12 Depicting Doctrine

Theological Paradox and Conceptual Iconography

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12.1 Introduction

Mystery and paradox shroud core Christian doctrines. This may not be surprising given the acceptance of a transcendent God that is ineffable and incomprehensible. Yet on the basis of some of these paradoxical doctrines, some have charged Christianity as being incoherent or self-contradictory. Many of these doctrines are not peripheral to Christianity but are part of its central teaching. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity, which some may regard as the distinctive heart that distinguishes Christianity from other monotheistic religions, has the air of paradox whenever it is presented. Several quandaries arise when examining that doctrine. What origination or dependence relations, if any, do the divine persons bear to each other? What external actions do they undertake, and what is each of their role in such actions? Are some divine persons subordinate (in some sense) to another divine person, and if so, were they subordinate from eternity or from some moment in time?

Yet it seems that the primary paradox is over the claim that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each God and distinct from each other, yet there is exactly one God. This mystery, once unknown but now revealed, putatively implies that there are three divine individuals and exactly one divine individual. This particular paradox is often labeled as 'the logical problem of the Trinity' or 'the threeness-oneness problem'. Treating the problem as a paradox suggests that we are taking the propositions related to the doctrine of the Trinity as appearing to be logically inconsistent, and so it seems that a contradiction can be derived from those propositions.

Different strategies to address the logical problem of the Trinity have been proposed by both historical and contemporary thinkers, especially by those who engage in analytic theology. Some propose that it is rational to accept the apparent contradiction in the doctrine of the Trinity while insisting that there is no genuine contradiction (Anderson 2007). Others suggest that the doctrine of the Trinity may indeed include a genuine contradiction, but that its inclusion is not problematic if one is willing to opt for non-classical logic (Beall forthcoming). Perhaps the most prominent approach by analytic theologians who have addressed this issue is to provide a paraphrase or a model of the

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relevant propositions in order to show that the reconstructed or reformulated set of claims is not logically inconsistent. Models or accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity are thereby put forward as solutions to the logical problem.[1]

In this chapter, I consider shifting the way we approach the paradoxical nature of the doctrine. Rather than offering trinitarian models as solutions to the logical problem of the Trinity, I propose that we regard these models as artistic embellishments or theological works of art, and more specifically as conceptual icons. Icons represent, but they do not attempt to provide a precise or an accurate depiction of the object that is being represented. I suggest that theological models of the doctrine of the Trinity should be regarded in a similar way. Instead of using paint, oil, or a mosaic, analytic theologians employ ontological, ideological, or logical tools at their disposal. The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is not a problem to be solved but a teaching of the church to be imaginatively explored and creatively embellished for the purpose of wonder at the God that Christians worship.

12.2 Trinitarian Paradox

While the term 'paradox' can be used in different ways, a common use has to do with the appearance of something rationally unacceptable. For example, a paradox may be a set of claims that is apparently logically inconsistent or an argument with an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived from apparently acceptable inferences and apparently acceptable premises.[2] Paradoxes in philosophy abound, e.g. the liar paradox, the grandfather paradox, the preface paradox, etc. These paradoxes are problems that require a solution, which usually aim at finding a flaw in the reasoning process or by rejecting or revising some of the premises or assumptions involved.

Does the doctrine of the Trinity involve a paradox of this sort? It is tempting to answer in the affirmative. Consider the salient propositions concerning the logical problem of the Trinity:

1 The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.
2 The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Father is not the Spirit.
3 There is exactly one God.

These claims appear to form a logically inconsistent set.[3] Typical solutions offer a reconstruction or paraphrase of these propositions, but many (if not all) solutions have been charged with deviating from the historical contexts and intentions of the creedal, conciliar, or traditional pronouncements from when these claims were being formulated.[4] If this is right, then contemporary solutions solve the problem by showing that there is no unacceptable inconsistency or contradiction but do so at the price of a heterodox or ahistorical rendering of the doctrine (Anderson 2007, 12).

The attention to the historical development and context surrounding the formulation and development of the doctrine of the Trinity has been a welcome and beneficial turn among contemporary analytic theologians, but we must beware foisting too much content on claims where there was no such intention. Even in the 4th century CE, some theologians regarded as orthodox held to claims concerning the doctrine of the Trinity that conflicted with other orthodox theologians. James Anderson correctly points out that "while there may be only one God, there is surely more than one doctrine of the Trinity; at any rate, there is more than one interpretation of that distinctive Christian teaching expressed in the ancient creeds and confessions of the church" (Anderson 2007, 11–12). These conciliar pronouncements, rather than providing a full-blown trinitarian theory, offered boundaries of acceptability, focusing their attention on anathematizing particular conceptions that were considered as outside those boundaries and hence were regarded as heterodox or heretical.[5] Arianism and Sabellianism (among others) were out. Despite what the creeds and councils ruled out, they permitted a variety of views. Commenting on the pronouncements from the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Sarah Coakley highlights the regulatory framework of the Chalcedonian definition. The claims are not mere linguistic regulations—they do not merely tell Christians how to talk about Christ. Nor are the claims to be taken merely metaphorically (even if metaphors are used at times). Rather, she opts for a *horos*-oriented approach where the definition does not yield a precise analysis but (following the etymology of the term 'define') provides the limits or boundaries for what does or does not count as acceptably orthodox (Coakley 2002, 159–163).

Another common thread among the theologians from the period of the ecumenical councils is a strong commitment to divine ineffability and incomprehensibility. While Augustine offers several psychological models of the Trinity, he repudiates all of them, recognizing the inability to comprehend this mystery.[6] And while some of the Cappadocian theologians are known for employing accounts that involve universals (or shared masses[7]), these models arguably are used to address questions and challenges from the opposition rather than offering their preferred way of speaking about or conceptualizing the Trinity.

Admitting some measure of apophaticism should be expected when thinking about a God who is transcendent and unlike everything else in the created order (especially for those who subscribe to certain versions of classical theism). While there are different ways of understanding apophaticism, Jonathan Jacobs and Sameer Yadav offer proposals that are both historically sensitive and conversant with contemporary issues. For Jacobs, espousing apophaticism entails that we cannot say anything both true and fundamental about God's intrinsic characteristics (Jacobs 2015, 165). This allows uttering many true things of God (e.g., "God is all-powerful", "God is love", etc.). But these truths are not fundamental (cf. Sider); that is, we are not saying

anything about God that carves God at the joints (so to speak). Even the propositions involved in the doctrine of the Trinity, while strictly and literally true, are not fundamental. It is true that *the Son is God* and that *there is exactly one God*, but these are not mapping on to reality precisely in the way that reality is actually structured.[8]

But the apophatic approach, as Yadav notes, is not merely about what we can or cannot say of God; the aim of apophaticism includes attention to mystical experiences that yield a direct and immediate union with God, filling the experiencer with wonder and awe (Yadav 2016, 32). According to Yadav, "[w]onder can…be roughly characterized as an attitude of epistemic interest in an object for which the felt stances of surprise, amazement, or astonishment are appropriate" (ibid., 34). Such wonder is produced at the recognition of the mysteriousness of that which is being contemplated. Moreover, the appearance of God will be "under some gerrymandered mode of presentation which is recognized by the mystic as an indicator of God's ineffability" (ibid., 34–35). The way God appears will be, in a sense, manufactured. A crucial feature for our purposes is that the artificiality in the experienced presentation can highlight God's transcendence and incomprehensibility. The prominence of apophaticism among historical theologians involved in the formulation and development of the doctrine of the Trinity needs to be taken seriously, and I suspect doing so will shift the way we think about the logical problem of the Trinity.

12.3 Reframing the Logical Problem

Return to the main propositions related to the logical problem of the Trinity, viz. (1)–(3). The important role of these claims was to preclude particular statements that were propagated by those deemed as heretics by the councils. Claims of Arian subordinationism, Sabellian modalism, and polytheism are the intended targets ruled out by (1)–(3). So one cannot remain with the bounds of orthodoxy and claim that *the Son is not God* or that *the Father is the Son*.

Orthodoxy, then, requires claiming at least that *the Son is God* and *the Father is not the Son*. But what more do these statements tell us, or what do they entail? Taking the conciliar pronouncements as primarily providing boundaries of acceptability for orthodox Christians and also recognizing conflicting trinitarian accounts by pro-Nicene theologians, we can reasonably assume that (1)–(3) are missing some content in such a way that trinitarian models can fill them out in different ways. To be perspicuous, let 'the doctrine of the Trinity' refer to (1)–(3), and let 'models of the Trinity' refer to attempts to paraphrase or reconstruct those propositions.[9] Contemporary models of the Trinity are the ones that use cases involving time travel (Leftow 2004), extended simples (Pickup 2016), multilocation (Effingham 2015), episodic periods (Mooney 2021), relative identity (van Inwagen 1988), numerical sameness without identity (Brower and Rea 2005), constitution relations

(Hasker 2013), parthood (Cotnoir 2017; Molto 2018), powers (Page 2017), truthmakers (Byerly 2019), perichoresis (Davis 2006), and more.

These contemporary models are not to be identified with the doctrine of the Trinity, but they are rather offered as competing ways of interpreting or construing the doctrine of the Trinity.

To be sure, the conciliar pronouncements concerning the doctrine of the Trinity are informative, as they inform us that there is one divine nature or substance, that there are three divine persons or hypostases, that the three are not the same person, that the Father is a source of the persons without having a source, and that the Son and the Spirit have (at least) the Father as a source (Pawl 2020). What it says is adequate for ruling out (most, if not all of) the heretical claims from the third to fifth century.[10] Even so, much of the content in (1)–(3) remains open. For example, we can take 'the Son' to designate a particular person, but such a denotation does not provide a detailed analysis of what that person is. Is it a subsistent relation? A center of consciousness? Moreover, the term 'God' also leaves things similarly open. Is it a nature, and if so, is it concrete or abstract? And the same goes for the copula. In saying that *the Son is God*, how exactly should the relation between the Son and God be construed? When examining what the conciliar pronouncements claim about the Trinity, councils and creed do not clearly state what the relationship is between the divine persons and the divine nature (ibid., 107). Here are some live possibilities of what that relation may be:

a The Son is (strictly) numerically identical to God.[11]
b The Son is numerically the same but not identical to God.
c The Son is the same F as God (where 'F' is a suitable sortal).
d The Son is really identical to God (where real sameness does not have all of the formal properties that strict identity has).
e The Son is constituted by God.
f The Son has God as a (proper or improper) part (or God has the Son as a proper or improper part).

Perhaps there may be some considerations for disregarding some of these possibilities.[12] Similar remarks apply to the distinction between the divine persons. Rejecting Sabellian modalism requires a commitment to the claim that *the Father is not the Son*. But what relation is being denied? As with (a)–(f), we might aver that the relation being denied is (strict) numerical identity, numerical sameness without identity, relative identity, real identity, constitution, or (proper or improper) parthood.

The logical problem of the Trinity has bite only when the contents of (1)–(3) are filled out in a way that yields a contradiction, which is what opponents of trinitarianism may be doing. If we take the relation in (1) and (2) to be (strict) numerical identity, then a straightforward contradiction can be derived.[13] When some of the pro-Nicene theologians are considering objections to trinitarianism, the objectors are sometimes filling out the trinitarian

claims in just this way. While this particular sameness relation has the formal features of being reflexive, symmetrical, and transitive, there is no clear indication that the trinitarian formulations in (1)–(3) require a relation with these formal properties.

One may complain that the lack of robust content would lead to a failure of ruling out the relevant heretical positions, or that ruling out these heresies would fill in the content of (1)–(3) in such a way as to make them logically inconsistent. Yet all that is required to reject Arianism is to admit that the Son is God in the same way that the Father is God. It does not demand that the Son be numerically identical to God over being numerically the same (but not identical) to God, being constituted by God, having God as a proper part, or being a proper part of God. And the same goes for the other relevant propositions in the doctrine of the Trinity and the heresies they oppose.

Given this shift, the logical problem of the Trinity, rather than being solved, is dissolved.

If avoiding inconsistency is the main worry, then by merely avoiding filling out the content in ways that yield an inconsistency, then no logical problem arises. What then of the so-called solutions to the logical problem? The brief answer is that they are not solutions since there is no problem. Yet this need not render extant trinitarian models as useless or otiose. These models may be offered as ways of creatively embellishing (1)–(3) for a theological purpose.

It will be helpful here to mention briefly the nature and role of models. According to Oliver Crisp, models are "simplified conceptual frameworks or descriptions by means of which complex sets of data, systems, and processes may be organized and understood", and they are "representational, analogous, hermeneutical in nature, have a certain fidelity to aspects of the thing they represent, and take different forms" (Crisp 2021, 9–10). Given that many analytic theologians adopt a realist framework, Crisp notes that models (for realists) are approximations of the truth (ibid., 13). But truth or the approximation to it may not be the most apt standard of evaluation of models, especially in their use in other domains (such as in the sciences).

Additionally, apopohaticism should make us suspicious whether we can ascertain that some model approximates the truth more than another model. Now a proponent of apophaticism can maintain that (1)–(3) are true (albeit, not fundamental), but does employing the constitution relation approximate the truth more than employing relative identity or real identity? The incomprehensibility of God should make it difficult if not outright impossible to tell whether using some concepts are closer at approximating the truth than an approach that employs other concepts.

Rather than truth or the approximation to it, another purpose for which a model may be put forward is a way of conceptually picturing or imagining one way in which the contents of (1)–(3) can be filled. There are, of course, important constraints to the ways in which it can be so filled. They cannot be filled so as to yield a contradiction (if one is committed to classical logic).

Nor can they be filled in ways that would conflict with authoritative pronouncements. Some take conciliar pronouncements as authoritative, and hence the depiction would have to abide by what is claimed. Thus, it could not be depicted in a way such that the Father proceeds from another divine person. However, not all Christian analytic theologians take the conciliar pronouncements as authoritative, and hence some may fill out the content in a way that excludes any procession or dependence among the divine persons.[14]

Rather than regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, or at least (1)–(3), as giving rise to a logical problem waiting to be solved, we can reframe the issue by construing (1)–(3) as a canvas with basic contours waiting to be painted. But rather than oil and brushes, we can use ideological, ontological, or logical tools at our disposal. Trinitarian modeling becomes a creative expression of filling out the content, all within acceptable parameters. These ways of filling out (1)–(3) need not be regarded as competitive with each other. One solution is not better at solving the logical problem of the Trinity than another (since there is no problem to begin with), nor does one solution approximate the truth more than another. In other domains (such as in the sciences), multiple models need not conflict given the intended aim for which the model is offered. The same goes for artworks, even representational ones. Multiple portraits of the same person can be made, but we need not construe these portraits as competing against each other, and the various depictions may focus on or highlight different features of the person, and so each portrait can be worthy of appreciation and enjoyment in its own right. Similarly, trinitarian models need not be competitive nor in conflict with each other but may be appreciated and enjoyed as a kind of theological artwork.

12.4 Conceptual Iconography

The embrace of aphopaticism should give pause to treating trinitarian models as analogies or approximations.[15] What other use could these models have? I propose that we treat these models as icons, and specifically as conceptual icons. Icons are artworks that represent some feature of reality, typically God, one (or more) of the divine persons, a saint, or some event in salvation history. While these pieces are representational, no one should take them to be seeking an accurate or precise depiction of what that targeted portion of reality is actually like.

Even the depictions of human figures or ordinary physical objects are distorted in ways that make such artworks stand out when compared to other forms of art that aim to be more realistic or representationally accurate. One reason for this is due to a defining feature of icons, viz. the use of reverse perspective, which leads to intentional distortions of what is being represented (Antonova 2010, 27). In brief, reverse perspective is the "simultaneous representation of different planes of the same image … regardless of whether the corresponding planes in the represented objects could be seen from a single viewpoint" (ibid., 105). For a common example in icons, a saint may be

depicted with both ears clearly seen from facing the front. It is as though we are looking at each ear from the side angle, yet seeing them simultaneously when looking straight at the face. Another example is the well-known icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev, which appears to be the three human figures that visited Abraham as representing the three divine persons. Yet in that icon, the "three figures are actually one figure seen simultaneously from different points of view" (ibid., 163). Reverse perspective is employed to achieve the aim of viewing multiple dimensions from a single perspective, which is one way of describing how an eternal or timeless God might view multiple dimensions or distinct spatiotemporal regions from a single perspective (ibid., 101).[16] Moreover, what is said of the images in the icon may not be true of what is said of the target, as some theologians believe that we speak homonymously when talking about images in comparison to their prototype.[17]

While icons intentionally distort the target object, it is the distorted depiction that allows for an appreciation of some aspect of God, Christ, a saint, or some event in a way that draws the person contemplating on the image into prayer and awe. Icons are "a means and a path…[and] a prayer…[whose] goal is to orient all of our feelings, as well as our intellect and all the other aspects of our nature" (Ouspensky 1978, 211). The goal is not to attain a "purely theoretical understanding of God" but to contemplate God "in the sense of to dwell intellectually or spiritually on God's perfections" (Tollefsen 2018, 142). Not only can this be done through visual images but also through words. In fact, we can construe theological attempts at talking or writing about God as engaging in such an artistic endeavor, for "[i]n some cases, theologians tried to impart this aesthetic form on their writing by creating concise analogies between theological ideas and the act of painting—becoming in the process painters themselves and acting their work as a visual object or phenomenon in its own rights" (Tsakiridou 2013, 214). Writing out ideas and painting become analogous undertakings. One creates a physical representation and the other creates a conceptual representation. If both are iconic, then both distort, but both demand intellectual and contemplative apprehension and wonder at portions of reality where our words fail, or at least where our words are not employing fundamental language that captures the actual structures of those portions of reality.

To be clear, (1)–(3) by themselves are not the conceptual icons but rather the filling in of the content. For example, Leftow's Latin model that illustrates the view with time-traveling Rockettes (and later with the aid of Lockean events or modes) fills out the content of the relevant trinitarian claims by construing the divine persons as Lockean modes, regarding the relation between the divine persons and God as strict numerical identity.[18] The model can still be evaluated whether it genuinely avoids contradiction or whether it avoids falling into heresy.[19] So not anything is allowed when it comes to constructing a trinitarian model. But supposing Leftow's model stays within the constraints, we can then contemplate on the model as an intellectual exercise, one that may be demanding given its employment of concepts from

philosophy of language and metaphysics. Imagining the illustration or working out the metaphysical tools can help one appreciate and value the unity or oneness of God. Or consider Stephen T. Davis' social approach that depicts God as three separate centers of consciousness exemplifying the essential divine properties, bearing some dependence relation to each other, being unified in will, and being perichoretically related to each other.[20] Assuming that the theological and philosophical constraints are not violated, reflection on this model may lead some to contemplate the distinctness of each divine person.

Which model is better? But we would have to ask: better in what sense? Better at approximating the truth (or offering a better analogy)? But as stated earlier, neither can be better in those senses since neither is closer at approximating the truth.[21] Now one model may be better at emphasizing the distinction of divine persons and another model may be better at emphasizing the divine unity. But all these models are on par when it comes to avoiding contradiction provided that each way of filling out (1)–(3) yields a logically consistent set.

Construing trinitarian models as conceptual icons makes these models non-competitive. The different icons of Christ are not in competition with each other with respect to being more accurate or approximating what Christ's face or body actually looked like. But each icon can be used to enable the people dwelling on it to focus on particular aspects of Christ (or whatever the represented target is) for the purpose of intellectual engagement, aesthetic appreciation, wonder, and worship. Rather than offering models as solutions to the logical problem or the threeness—oness problem of the Trinity, we can shift the framework away from construing (1)–(3) as a problematic set and rather as the starting point from which we artistically conceptualize ways of thinking about God. The products will be distortions in the way that icons are distortions, but they help capture our attention on particular aspects of God or the divine persons, in the way that physical icons overemphasize certain features to draw our attention toward that characteristic.

These models are illustrative and not analogous to God, yet they can serve what they were intended to do: a way of thinking about God that precludes heresies.

These models of the Trinity should thereby not be regarded as adhering to the original intentions of those who formulated the creeds or conciliar pronouncements. Iconic depictions are not treated as orthodox representations that must be accepted by all. Similarly, there is no model that must be assented to in order to remain orthodox (assuming that the acceptance of (1)–(3) is not tantamount to putting forth a model). These models are conceptual embellishments. If a model required denying one of the trinitarian claims, then the charge of heterodoxy would stand. But these models seek to retain (1)–(3). This approach, therefore, does not construe the models as reconstructions, paraphrases, or analyses that get at the original intent or meaning. Taking the historical pronouncements as setting up boundaries that provide some conceptual materials, other conceptual materials (e.g., the ideological

and ontological tools of metaphysics) are fair use in depicting the doctrine. So, a conceptual iconography approach sees (1)–(3) not as a problem or puzzle but rather as a palette on which to be painted by metaphysical tools. An upshot of this approach is that it respects the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity and takes seriously an apophatic framework.

12.5 Is There Too Little Content?

The conceptual iconography approach to models of the Trinity may be similar to what James Anderson labels as 'semantic minimalism' (Anderson 2007, 131f.) or what Tuggy has called 'negative mysterianism' (Tuggy 2011). Semantic minimalism, as the name suggests, considers the semantic content of the relevant propositions concerning the doctrine of the Trinity to be minimal enough such that they do not entail a contradiction. This is contrasted with positive mysterianism where (1)–(3) do appear to entail a contradiction (yet avering that accepting the claims is permissible since it is reasonable to assume there is an unarticulated equivocation, and hence the appearance of a contradiction does not give us reason to infer that there is a genuine contradiction). According to Anderson, he "can find no scholarly defence of [semantic minimalism] in print" (Anderson 131, fn. 50).[22]

The main objection to semantic minimalism or negative mysterianism is that they are associated with a version of apophaticism where no positive affirmations concerning God can be made. But such an apophaticism is fraught with difficulties, as even negative affirmations can entail positive statements. And some proponents of apophaticism do appear to make some positive statements about God. While there have been some who have endorsed such a strong view of apophaticism (e.g., the Jewish theologian Moses Maimonides), there are other forms of apophaticism that fit with the framework of the pro-Nicene theologians, including the version of apophaticism proposed by Jacobs (2015). Given the kind of apophaticism laid out earlier, true and positive affirmations about God can be made. These claims, however, will not be fundamental. They can be literal and non-metaphorical. So the implausibility of the stronger version of apophaticism does not give reason to reject semantic minimalism or the conceptual iconography approach to models of the Trinity.

Another worry for the proposal offered in this chapter is that the content in (1)–(3) will be so minimal that the trinitarian claims are uninformative or uninteresting. In response, we may consider a different issue where a similar objection has been made. Consider the statement that we are animals, which is the primary thesis of a view known as animalism. Some have criticized this animalist thesis by insisting that it is too semantically minimal so as to be trivial or uninformative, especially since the thesis does not tell us what the nature of animals is, whether they are entirely material or partly immaterial, what the persistence conditions of animals are, or whether we are animals essentially or not.[23] Yet defenders of animalism have argued that the thesis is plenty substantive, for it tells us that we are not identical to immaterial

substances, that we are not constituted by animals, that we are not proper parts of animals, etc.[24] The animalist thesis rules out several competing views of personal ontology even given the minimal semantic content of the animalist thesis. There are different ways of answering the question of what the nature animals is or what the persistence conditions of animals are, but those questions need not be answered in order to affirm that we are animals.

Similarly, the Trinitarian theses in (1)–(3), even with their minimal content, are enough to rule out other views, such as Arian subordinationism or Sabellian modalism. The trinitarian claims can be embellished in different ways, but as long as they are informative enough to rule out the heretical claims that the early councils and creeds sought to oppose, they are informative and interesting enough. To demand that they tell us more may be to give up on apophaticism or the mysteriousness and ineffability of God.

12.6 Idolatry or Proper Worship?

An expected objection to treating trinitarian models as conceptual icons is that it may succumb to idolatry. After all, it was and is a common criticism against the use of icons that venerating them is tantamount to idolatry, which is strictly forbidden for Christians (and those of other Abrahamic faith traditions). The worry of idolatry for physical icons can be bypassed since the conceptual iconography of trinitarian models are not physical. Another worry is that physical icons can only paint Christ's human nature, which leads to a Nestorian separation of natures. Yet this worry is also bypassed since conceptual model-building is not so restricted.[25]

But there may be a lingering worry of conceptual idolatry as distinct from physical idolatry. One question is what would count as conceptual idolatry. It may be that having false views about God counts as conceptual idolatry. But William Wood argues that this cannot be right, and that conceptual idolatry instead requires thinking about God "in the wrong way", in particular ways that would negate attitudes such as "reverence, gratitude, and humility" (2021, 122). Assuming Wood is correct, the threat of idolatry does not attach merely to trinitarian model-building but onto any kind of reflection that precludes having the right intellectual or emotional posture toward God. Trinitarian model-building can be idolatrous, but so can formulating natural theological arguments, as God's existence may become primarily a conclusion to be inferred, which may overshadow reverence and awe toward God. But that it *can* be idolatrous does not entail that it *must* be so.

Wood also notes that analytic theology can be a form of spiritual practice, for it demands concentrated attention and a sense of wonder, among other actions and attitudes (ibid., 185–186). Much of the same applies to trinitarian model-building or the appreciation and apprehension of extant trinitarian models. Understanding some of the recent models offered by analytic theologians requires careful attention to the details of the case and the employment of various metaphysical and linguistic conceptual tools. The models can also

be awe-inspiring and conducive to evoking wonder, as depicting the doctrine of the Trinity is no ordinary feat as depicting mundane objects.[26] This abides by Yadav's apophatic approach, where God is presented in a gerrymandered, or we might say distorted way, and yet it leads the one contemplating into awe and wonder (2016, 32). We recognize trinitarian models as distortions because we cannot depict God as God actually is. Failing to provide an accurate depiction should remind us of God's ineffability and incomprehensibility. The models are not trying to analyze God or make God amenable to our intellectual concepts. The charges against ontotheology do not stick when we construe trinitarian models as artworks that inspire and evoke worshipful attitudes.

As much as physical icons are used as a means or path to engage in the worship of God, so conceptual icons can be used in the same way. People worship in different ways. Some employ music, ingest bread and wine, hear Scripture, offer signs or kisses of peace, or communicate with God. Some modes of worship are linguistic and others are not. Some modes of worship are more cognitively oriented and others are more affective. One can use a trinitarian model as one way of trying to think about God as God has been revealed, recognizing that this neither describes nor represents God as God actually is. But it recognizes how *other* and transcendent God is, which should lead us to humility when thinking about God and to wonder and marvel at the God Christians worship.

Notes

1 The exact nature, function, or goals of these models have been mostly underspecified in the literature, though there has been some recent attention to the approach of model-building as it relates to theological methodology (Crisp 2021, Wood 2016). Understanding theological models is crucial for understanding the use of trinitarian models, of which I say more in (unpublished).
2 These ways of understanding paradoxes can be found in Rescher (2001), Sainsbury (2009), and Anderson (2007).
3 Branson (2019, 1055) helpfully shows the ways in which it can be logically inconsistent either by being syntactically inconsistent in a language or (semantically) unsatisfiable in a language.
4 See Branson (2018) and Jedwab and Keller (2019).
5 For more on this, see Coakley (2002) and Torrance (2020, 136).
6 See Augustine (2002).
7 Marmodoro (2018).
8 This is compatible with rejecting anti-realism, where these truths are mind-dependent, and with maintaining these claims as non-metaphorical (Jacobs 2015, 167). However, it is also open to regard such claims as mind-dependent or as metaphorical (McFague 1982).
9 The phrase should be 'models of the doctrine of the Trinity', but for sake of ease, I will use 'models of the Trinity'.
10 If we take all of the ecumenical councils, then other claims deemed as heresies, such as monothelitism, are ruled out as well.
11 This relation is reflexive, symmetrical, and transitive.
12 Anderson avers that the relation between a divine person and God must be numerical identity in order to capture the intended historical meaning (Anderson 2007,

19–20). However, Pawl argues that the relation cannot be strict identity (nor can it be instantiation of divine properties), since they fall afoul of several worries (Pawl 2020, 108–112). However, defenders of strict identity or instantiation may be able to avoid those worries. What is important is that the historical formulations can reasonably be taken as not requiring numerical identity (or any specific sameness relation).

13 Nuances of the sort given by Leftow (2004), Pickup (2016), or Effingham (2015) left aside.

14 For an example of this, see Craig (2019).

15 There seems to be historical precedence for doing so. Consider Basil of Caesarea, a Cappadocian theologian instrumental in defending the claims later formulated in the Nicene Creed, who states that "what I say at best a token and reflection of the truth; not as the actual truth itself. For it is not possible that there should be complete correspondence between what is seen in the tokens and the object in reference to which the use of tokens is adopted" (Letter 38, in NPNF2, vol. 8). Some have taken these statements as indicating that Basil offers these tokens (or models) as approximations (Anderson 2007, 26), but that is difficult to square with the fact that "Basil's answer to this and to any such difficulty was to declare that what was common to the Three and what was distinctive among them lay beyond speech and comprehension and therefore beyond either analysis or conceptualization" (Pelikan 1975, 223–224).

16 Distortions may also be due to the attempt of infusing icons with *energeia* or the kind of dynamic vividness that makes the art lively (Corenlia Tsakiridou 2013, 7–8) [Icons in time, persons in eternity].

17 For more on this, see Tollefson (2018, 122).

18 Leftow develops his views in 2004 and 2007.

19 If one takes the ecumenical councils as authoritative, then additional constraints may also come into play, as Scott Williams (2022) has argued that Leftow's model is inconsistent with some of the pronouncements from the sixth ecumenical council.

20 Davis develops his view in the chapter "Perichoretic Monotheism" in 2006.

21 A trinitarian model can approximate the truth better than another if the latter does not accept all the relevant trinitarian claims (assuming that those claims are true). Thus, one of these models can be regarded as better than a Sabellian or Arian model that denies one of (1)–(3).

22 Anderson does state in that footnote that Coakley (2002) seems to intimate such a view.

23 For one such criticism, see Duncan 2021.

24 For such a response, see Bailey, Thornton, and van Elswyk (2021)

25 There are also ways of defending the veneration of physical icons from the charge of idolatry. See, for example, Wolterstorff (2015) who argues that the veneration of an icon can count as another act, viz. honoring or worshiping God.

26 Though there may be no mundane objects, especially since philosophical analysis of some of these objects may be surprising. This fits with a Christian view in which all that God has made is to be wondered at, appreciated, and enjoyed.

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