate a mediating position. For the most part, the two poles have carried the day and define the terms of the debate. But why do theologians divide in this way, abdicating a middle ground?

Consider for a moment the motivating grounds behind the theological positions. The two extreme positions have the advantage of evoking strong passions, which we claim are irrelevant to the question of truth. Confessional theologies identify the individual theologian with a community of believers (e.g., a Christian denomination); they are motivated by a desire to protect their particular tradition. Radical, secular theologies connect the theologian with a cause (e.g., the postmodern critique of the "tyranny" of formal systems or "linear thinking"); they are motivated by an attack on a particular tradition. Despite their different interests, both passions tend to divide the world into "us" versus "them." The mediating position, by contrast, has on its side only the passion of pursuing the truth wherever it takes one. It sees the world as an inclusive community of critical inquiry ("us") that is moved by the universal passion for truth. But how can theology rise above the divisive particular passions unless it has some way of both articulating its universal claims clearly and testing the truth of these claims? Our essay presents such a way under the heading of constructing and testing theological models. Our hope is to reinvigorate mediating theologies by raising anew the question of truth.

Second, Gilkey challenges our focus on the question of truth with the fact of pluralism. He raises the crucial issue in this way. According to him, Western scientific thought has a universality to it that Western religion, ontology, and theology do not have. Lacking universality themselves, he says, Western religion, ontology, and theology cannot ground a universal theory and method for constructing and testing theological models. Gilkey concludes that theological modeling necessarily reduces to a form of confessionalism as a result.

We reply to this point in two steps, taking religion first. Religious pluralism is an indisputable fact (if one means by religion the historical religious traditions, such as Christianity). We treat religion as one possible domain for theological modeling. The theologian who constructs models within this domain can and should respect the irreducible particularity of its historical data. According to our proposal, if religion is the chosen domain for modeling, that domain either can be tightly and narrowly restricted to particular texts or historical movements, or it can be loosely and

broadly defined to include comparative approaches to religious data. And in both cases some universal concepts are necessary in order to proceed. In any event, the fact of religious pluralism is no obstacle for a method of modeling that is nonreductive and that respects the integrity of the defined domain. We also show how the theologian can test those models in principle. We want to make it clear, however, that our proposal for constructing and testing theological models in no way rests upon religious beliefs or principles—Christian or otherwise. The situation is somewhat different for ontology and theology. As we now explain, we do base our practice of theological modeling on some universal principles of ontology and theology.

Gilkey's more significant point is that ontological and theological paradigms suffer from the same problem as religion—that is, they are vastly different across cultures. Gilkey is quite right to raise this point. Indeed, he has put his finger on an important omission in our article. In an earlier draft, we addressed this concern directly, and we reached a conclusion different from Gilkey's. Namely, we argued that the ontological and theological paradigm of thinking that we assume here does indeed have a universality that is sufficient to ground our method of theological modeling. The argument consisted of constructing a detailed reflexive, metacritical model of the activity of thinking, a model that is itself also a product of thinking activity. Such modeling of the thinking activity—or thinking about thinking—belongs to the long history of thinking about thinking that flourishes under the names *first philosophy*, *metaphysics*, or *dialectic*. A metacritical model attempts to articulate the structure of thinking that is common to and presupposed by all thinking, including that of both confessional theologies and radical, secular theologies. The function of a metacritical model is to provide a means for adjudicating between different models within a pluralistic situation.

Now, it is true that each competing metacritical model from this history arises out of a particular cultural context and language, which changes over time. Hence we find in this history a series of models each giving way to new models of thinking (e.g., from Plato and Aristotle, to Descartes and Kant, to Hegel and Schleiermacher, and to Husserl and Heidegger). In section 2 of our essay, because of space limitations, we give only a summary account of some of the features of our model. We define the structure of thinking, and we distinguish among kinds of thinking. What we do not accomplish here is to show the sense in which thinking is both ontological and theological in its essential nature. Gilkey is quite right to point out that we have omitted an essential ingredient of our overall argument. The omission of our model of thinking gives rise to his concern about pluralism, for without a universal model of thinking, both ontological and theological thinking would in fact break down into unsynthesizable fragments. Here is a brief account of how we think about this issue.

Thinking is always thinking about being. Even when I think about my own thinking, I am thinking about the being of my thinking. In this sense, thinking is intrinsically ontological, because thinking posits being as that about which it thinks. Moreover, thinking is also intrinsically theological, because the relating of thinking to being has as its necessary condition an ultimate principle and ground of all thinking about being. We call this principle the *depth* of all thinking about being. This principle of the absolute unity of the unity and difference of thinking and being is the unthinkable yet necessary presence of "God" within thinking. Insofar as all thinking necessarily has the condition of its possibility in an unthinkable, transcendent principle of the unity of the unity and difference of thinking and being, all thinking has a theological depth. The fact that thinkers in this tradition of metacriticism from Plato to Heidegger are Western thinkers does not mean that the results of their thinking are historically and culturally determined. Western science has a universality to it, as Gilkey points out, and that tradition of thinking is also largely Western in its historical genesis. The point is that anyone who thinks, no matter in what culture, at what time or place, or in what language, is necessarily thinking about being.

We admit that any model of thinking (including our own) is fallible. It is open to revision and correction in the future. Indeed, it always and necessarily both discloses and distorts the reality of the thinking activity—and its ultimate ground—that it models. Our discussion therefore does not assume that a single model of thinking can or will ever achieve universal acceptance. We know that a single, monolithic model of thinking is impossible, precisely because thinking occurs in the medium of historical languages. Nonetheless, we do hold that the real structure of thinking itself—the reality to which the metacritical model of thinking refers—is universal and self-identical. If there is no universal and self-identical structure of thinking, different thinkers would not be able to grasp that competing metacritical models are attempting to construct adequate models of the same thinking activity. The necessary precondition for dispute and difference among actual, historical, linguistically articulated metacritical models of thinking is a universal, self-identical structure of thinking as the reality to which the disputing models refer. Indeed, translation between competing models would be impossible without such universality and self-identity in structure. Consequently, we hold two things simultaneously. No perfect, literal model is possible; yet some models are more adequate than others. Part of the theory of modeling is devoted to determining tests of relative adequacy.

Third, Gilkey claims that we have not adequately acknowledged the issue of analogy among kinds of models. We assume, he says, some strict analogy, even identity, between scientific models on one hand and theological models on the other hand. Both scientific and theological models

share properties of nesting and openness to new, superior models. However, claims Gilkey, the analogy between them breaks down in the realm of testing. In scientific models, we test models of the structure of observed regularities in a domain on the basis of predictions that are theoretically falsifiable, whereas theological models do not adopt explanation, prediction, and falsification as central categories in the testing of models.

In our view, Gilkey is correct to point out the real differences between scientific models and theological models. But it is incorrect to think that we suppose some strict analogy or identity between the two kinds of models. In our article, we deal first (in section 1) with scientific models, and we say that "explaining why is the function of models." Indeed, the language of "modeling" historically came about first in the discipline of science. However, that fact of history does not mean that the specific shape of scientific models is normative for the construction and testing of models in other disciplines, such as theology. It could have happened that modeling first developed in theology, and we could have begun our paper with an analysis of theological models. The order of these events is not essential to the logic underlying them.

The proper way to think about the relation between scientific models and theological models is the following. Scientific models and theological models are both species of the genus *model*. Models, generically speaking, are created out of any material whatsoever as tentative exploratory means for understanding whatever strikes the mind as puzzling. Models in general must also be testable. The various species of models, however, differ on the basis of the domain of inquiry involved. Scientific models deal with the domain of physical nature. Literary models deal with the domain of literature. Theological models deal with God. As we say in the paper, because *God* does not designate a domain of objects, theology has no material domain of its own. Theology has the domain of all domains. *God* designates the depth dimension that is always capable of appearing in and through any domain—i.e., the dimension of the domain that corresponds with the ultimate principle of thinking itself.

Viewed in this way, each kind of model must be testable in a way that is appropriate to the nature of the domain indicated by the type. Scientific models are testable with reference to the domain of physical nature, where explanation through prediction is both possible and necessary. Theological models, however, having no material domain of their own, cannot be tested with reference to explanation through prediction. Tests must be devised to show that the depth dimension of the structure of a chosen and defined domain appears within that domain. Something has theological meaning if it displays transcendence within a defined domain. In section 3 of our essay we give rules for testing theological models that are appropriate to the theological reality—the reality of a depth dimension of meaning, or the appearance of transcendence within some domain. The means

of testing scientific models and theological models must be appropriate to their specific differences within the genus of models.

Fourth, Gilkey quite astutely notices the absence of the word *revelation* in our account of theological models. In some systems of theology, what is meant by the term *God* appears only in revelation. From our point of view, the term *revelation* is universal, not limited to theological discourse. As we use the term, it pertains to the cognitive activity generally. When the depth dimension of a domain manifests itself to thought, we have an instance of revelation. This breaking-in of a depth dimension of meaning can occur to the scientist, the mathematician, the poet, the musician, and so on. If indeed it is the depth dimension that shows itself, so that a model of the depth can be constructed and tested, the revelation is theological.

In other words, we do not conceive of revelation as the activity of some highest being who chooses to be disclosed (or not, as the case may be). Revelation is a feature of human cognitive activity. One may conceive of God as a highest being (rather than as "being-itself," as we do) who does choose to be revealed. In this case, as we argue, to engage in theological reflection is to construct a model of such revelatory activity and to devise and defend a way of testing the model. The model in this case would be a theistic and revelatory model of God, and the data would include the analysis of texts (such as the Bible), historical data, or logical relations between concepts. In any event, such theistic models should be tested, as all theological models should be tested.

Finally, Gilkey raises a question about our use of the "symbol of God." He says that the Anselmian test for the symbol of God as manifesting a depth dimension is coherent but not "scientific." We hope that we have made clear that a scientific test for a theological model is neither possible nor desirable. Theological models should be tested in a way that is appropriate to the domain under investigation. Theology's domain is the domain of all domains. In constructing theological models, we seek the depth of the structure of any domain in which the model has been constructed. That depth is not to be tested using predictive methods of science. The Anselmian test is both possible (as a conceptual test for the depth of the structure) and appropriate (it accords with the nature of theological models).

Moreover, Gilkey adds that sometimes in a system (e.g., Whitehead's process thought) the symbol of *God* is not the "depth" of the system. Other systems also have used the symbol *God* in a problematic way. To this concern, we first want to make clear the meaning of our term *symbol of God*. By it we refer to the element (or relation among elements) within a domain that functions as a symbol of the depth dimension of the structure of that domain, not to the contingent appearance of God as an image or word or idea in some domain. The difference between these two uses is very important. As we use it, *God* refers always to the meaning that ap-

pears at the depth of a domain's structure, no matter whether or not the specific term *God* appears at all within the domain.

Hence, in Whitehead's process thought, for example, the depth of the structure of his thinking is not represented by the term *God* but rather by the term *creativity*. God may be an element within the structure, but it does not represent the depth. If we were to explicate Whitehead's system, the symbol of God would be the element within the structure of thinking that represents the depth—namely, the concept of creativity. Similarly, in Buddhism, where the term *God* does not appear, we would identify the symbol of God as the element that manifests the depth of the structure as we would analyze it. Not having carried out this analysis, it still seems as though the depth of Buddhist thinking is located in the idea of the interdependence of all dharmas. Thus, if a particular element within the domain of Buddhist thinking represented the depth of the structure, we would call that element the symbol of God. It seems to us that such is the role of *sunyata*, the emptiness of all dharmas due to their interdependence, an emptiness that includes the emptiness of emptiness.

We could have avoided the possibility of confusing the meaning of "symbol of God" by dropping the term *God* altogether in favor of *depth*. In this case, to construct a theological model is to show the depth dimension of some domain by way of analyzing its structure. In this way, we would avoid importing the term *God* into a domain where it is not native or using the term differently than it is used in the domain itself. Perhaps we should consider removing the term *God* from our method, but to do so would have other, undesired consequences. We want to maintain continuity with the traditions of philosophical theology and theology of culture from which our thinking emerges. To cut ourselves off from God-language is too high a price to pay. We consider it safer to define what we mean by *God* and use the term systematically.

In conclusion, we want to say how much we have benefited from this exchange with Langdon Gilkey and to thank him for his insightful criticism. We hope that our response clarifies some of the important points that he has raised.

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