

PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THEOLOGICAL MODELS: RESPONDING TO DAVID KLEMM AND WILLIAM KLINK

by *Langdon Gilkey*

Abstract. This essay is a response to the proposals of David Klemm and William Klink concerning the construction and testing of theological models. A number of issues are raised for critical attention. (1) The exclusive attention to Christian theology, with no discussion of other religions, poses some significant problems, not the least of which is that cognitive claims of religious thinking are not universal but rather are defined by the particularities of the religious context in which they are made. (2) Although the authors wish to transcend confessionalism, their focus on Christianity and on the concept of God as a basic assumption can be construed as a kind of confession-alism. (3) The argument that theological and scientific models stand in analogy to each other requires more critical examination, particularly with respect to the issues of explanation, prediction, falsification, nesting, and openness. (4) While the argument is persuasive when referred to certain theologians, such as Paul Tillich, it requires some adjustment if it is to apply to other theological systems, such as Process theology.

Keywords: confessional theology; depth; God; models; naturalistic theology; Process theology; Paul Tillich.

The previous essay, by David Klemm and William Klink [2003; see pp. 495–528 in this issue], is admirable and intriguing. I am sure that it will significantly advance not only the discussion of scientific method and its relations with theology but even more the interesting and complex question of the cognitive possibilities of theological discourse and models.

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The stated aim of the essay is to develop a mode of testing and evaluating theological models, since, say the authors, such testing is necessary for theology if the latter is to make any valid cognitive claim. Thus, the authors begin with “the practice of constructing and testing that is widely accepted in the scientific community” (p. 496), and they go on to suggest ways this method can be applied to theology. Then, they assert, theology can move beyond the current impasse created by the contradictory options of “confessional” theologies, unrelated to other discourse, and “radical,” “secular” theologies, which have adopted the criteria of a secular world and hence tend “to disrupt or deconstruct” theological efforts (p. 497).

I am not convinced that this stark dichotomy represents all that theology has offered on this topic since the age of the giants (Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others); but, that aside, the effort to steer a course between confessional theology and secular (naturalistic) theology is a worthy one. Questions about the fundamental paradigms and assumptions of a piece of theological writing are a part of our craft, however, and I have several.

1. First, the issue of theological models in relation to other religious traditions is never raised at all; “theology” seems to be confined to Western, perhaps even to Christian, theology. This issue of other religions and their models makes the question of the cognitive character of any given theological model almost infinitely more complex. As I understand it, the authors are suggesting tests for Christian theological models—say, the Tillichian model they proposed or, others might suggest, the Process model. But each of the other religious traditions has many comparable models—or even none at all (Hinayana). What are we to say, therefore, if our tests, geared to Western science *and* Western religious traditions, show our model to be “cognitive”? Other cultures have adopted our modes of science but by no means our theological models or paradigms; do our tests, therefore, derived from the science we hold in common, show *their* theological models to be uncognitive, even false? I doubt it. However universal our sciences may be, our ontological and theological paradigms, basic for theological models, are vastly different. On these grounds I have never been able to assume that a common theological or even philosophical paradigm or viewpoint that encompassed all religious traditions was possible. If true, this means that (a) in this field the word *cognitive* has, in the relation of science to theology, at best an analogical and not a univocal meaning; and (b) any argument or test that confines itself to one religious tradition runs the risk of seeming, to testy critics, to be traditional or even confessional in character.

2. This suspicion—and it is only that—of confessionalism deepens with the use made in the essay of the symbol *God*—or should I say of the *model* of God? The authors admit quite candidly that “we begin with the first principle of Tillich’s theology, namely that God is ‘being-itself’” (p. 498);

and then they proceed to suggest ways of defining that concept (God as being-itself). In the process they ask “whether it is possible to construct and test theological models to show the appearance of God as being-itself within specific domains” (p. 499). And finally, “Theological models always model the reality of God” (p. 514).

Clearly they have, as they claim, begun with God as the presupposition of their suggested mode of testing; in other words, they are testing theological models only by showing their adequacy to express or uncover “the appearance of God.” *God* here is not a theological model to be itself tested but rather the presupposition, the assumed paradigm, in terms of which other theological models are to be judged; the test assumes God (even the reality of God?) and proceeds from there. Again I felt the enclosure of this entire discussion within the confines of Western religious and philosophical tradition, where God is assumed (by some) to be the goal and object of religion.

3. The essay seems to deal throughout with the problem of analogy, though to my knowledge the word is never used. The aim of the essay is to use recognized scientific testing as a means to render theological models cognitive. In other words, it is assumed that there is a strict analogy, even an identity, between testing in natural science and argument or debate in theological discourse. And because of this very strict analogy, or near identity, between the inquiries of science and those of theology, the methods of the one discipline could be transferred without much transformation into the methods of the other. Let us see how well this key assumption of a near identity of methods holds up.

Their discussion of scientific method and the history of scientific paradigms is, to me, exceedingly coherent, as is their delineation of the important modes of scientific testing and model construction. It seems clear that for them, central to the scientific method, especially to testing, are, first, that scientific theory *explain* the events it made intelligible, and second, that there be the power of *prediction* on the basis of the theory, and the consequent possible *falsification* of the theory in the light of the empirical evidence. Thus, explanation, prediction, and possible falsification are the basic characteristics of scientific testing.

The authors are quite right to point out that an important function of a new, acceptable theory in science is its ability to include in its own terms older theories and even older paradigms, a process they call “nesting,” and to insist—as they do—that the scientific attitude is such that it always welcomes new models, new theories, and new paradigms, even while it continues to affirm present forms of understanding. I have the feeling, however, that these admirable characteristics of nesting and openness tend to replace in their minds explanation, prediction, and falsification as central to scientific testing. Thus can they move as easily as they do from scientific method to theological method, where, at least since the early

nineteenth century, some semblance of “nesting” and of “openness” has characterized at least the liberal tradition.

4. When we move to the testing that they suggest for theological models, the analogy with their description of scientific testing appears almost entirely to dissipate (or so it seems to me). There is, for good reason, no mention of the categories of explanation, prediction, and falsification. These are processes almost inconceivable in relation to any given theological models. Very strict orthodox thinkers, to be sure, might pretend to “explain” or to “predict” events on the basis of their model, but certainly the same theologians would countenance neither falsification nor openness.

The essay begins its specific discussion of theological testing with, surprisingly, Karl Barth. Through Barth’s theological work, the authors argue, theology has been freed from every special material domain of its own, even religion. And thus is “theology free to construct theological models from any material with which an inquirer has familiarity” (p. 515)—a vastly *un*Barthian sentiment! The fact that Barth established as basic to *all* theological models the noncultural domain of revelation is mentioned, but in the conclusion drawn from all of this about constructing and testing models revelation is never referred to. Clearly, taking seriously revelation as the source and criterion of all theological models would manifestly undercut any form of scientific-like testing.

In the very persuasive argument that follows, the authors maintain that every intelligible structure of a domain has a “depth” within which its coherence resides, i.e., the first principle. This first principle, then, is “being-itself”—though this latter is surely a bit of a jump. Depth is the element in the structure “that allows the viewer to see the structure as a manifestation of being-itself” (p. 516). Depth is where the structure points beyond itself to the ultimate ground and abyss of meaningfulness. This very Tillichian argument makes a lot of sense to me, though in what regard it is a scientific and not an ontological-theological argument I am not at all sure.

In any case, the next step of this argument “introduces the symbolic language of *God*” (p. 516). The test for a theological model therefore consists of showing that the depth of the structure as a model “expresses God,” that is to say (to appeal to Anselm), “whether the identified ‘depth’ of the structure is ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’” Depth, so defined and understood, positively points beyond itself to the ultimate ground and yet negates every particular formulation of it, a Yes and a No for any conceivable theological model or structure. And our question for theological modeling, in effect the test, is: Can this “depth” function as a real symbol of God? or “make present and perceptible the being of God” (p. 516)? Does this symbol (of depth) really enable a thought of God? Does it make the being of God “accessible to human understanding and cognition” (p. 519)? As the authors say repeatedly, this model of

depth “presents God to us”; it functions as a positive symbol of God and yet points beyond itself. Thus this model has been “tested.”

I find myself of two minds about this whole careful and complex argument, and this brief summary may not be at all faithful. I consider the discussion of depth, of its clear relevance to immanence and transcendence, immensely persuasive; for me this *is* the most adequate model of God. But how this argument for the model of depth represents anything like a scientific test of this model I do not see. What would, say, a Process theologian, with an entirely different model, say to this conclusion from the test? Probably both the Process model and the depth model would be presented by their adherents as “enabling the thought of God.”¹ Since, apparently, the thought or the presence of God is “enabled” by these two very different models, it is difficult to see how a reliable test can be constructed by these means. And beyond the question of the Process adherent lies that of the devotee of Vishnu or of Amida Buddha. Is there any test that can fairly include these models for which even the symbol *God* is problematic?

Tests seem inescapably to depend on a common fundamental paradigm; in the theological domain these paradigms vary widely, even in one religious tradition, and certainly in markedly different traditions. This wide variance makes the whole question of theological argument, and especially theological testing (and that of philosophy as well), a most complex, frustrating, and yet fascinating maze, a terrain that, to me at least, contains many more pitfalls than this essay supposes.

One final word. If what we have said is valid, there is at best only an *analogy* between the cognition achieved in science and that sought for in theology and philosophy (even the philosophy of science). I believe that we can in truth speak of cognition, of knowledge, and of truth in the area of theology, but we need to be very careful neither to claim it to be too similar to scientific cognition nor to deny any possibility of cognition. Above all, we need to recognize that there are seemingly different levels of truth and so different modes of cognition and of knowledge at best analogical to one another. As anyone involved in dialogue with, say, Buddhist colleagues knows, it is not easy to produce a test of the models of each, nor is it useful to ask, as one aspect of any test offered in the context of dialogue, which model best presents to us or enables a thought of God.

I repeat that this is a most creative and intriguing essay, and I am grateful for all it has added to the discussion of theological models. As is evident to me, however, testing in theology is a very complex subject, and a lot more discussion needs to be given to it and to its relation to scientific inquiry.

NOTE

1. It is perhaps relevant to point out how different this Tillichian train of thought is from that of A. N. Whitehead, and hence from most Process models in theology. For Whitehead *God* is certainly the principle of rationality or order of structure—the Logos, one could say. However, in Whitehead, *depth* and with it *being-itself* are concepts applicable (if at all) only to Creativity and not at all to God. Hence, the model of God as depth offered here and any Process model differ vastly from one another.

REFERENCE

Klemm, David E., and William H. Klink. 2003. “Constructing and Testing Theological Models.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38 (September): 495–528.