

# MORE THAN A PERSON. REFLECTING ON GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO CREATION

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**Abstract.** The question whether God should be thought of as personal or a-personal is closely linked to the issue of an appropriate model of God-world relation on the one hand and the question how to conceive divine action on the other hand. Starting with a discussion of the scientific character of theology, this article critically examines the univocal-personal concept of God. Traditional Christian conceptions of God have, however, always acknowledged a radical asymmetry between the personal existence of created beings and the ground of being itself. In a second step, the ontological truth claim associated with this way of speaking about God is being related to its methodological consequences. In final step, attention is given to the relation of immanence and transcendence as it is defended in different versions of panentheism: As an alternative to divine interventionism, panentheism can be shown to explicate divine providence as formal and final causation.

## I. SPEAKING ABOUT GOD AND THE SCIENTIFIC CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY

The question of an adequate concept of God in theology is closely linked to the question of its scientific character and its standing as an academic discipline at universities. A grim dispute on this question is currently going on among German theologians. Predominantly, coming from the English-speaking world, analytic philosophy of religion has been powerfully entering into the theological community in Germany, and accusing continental European theology of working with vague or ill-defined concepts and unclear standards of rationality.<sup>1</sup> Therefore continental theology apparently does not

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1 Cf. Benedikt P. Göcke, "Theologie als Wissenschaft?! Erste Antworten auf die Herausforderungen von Wissenschaftstheorie und Naturalismus", *Theologie und Glaube* 107, no. 2 (2017);

conform to scientific standards. These accusations have led to understandable heavy defensive reactions from many German theologians, especially those schooled with Heidegger and his French counterparts: Who likes to be denied his basic professional competency?<sup>2</sup>

This dispute mainly concerns systematic theology.<sup>3</sup> It is not just about an appropriate style of doing theology, as some argue. The dispute is rather about the question whether it is scientifically acceptable to make systematic truth-claims about God. Are systematic theologians justified in making statements about God, or do they need to content themselves with making justified statements *about statements* about God?<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, I think if theology wants to comply with scientific standards, it must not be constrained to performing hermeneutics of culture and traditions, and, in this spirit, to only reflecting religious experience or rather written testimonials of experiences of God's presence. This way, theology would abolish itself. It would merely be descriptive phenomenology of religion. In fact, theologians have the duty to make positive statements about God, his nature and his presence in the world. How else should theology carry out one of its primary responsibilities: accounting for the content of our belief? Of course, a hermeneutical analysis of the development and culture-dependence of our doctrines is indispensable for the examination of their validity. This is an aspect that is chronically given too little consideration by analytic philosophers of religion. But for the clarification of claims of validity, genealogy is not enough, rather the question of truth needs to be raised. In this, perhaps, lies the blind spot of our continental-hermeneutical tradition.

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Benedikt P. Göcke, "Glaubensreflexion ist kein Glasperlenspiel", *Herder Korrespondenz* 71, no. 1 (2017); Benedikt P. Göcke, "Katholische Theologie als Wissenschaft? Einwände und die Agenda der analytischen Theologie", in *Die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Theologie: Band 1: Systematische und historische Perspektiven*, ed. Benedikt P. Göcke (Aschendorff Verlag, 2018); Thomas Schärfl, "Analytisches Denken im Kontext", in *Handbuch für analytische Theologie*, ed. Georg Gasser, Ludwig Jaskolla and Thomas Schärfl (Aschendorff Verlag, 2017).

2 *Pars pro toto* cf. Hans-Joachim Höhn and Saskia Wendel, eds., *Wir müssen reden. Analytische und kontinentale Theologie im Dialog* (Herder, 2020).

3 Cf. Göcke, "Katholische Theologie als Wissenschaft?", 146–48.

4 Cf. Ursula Lievenbrück, "Die Theologie und der persönliche Glaube — eine notwendige Verbindung? Überlegungen zum Bedingungsgefüge theologischen Arbeitens", in *Dialog und Konflikt: Erkundungen zu Orten theologischer Erkenntnis*, ed. Martin Kirschner (Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2017), 213f.

However, how should statements about God be formulated, such that they satisfy fundamental scientific standards like the demand for consistency, coherence and other criteria? How can statements about God be adequately criticized? How can their validity be inter-subjectively tested? How can we achieve a truth claim, which every science necessarily has to raise, in the field of theology? Does the scientific character of theology fall if theology dares to make a truth claim about God, while such a claim — even if it is only a claim on rational plausibility and explanatory power — can in no way adequately be reached? The current self-restriction of theology to statements about statements about God, that is the factual self-limitation on cultural-science-based hermeneutics of religion, has, from the perspective of this epistemology, a well-justified basis.

The debate on scientific standards of theology circles around the assumed concept of God. How is theology as a science, understood as a science of God, possible, if it is widely accepted since Aristotle, that there is no such thing as a science of an individual entity?<sup>5</sup> From this, parts of analytic philosophy of religion and proponents of the so-called *personal theism* have drawn their conclusions, that the concept of God needs to be modified, so that he is no longer conceptually solitary. These academics speak of God as a person in a fundamentally univocal sense, this means in the way we would refer to ourselves as persons. Only that this God-person is characterized by attributes which express his maximum perfection: infinite goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, etc. With such a concept of God as the subject of a proposition (dt.: Subjekt eines Aussagesatzes), or the parameter of a predicate, it is possible to infer corollaries, which — referring to the subject — can claim intelligibility, coherence and openness to criticism.

The American philosopher *William Alston* speaks of God as a person that can act like we can, although he has properties we do not have, e.g. being incorporeal. Alston wants to exclude *per definitionem* that God is being characterized by utter simplicity. He rejects classical theism, which says that God is not an individual among individuals, but that he is being itself. Alston's motivation for his rejection of classical theism is that such claims would make

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5 Cf. Aristotle, met. VII, 15, 1039b-1040b. Of course, for Aristotle God is not such an individual entity, because God is pure form without any material substance. He is the unmoved mover. Cf. Aristotle, met. VII, 10, 1036a. As pure form, eternal substance and unmoved mover clearly. He is subject of metaphysics; cf. Aristotle, met. XII, 6.7.

the univocal predicability of personal attributes on God and the synthesis of respective corollaries impossible.<sup>6</sup>

The price that is paid for this achievement on operationalization is high; too high, in my opinion. Our whole theological tradition has always held good reasons to refuse to trim the concept of God down to such a manageable level. Instead, the best approaches have always grappled with the issue to include *Deus semper maior*, which is more than a simple superlative, in the concept of God without compromising its fundamental rationality. It can be conceived that God is always bigger, even bigger than our thoughts, bigger as our concepts of him.<sup>7</sup> Methodologically, this leads to the doctrine of analogy, which claims that due to the limitation of our speaking about God, our speech is always infinitely surpassed by its object. We only try to contour the least wrong concept of God. This teaches us humility and respect for opposing arguments.

Regarding the content of the concept of God, due to the *Deus semper maior*, we need to include the idea that the concept of God leads to the limits of our intellectual capabilities. This is because God is not a particular among particulars in our world. The concept of God raises the issue of the fundamental ground of being and insofar the transcendental condition of the possibilities of our thought. This has been tried by the best approaches of theological and philosophical thought about God. I arbitrarily name a few of a much longer tradition: God as a being than which nothing greater can be conceived (*Anselm of Canterbury*),<sup>8</sup> as subsisting being itself (*Thomas Aquinas*),<sup>9</sup> as infinite substance (*Descartes*,<sup>10</sup> but also *Spinoza*<sup>11</sup>), as — with a perspective on German theology — all determining reality (*Rudolf Bultmann*,<sup>12</sup> but also *Wolfhart Pan-*

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6 Cf. William P. Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1985), 221.

7 Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, Prosligion XV: God is „maius quam cogitari possit“.

8 Cf. *ibid.*, II-IV.

9 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, STh I q 4 a 2 resp; STh I q 7 a 1; STh I q 44 a 1 resp.

10 Cf. Rene Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia: Lateinisch-Deutsch* (Meiner, 2008), 89 (= third meditation 45,9).

11 Cf. Baruch Spinoza, “Ethica: Die Ethik mit geometrischer Methode begründet”. In *Opera. Werke.: vol. 2*, ed. Konrad Blumenstock (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 86–89 (= part I, def. 6).

12 Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze: vol. 1*, 8th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 26–37.

nenberg<sup>13</sup>), as perfect unity of identity and difference (*Hansjürgen Verweyen*)<sup>14</sup> or as formally as well as materially unconditional freedom (*Thomas Pröpper*).<sup>15</sup>

This does not mean, that such concepts of God are in principle incompatible with personhood. It just means that the concept of God used by scientific theology has to take into account that this concept — hopefully — has an extra-mental reference that is not a particular. It is a singular and all-encompassing totality, because it is the condition of the possibility of all of reality itself and all speech about this reality. If this uniqueness and strong singularity of the concept of God as a concept of limitation and as finishing thought of our thinking are accepted in philosophy of science, there is no reason to deny the scientific character of theology.

But the strongly asymmetrical relation that exists between God as the fundamental ground/reason of all of creation and us as created subjects has to be mirrored in the concept of God itself. Everything else would not be specific enough for this concept. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate to bring into position a univocal concept of personhood in order to achieve better operationality. This would not be complex enough. God is in this sense not a-personal, but much more as merely a person, what we normally call a person. God is not a particular among particulars, not even if these particulars are personal subjects with intellect and will. This is important to note — not despite but because the concept of God as a concept of all-encompassing reality, a basis of all of reality and a basis of our speech is a unique concept: a limit concept.

## II. TRUTH AND METHOD

We still have to engage with the question of truth. How can we decide the truth of the claim of God's existence? Even a transpersonal concept of God is nothing but a concept we formed. Nothing and nobody in this world can give us a reliable proof that God really exists, that our concept of God fits its extra-mental reference that we accept in our faith. However, if we want to postulate

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13 Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie* (Suhrkamp, 1987), 298–302.

14 Cf. Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Mensch sein neu buchstabieren: Vom Nutzen der philosophischen und historischen Kritik für den Glauben* (Pustet, 2016), 60–68 — with regard to Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Gottes letztes Wort: Grundriß der Fundamentaltheologie* (Pustet, 2002), 133–85.

15 Cf. Thomas Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte* (Kösel, 1991), 190f.

our claim of God's existence as true, we presume not only a realistic ontology, but we also presume that the concept of God in itself entails certain ontological commitments. If we speak about God with the claim of truth, the reality of God is always transcendental-logically assumed because it is the necessary logical requirement of speaking about God with an assertion of truth (dt.: unter Inanspruchnahme einer Wahrheitsbehauptung).<sup>16</sup>

The theory of truth which conforms most closely to this setting which is necessary for thinking is the classical correspondence theory of truth.<sup>17</sup> It understands truth as correspondence of thought and being, as correspondence of language and reality. *Thomas Aquinas* writes: Truth is *adaequatio rei et intellectus*.<sup>18</sup> Truth is correspondence of a thing with the intellect denoting it. Because the theory claims that it is thought-independent reality that makes a claim true or false, it is also called realist theory of truth. I argue for such a metaphysically realist theory of truth because it is most adequate for the — if I am allowed to say this — ontological weight of our discussed concept of God. God would not only guarantee the extra-mental reality as the actual truth-maker of our believes, but would also guarantee the fundamental ability of contingent thought to converge on the truth when grasping reality.

This does not mean that the fundamental interpretational openness of our contingent situation of living is neglected. We are not forced to take God's perspective, which would ignore the contingency of our perception and thought. I only want to say that the ontological presuppositions that we need to postulate with the articles of our faith should not simply be ignored in our models of thought. A divine perspective and its absolute epistemic certainty

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16 Cf. Thomas Schmidt, "Objektivität und Gewissheit: Objektivität und Gewissheit", in *Religiöse Überzeugungen und öffentliche Vernunft: Zur Rolle des Christentums in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, ed. Franz-Josef Bormann and Bernd Irlenborn (Herder, 2008), 213.

17 Cf. Thomas Schärfl, "Theologie — Metaphysik — Realismus", *Theologie und Philosophie* 93 (2018); Godehard Brüntrup, "Was ist Wahrheit? Theologie braucht Philosophie — aber welche?", *Herder Korrespondenz* 72, no. 6 (2018); Jan Rohls, "Korrespondenz, Konsens und Kohärenz: Pragmatische und analytische Wahrheitstheorien", in *Wahrheit in Perspektiven: Probleme einer offenen Konstellation*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger (Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Ruben Schneider, "Struktural-systematische Theologie: Theologie als Wissenschaft vor dem Hintergrund der transzendentalen und linguistischen Wende", in *Die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Theologie: Band 1: Systematische und historische Perspektiven*, ed. Benedikt P. Göcke (Aschendorff Verlag, 2018).

18 Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* q 1 a 1 resp; *De veritate* q 1 a 4; *ScG I*, 59; *STh I* q 16 a 1 resp. Cf. Walter Senner, "Wahrheit bei Albertus Magnus und Thomas von Aquin", in *Die Geschichte des philosophischen Begriffs der Wahrheit*, ed. Markus Enders and Jan Szaif (de Gruyter, 2006).

is not available to us. To assume this would be absurd. It would reduce faith to infallible perception. God's perspective is not available to us. We have to assume that such an encompassing horizon of meaning (dt.: Sinnperspektive) exists, such that our belief, our communication and our actions in this world and last but not least our sciences do not decline into absurdity and become self-contradictory.

If scientific theology wants to make statements about God, it cannot avoid accounting for the ontological commitments of the concept of God. The theory of truth that is most adequate for this is the correspondence theory.<sup>19</sup> It only assumes the existence of a divine perspective that is independent of the subject, but it does not postulate that this perspective can be obtained without error or even that it can be exclusively possessed. Metaphysical realism of truth and epistemological humility do not exclude each other, but are conditions for each other, because it is accepted by this theory of truth that humans are not the main reference point.<sup>20</sup>

How can we do theology on this basis? My proposal is: If we are not able to answer the question of the truth of God in a final manner, if we cannot possess this claimed and assumed truth and cannot proudly parade it around, then it is advisable to show humility and ask instead: Which *model* of divine presence, of God-world-relation, has which level of explanatory power? And in which context can a certain model achieve a certain level of plausibility? We cannot gain sufficient epistemic security on the truth of the presence of God. But we can ask with at least some prospect of success: Which model of divine presence in the world has which capacity to solve problems, and what kind of new problems does it produce?<sup>21</sup>

Models serve the representation of something else than themselves. A model is a structural visualization of a far too complex reality. It aims for ena-

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19 Cf. William P. Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38, no. 1/3 (1995), 57: „I have sought in vain for any convincing arguments the irrealists have against alethic realism in favor of their positions. [...] I conclude that traditional Christian believers have little to fear from the swarm of irrealisms we find in the intellectual world today. They are but paper dragons.“

20 Cf. Brüntrup, "Was ist Wahrheit?", 44–46.

21 Cf. Ted Peters, "Models of God", in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013); L. Whitney, "Symmetry and Asymmetry: Problems and Prospects for Modeling", in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013).

bling understanding with the help of open analogies. It is the middle between a single hypothesis and an encompassing form of thought that is always bound to a certain worldview or a paradigm in philosophy of science. Despite its character of exploring reality and its claim on being principally able to have truth value, model thinking is aware of its epistemic boundaries: No model describes everything, and no model is completely correct. Therefore, models complete each other and rely on each other even if there is tension between them, because they show each other's blind spots. This gives them their eminently corrective function.<sup>22</sup>

But most importantly, the business of model building is methodologically appropriate for theological theory building, because it precisely operationalizes the correspondence between realism of truth and epistemic humility. Of course, these models are nothing but mental constructs we build in order to communicate about an inconceivable entity. Indeed, as criteria of suitability for judging models only consensual and comparative procedures remain, which are oriented after the classical criteria of science: most importantly intelligibility, consistence, coherence, furthermore parsimony and interdisciplinary connectivity, and finally correspondence to given underlying data and heuristic explanatory power.

As far as we know, all these criteria can count as evidence for the adequacy of a model. They raise the probability of truth approximation of a model. But the ontic truth-maker can only be the reality itself that was visualized in the model. Therefore, the conception of model we use — symbolic representation of a complex reality — forces us to adopt a correspondence theoretical concept of truth, because otherwise we would run into a contradiction. What should be the point of orientation for the pursuit of truth approximation, if not the reality described by the model? In order to be able to compare models with each other, we have to assume that there are standards of assessment that are themselves not dependent on model-theoretical constructs, but are taking their measure from a reality that transcends all models. Theologians call this reality God.

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22 Cf. Matthias Remenyi, "Vom Wirken Gottes in der Welt: Zugleich ein Versuch über das Verhältnis von Naturwissenschaft und Theologie", in *Gottes Handeln in der Welt: Probleme und Möglichkeiten aus Sicht der Theologie und analytischen Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Benedikt P. Göcke and Ruben Schneider (Pustet, 2017), 278–79.



### III. PANENTHEISM: THINKING GOD'S PRESENCE

What are the consequences of my results so far for a model of God's presence in the world? What is the starting point for modelling it? For me, the central point is the strong singularity of the concept of God. This singularity, as I have argued, should not only be respected regarding aspects of philosophy of science. The singularity forces me to adopt metaphysical realism of truth, although I am aware that in the search for truth it is only possible to compare models. The central task of a model of the worldly presence of God, or rather the God-world-relation, is to take into account the strong singularity of God as a transcendent ground of the world and as a transcendental requirement for thought.

At this point I want to remind you of my objections to the nominalist tradition that defends a univocal model of the personhood of God. This involves the big danger that this God-person is only conceived as an opposite to finite persons. With this, the idea of a deep immanence of God in all created things becomes difficult to reach. Without God's immanence, his transcendence is merely reduced to being opposite creation. However, God's immanence and transcendence presuppose each other. They stand in a direct proportional relation to each other. A model of God-world relation that has difficulties in making plausible God's immanence will also have problems to make plausible true transcendence.

My thesis in this third part is that a panentheistic model of the God-world relation fits best to this direct proportionality of immanence and transcendence of God and to the strong singularity of the concept of God as transcendent ground of reality and transcendental condition for the possibility of conceptualizing this reality. Such a panentheism is not necessarily incommensurable with personal theism, but serves as its supplement which makes personal theism more immune to ideology.<sup>23</sup>

The concept panentheism is indeed vague and can be used for a variety of different models of divine presence in the world.<sup>24</sup> Literally, it means that eve-

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23 Cf. Remenyi, "Vom Wirken Gottes in der Welt", 290–97.

24 The literature on the subject of panentheism is endless. Cf. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher, eds., *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Springer, 2013), 371–472 (= Part VI: Panentheism); John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Baker Academic, 2006); John Culp, "Panentheism", last modified June 3, 2017, accessed March 5, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/panentheism/>;

rything is in God: Pan-en-theism. In this, the words ‚everything‘ and ‚God‘, but also the small connecting word ‚in‘ are open to interpretation.<sup>25</sup> Panentheism refers to a unity of God and World that does not exclude difference; or vice versa: The concept argues for a difference between God and world, which is again carried by a prior, encompassing and founding unity — World „in“ God. The basic structure of panentheism shows a unity in difference, or more precise: a unity of unity and difference in the relation of God and World.<sup>26</sup> This mutual relation of immanence of God and World is fundamentally different from the monistic identity of God and World. My hypothesis is that it rather forms a suitable model-theoretic basis for considering divine presence in the world.

In various conferences in 2017, *Godehard Brüntrup* presented model variants of panentheism.<sup>27</sup> They have helped me to clarify my own position. The weakest form of panentheism — model 1 — only says that the world is a part of God. It denotes a unity-in-difference-panentheism, which e.g. is also satisfied by the classical theism of *Thomas Aquinas* when he calls God being itself, *esse seipsum*. Here, due to the concept of being, all being is „in“ God as it participates in being. Nonetheless, God is in no real relation to the world because of his immutability and independence. Instead, he reigns in a way from outside, via eternal timeless decrees.<sup>28</sup>

The second model presented by *Brüntrup* is called kenotic, bi-directional panentheism. This model variant goes further than the first one because it postulates a really bi-directional, mutual relation of God and World. God

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Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Fortress Press, 2008); David R. Griffin, *Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism: Rethinking Evil, Morality, Religious Experience, Religious Pluralism, and the Academic Study of Religion* (Process Century Press, 2014); Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, eds., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Pantheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Eerdmans, 2004); Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, eds., *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 91–144 (= Part II. Panentheism).

25 Cf. Benedikt P. Göcke, „Panentheismus als Leitkategorie theologischen Denkens? Eine religionsphilosophische Bestandsaufnahme“, *Theologie und Philosophie* 90, no. 1 (2015).

26 Cf. Ruben Schneider, *Die Einheit von Einheit und Vielheit: Eine Untersuchung zur Fundamentalstruktur des Pantheismus* (Mentis, 2020).

27 I refer in the following to my notes by hand. The original essay is outcoming soon. Cf. Godehard Brüntrup, „Prozesstheologie und Panentheismus“, in *Prozess - Religion - Gott. Whiteheads Religionsphilosophie im Kontext seiner Prozessmetaphysik*, ed. Godehard Brüntrup, Ludwig Jaskolla and Tobias Müller (Herder, 2020).

28 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, STh I q 28 ad 3; STh I q 13 a 7 resp.

empties himself into creation — therefore the attribute kenotic: self-emptying — and allows the world to deeply touch him. *Klaus Müller* says that in this model the world unfolds a „feedback on God“.<sup>29</sup> Important proponents of this second model type are *Jürgen Moltmann* and *Philip Clayton*. They still adhere to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*,<sup>30</sup> but assume, that the power with which God created the world from nothing is the power of a love which wants to be affected by everything it releases. In this view, God offers himself to others, suffers with others, is present in the core of everything that exists and wants to win people for his salvation plan only with the power of love.

The third model proposed by *Brüntrup* takes the ideas from the first two models and goes a step further. *Brüntrup* calls it the strong modal variant of the second, bi-directional model. It does not have *creatio ex nihilo* and is instead process-philosophical. God is the always luring power in the processually linked, spatiotemporal event realities. God is not a transcendent opposite to the world but is present in its creative development as its deepest goal.

I tend to the second, weak modal variant. It seems to me, that the second model preserves the balance of transcendence and immanence of God in the best possible way. In my point of view, the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* is a necessary condition for deep immanence of God in the world, because it is an expression of God being without any opposite and of the absolute asymmetry of the God-world-relation. Only a God strictly transcendent from the world can give himself into the reality of the world in such a complete way that he does not become a competitor to inner-worldly efficient causes as an efficient cause in his own right. This makes the idea possible that God is not only the final cause of the created processes but also their formal cause, without determining their own causal efficacy.<sup>31</sup> I am reading the model element *creatio ex nihilo* not as a danger for the freedom of creation, but in reverse as an expression of creation's release into relative independence and causal autonomy — while creation's structures and principles of being are still given by God. Following

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29 Klaus Müller, „All-Einheit christlich: Eine kleine Provokation mit Folgen“, in *Eigenschaften Gottes: Ein Gespräch zwischen systematischer Theologie und analytischer Philosophie*, ed. Thomas Marschler and Thomas Schärfl (Aschendorff, 2015), 111.

30 Cf. Philip Clayton, „Open Panentheism and Creatio ex Nihilo“, *Process Studies* 37, no. 1 (2008).

31 Cf. Remenyi, „Vom Wirken Gottes in der Welt“, 292–97.

*Magnus Lerch*, a theologian from Vienna, finite freedom would be in this sense “autonomous but not self-sufficient” (dt.: “autonom, aber nicht autark”).<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, God’s true transcendence, which is more than simply being an opposite, is necessary for the soteriological function of all models of the God-world-relation. Theology is the expression of the sometimes ridiculous hope that what exists in the world is not everything that exists, because there is a God who wants the good and who holds everything in his hands. It is not clear to me how God can guarantee sufficient hope against the de-structuring law of entropy if he is thought in a process-philosophical way. All evolutionary ordering structures have to be wrestled out of the hands of entropy and according to all we know, entropy will win this fight in the end. The *creator-ex-nihilo*-God and asymmetric-transcendent grounding relation that was given by him into the world form the condition of possibility for hope for this developing world as a whole.

Therefore, God is also the condition for the possibility of hope for justice for the victims of history. For me, *Immanuel Kant* makes a lot of sense dealing with this issue: We have to postulate a God transcendent from world and history, who is enabled by his transcendence to balance natural and moral law and therefore can ensure justice for the victims of history.<sup>33</sup> My opting for this second model of panentheism also has reasons coming from theology of history and from considerations on justice.

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS ON THE DIVINE ACTION DEBATE

The cost of this model constellation, of course, is that I have difficulties to think of God as acting immediately and in special acts in the sense of a *causa efficiens* or agent causality. Instead, I argue for divine action in the sense of *causa formalis et finalis*, as a formal and final cause, but not as a directly intervening efficient cause.<sup>34</sup> God forms his creation with his spirit and is present in creation as its immanent dynamic of the good, but he does not intervene with specific, single and efficiently caused acts. Perhaps the relation of God

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32 Magnus Lerch, *Selbstmitteilung Gottes: Herausforderungen einer freiheitstheoretischen Offenbarungstheologie* (Pustet, 2015), 425.

33 Cf. Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, A 223–226.

34 Cf. Reinhold Bernhardt, “Das Handeln Gottes—Christliche Perspektiven”, in *Handeln Gottes - Antwort des Menschen*, ed. Klaus von Stosch and Muna Tatari (Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014).

and creation can be compared to the Aristotelean relation of soul and body: According to *Aristotle*, the soul is the principle of being and life, in a way the building plan and inner structure of the living organism.<sup>35</sup> The soul forms and shapes the body, it is the guarantee for liveliness and autonomous activity. The soul enables the body's free efficient causation activity — but it does not replace and is not in competition to the body. In this sense we could perhaps say: God is the soul of the world.

Therefore, in regard to the debate around divine action, I would reject direct, unmediated and special interventionism in favor of a non-interventionist position. I would follow the spirit of *Bela Weissmahr's* secondary causation theory and similar concepts in arguing that God acts as a transcendent first cause in and via “categorical” secondary causes.<sup>36</sup> Only in that way the balance of immanence and transcendence of God in his relation to the world can be appropriately maintained. Furthermore, only in that way the direct proportionality between creatures' autonomy and dependence on God can be conceived.<sup>37</sup> This proportionality is constitutive for the panentheistic God-world-relation.

Sometimes it is argued that the transcendental-founding basic relation of God and World and an additional, special divine action by God are not necessarily incompatible. Why should God's transcendence be impaired if he sometimes intervenes in creation beyond general divine action? I would disagree on this, and not only because of the theodicy problem. I believe, as a theologian, one needs to make a fundamental decision here: Would God — even epistemically hidden — intervene in immediate special acts in creation, he would be in competition with inner-worldly secondary causes. He would lose both his transcendental status and his pure immanence without opposition.

As a side note: The power of God that can raise the dead is not questioned by this, because it is *per definitionem* beyond the established parameters of creation. Moreover, an incarnation would not be made impossible, because

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35 Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* II, 1, 412.

36 Cf. Remenyi, “Vom Wirken Gottes in der Welt”, 282–90; Bela Weissmahr, *Gottes Wirken in der Welt: Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zur Frage der Evolution und des Wunders* (Knecht, 1973); Weissmahr, *Gottes Wirken in der Welt*; Christoph Böttigheimer, *Wie handelt Gott in der Welt? Reflexionen im Spannungsfeld von Theologie und Naturwissenschaft* (Herder, 2013); for critique of the primary/secondary causation scheme cf. Thomas J. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 102–4.

37 Cf. Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Herder Verlag, 1976), 86.

the divine logos utilizes a human nature to act as secondary cause, through which he can be present and act in the world.

## V. A TRINITARIAN OUTLOOK

Finally, I want to at least mention that there is an alternative to panentheism that is also able to balance immanence and transcendence of God in his relation to the world. This is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. However, even here, we need to ask how the model is structured in detail. If one chooses a social model of the Trinity and speaks of three persons as autonomous centers with intellect and will, one not only has to grapple with the problem of tritheism. One has to explain why immanence of God's spirit is conceivable in created things without the self-conscious first-person personality of the spirit absorbing the personality of finite subjects. Whoever prefers traditional trinitarian models instead of panentheism should — this is my recommendation — once again take a benevolent look at the Latin, mono-subjective trinitarian doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

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38 This article is based on a presentation held in Innsbruck, August 5, 2018. It stems from my inauguration lecture in Würzburg, May 16, 2018. The text was kindly translated from German into English by Georg Sauerwein and Johannes Grössl. For the German original text and details on quoted sources cf. Matthias Remenyi, "Gottes Gegenwart denken: Eine fundamentaltheologische Programmskizze", in *Freiheit ohne Wirklichkeit? Anfragen an eine Denkform*, ed. Benedikt P. Göcke and Thomas Schärtl (Aschendorff, 2020).

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