

Construction, Evaluation and Function of Theological Models – Considerations on a Method of Theological Theory Building

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Model building is a recognized scientific method and helps us to investigate theories, to explain facts in the world or to make predictions about future events. Be it climate models or the standard model of physics, models offer their own valuable approach to the world and are established as a method of scientific reasoning. Modeling has also become established in theology. Models of the Trinity, christological models, or models of interreligious relations are discussed here, for example. For about half a century, the philosophy of science has also been increasingly methodologically interested in model building and has been asking how scientific models work. While this debate in philosophy of science has already been received in some disciplines, methodological and epistemological investigations of theological modeling are rather rare and fragmentary, so that one can speak of the fact that models in theology have not yet been sufficiently investigated. In my presentation, I would like to take this gap as an opportunity to draw broad lines of a program of inquiry into this important theological method. First, I will discuss the question of why theology should engage in model building at all. To do so, I will discuss the added value of models for theological theory building. I will argue for the fact that the study of abstract entities cannot avoid constructing models to test and plausibilize their assumptions. I will then attempt to trace the construction process of theological models. After that, I will argue for the need to extend criteria of evaluation of models in theology beyond general logical criteria such as coherence and consistency to include theological criteria such as adequacy to religious experience or sacred scriptures. After that, I would like to present some functions of theological models such as the explication of doctrines, the plausibilization of religious experiences, or the testing of theories. The concept of reality and truth of theological models are of particular importance because, on the one hand, it is clear that models are subject to further development and in this sense incomplete and provisional and, on the other hand, religious theories and their models always make a certain claim to validity and normativity. Thus, theological models should on the one hand help to make real progress in knowledge and understanding and on the other hand reflect the perspectivity and limitedness of human thinking about God. Therefore, I would also like to briefly address the complementary role of models and metaphors and analogies.

Bibliography

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