

Response to Ted Peters’ “Models of God”

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Abstract In “Models of God,” Ted Peters discusses a methodology for formulating and evaluating models of God, surveys nine models, and proposes one that he entitles “Eschatological Pantheism.” This paper provides critical comments on Peters’ methodological claims, taxonomy of models of God, and specific proposal. This paper has been delivered during APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

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Ted Peters has given us an interesting and useful essay to launch our conversation about models of God. He discusses methodology, biblical and theological resources, and nine specific models. He recommends one of these, which he calls “eschatological panentheism,” as “the most satisfying model for Christian constructive theology” (p. 17). There is much in his paper that deserves attention, but I’ll focus my comments on the claims he makes that seem to me to be most conducive to discussion.

In my engagement with Professor Peters’ paper, my remarks will fall into three areas: (1) methodology, (2) taxonomy, and (3) eschatological panentheism.

Methodology

In brief, Professor Peters’ methodology involves (a) constructing a model of God on the basis of symbolic language about God and (b) evaluating models of God in terms of their “explanatory adequacy.” Professor Peters adopts a critical realist approach to models of God. An adequate model will refer to objective reality and yet fail to provide a description of God that is either literally true or complete.

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Symbolic language about God can be drawn from the Bible. Professor Peters argues that the language of the Christian scriptures provides good grounds for modeling God as – at least – one self-existent, transcendent and immanent being. These and other attributes of God Professor Peters adds (such as God's being personal) enable him to evaluate some alternative models as not being satisfactory for the Christian theologian.

I agree with most of Professor Peters' methodological assumptions. However, there are at least two important points on which we seem to have differences of opinion. First, Professor Peters appears deliberately to exclude the possibility of employing philosophy in the form of natural theology as a source of conceptual material for a model of God. He says that philosophical criteria are relevant for determining explanatory adequacy but that he will "turn to theology for the foundations upon which a conceptual model of God is to be constructed" (p. 1). Since Professor Peters distinguishes theology from philosophy here, I take it that what he means by theology is *biblical* theology (rather than natural theology). My recommendation is that we draw on both natural and biblical theology in constructing a model of God.

The second issue on which Professor Peters and I appear to differ is the question of whether it is possible for any of our thought or talk about God to express literal truths. I agree with Professor Peters that much, perhaps most, of our language about God is non-literal. However, I recommend that we take seriously the possibility that *some* of the things we say about God are literally true (such as for instance that God exists).

Taxonomy

Professor Peters introduces his paper with the question, "What is conceptually the most satisfying way to model the divine?" Though there is a sense in which each of the nine models he sketches provides an answer to this question, it seems to me that they are not all the same *kind* of model of God. I suggest that we generate Professor Peters' taxonomy by means of a series of more specific questions to make it clearer what roles his models can play and how they are related to each other. I have four questions in mind for this purpose.

The first question is this: "Does a divine reality of any kind exist?" A negative answer to this question will yield Professor Peters' first model, atheism, which is not so much a specific model of God as a general denial of the existence of a divine reality of any kind. The only thing atheism ascribes to God is the "attribute" of non-existence. There does not seem to be a single conventional label for a *positive* answer to this question, since it is consistent with a number of different models. Notice that agnosticism, Professor Peters' second model, is not really an answer to this question but rather a refusal to answer it one way or the other, at least in such a way as to imply that one *knows* this to be the answer. Agnosticism differs from all the other models in being an epistemological position rather than a metaphysical thesis. The seven remaining models differ from atheism and agnosticism in that they share in common both a commitment to the existence of divine reality and a relatively specific description of its nature. I believe that this agreement makes them more suitable candidates (than atheism and agnosticism are) for being labeled "models of God."

The second question in my series presupposes that some kind of divine reality exists: "Is the divine reality completely ontologically distinct from the universe?" Both pantheism and panentheism, two other models Professor Peters discusses, answer this question in the negative. The former identifies the universe with God or the Divine and the latter entails that the universe is a proper part of God. Let us call a *positive* answer to this second

question “Supernaturalism.” Polytheism (and henotheism), deism, and (mono)theism are each versions of supernaturalism.

My third question, which assumes supernaturalism, forces us to choose between polytheism (and henotheism) and the other supernaturalist models. This question is, “Is there only one ultimate supernatural reality?” Given that the answer to this question is “yes,” we can employ the fourth and final question to choose between the remaining supernaturalist options. This question is, “What is the relationship between God and the universe?” As Professor Peters points out, deism restricts God’s relationship to the universe to its original creation *ex nihilo* and monotheism does not.

One thing that Professor Peters does not discuss is how different versions of monotheism answer this final question about God’s relation to the universe in different ways. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam agree in their affirmation of “creation monotheism,” the view that God created the universe out of nothing. However, Aristotle’s monotheistic view, which was very influential in the early “Western” philosophical tradition, is that God and the universe are co-eternal. Given this assumption, God is not the creator *ex nihilo* of the universe. There are two versions of non-creationist monotheism. On one version, the universe is not necessary but contingent, and so it depends for its eternal existence on God’s eternally sustaining it in existence. Let’s call this “contingency monotheism.” On the second version of non-creationist monotheism, the eternal universe is independent and self-existent, so it does *not* depend on God for its eternal existence. This “dualistic monotheist” view seems to have been held by the Zoroastrians, the Manicheans, and by the monotheist vedantin (Hindu) philosopher/theologian Madhva. It is dualistic because it affirms two eternal self-existent realities; it is monotheistic because only one of these realities is God.

Eschatological Panentheism

I will try to answer two questions about eschatological panentheism, the model Professor Peters recommends. First, what is the *content* of the model? Second, is the model logically *coherent*? I will argue that the model is in serious danger of logical incoherence and that we would be better off sticking with a purely monotheist model of God.

Professor Peters says this model is “an experimental model of God that combines some of the best features of theism and the best features of panentheism” (p. 14). He says the model borrows from theism the claims that God is independent, free, and omnipotent, and that God created the universe out of nothing. Panentheism provides the themes of relationality, connectedness, and continuing creation. Professor Peters adds two additional characteristics of God provided by the Bible. These are that God promises to act in the future and that this future act will be redemptive.

Before we consider the remaining elements of Professor Peters’ model of God, let’s pause and think about what we have so far. It seems to me that all of the components of the model just mentioned can be accommodated by a Christian monotheist model without having to resort to panentheism. This is especially evident on an explicitly Trinitarian conception of creation monotheism (which Professor Peters elected to set aside for present purposes). Clearly, a triune God is essentially relational in nature. Moreover, a God who can create *ex nihilo* can continue to exercise this capacity and God’s activity of continual creation can keep God connected with the creation. Finally, a monotheistic God can act redemptively in the future. So where is the distinctively panentheist element in this model that cannot be accounted for on a monotheist model?

Well, for one thing, Professor Peters says that “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” (p. 13). But he fails to provide an argument for this claim. On the face of it, I don’t see why immanence and connectedness require the universe to be a proper part of God. So I don’t yet see why we need to supplement monotheism with panentheism.

Professor Peters says the key to his model is that “God creates from the future, not the past.” He explains this intriguing but cryptic statement by saying that God’s creative work is the same as God’s redemptive work and that the creation will not be “very good” until God’s continuing creative/redemptive work is complete in the future (in fulfillment of God’s promises). This future orientation is what makes Professor Peters’ model eschatological. What makes it panentheistic? As far as I can tell, it is panentheistic only in virtue of Professor Peters’ claim that the very good consummation of God’s plan will be that the created world, which starts out as being ontologically distinct from God, will *become* ontologically part of God. As Professor Peters says, “The creation will no longer be other” (p. 16).

We finally have a claim that cannot be accommodated on a monotheist model but requires a panentheist conception of God. But does the addition of this claim yield a logically coherent model? It seems to me that it does not. Professor Peters says that “we may be theists today, but panentheists tomorrow” (p. 16). However, it seems to me that if monotheism is ever true, then it is necessarily true and God is necessarily and thus eternally ontologically distinct from the created world. On the other hand, if panentheism is ever true, then it is necessarily true and God is necessarily and thus eternally dependent on the uncreated world as a proper part of God. If these claims are true, then Professor Peters’ model is not possibly true but instead logically incoherent.

In closing, I suggest that a purely monotheist model can account for Professor Peters’ affirmation that “the future world...will enter and remain *within* the divine life” (p. 16). I believe that the creation can participate in the life of God without becoming God or a part of God.