

Models of God: Comparing Concepts

**By
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Thinking about what we believe has a long and distinguished history in Christianity. Within a century after the time of Jesus, Christian thinkers had established themselves as respected intellectuals in the Roman Empire. A millennium later St. Anselm of Canterbury gave us the phrase, *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeks understanding.” Today’s thinking Christians continue this noble tradition.

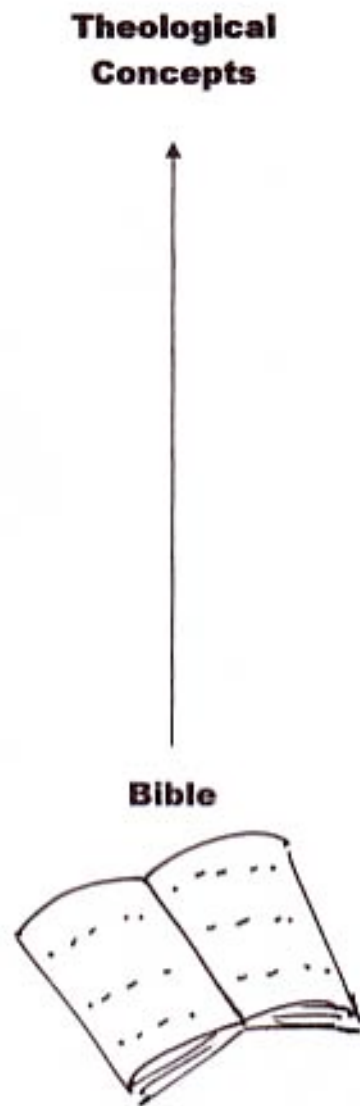
The word for Christian thinking is *theology*. Take it apart. *Theos* in Greek means “God.” *Logos* in Greek means “thinking” and connotes reason, logic, word, speech. In the paragraphs that follow, we will engage in thinking about a variety of things regarding God, especially God’s relationship to the world.

Just how do we think about God?

Building a concept or mental model of God is like building a house. We need construction materials. We need to put them together in a reasonable way. Once we’ve erected the house, then we need to step back, look at it, and consider whether we’ll paint it a different color or put on an addition.

What are the construction materials? The foundation is laid with what the Bible says. On top of that foundation we add insights from the Christian tradition, testimony from selected persons’ experience, and thinking reasonably about what is *essential* and what might be *adiaphoral* or, shall we say, flexible.

In what follows we will concentrate on building a concept of God based on what the Bible says in light of insights from the Christian tradition. We will look briefly at one very important passage in the Bible, Exodus 3:14, where God engages in self-revelation to Moses near Mount Sinai. What we will find is that God is mysterious. Even when God confronts us with revelation we are left with an unfathomable mystery.



We will then turn to concepts of God that have developed in the Christian tradition accompanied by some non-Christian ideas about God. Get ready for some big words. We'll define them, of course. Here are the key models of God: atheism, agnosticism, deism, theism or monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, and panentheism. Most Christians through the ages have come closest to Trinitarian monotheism, but not exclusively. We will compare and contrast these ideas.

These ideas or mental models do not capture completely what God is like. God remains mysterious. Reminding ourselves from time to time of God's mystery will help prevent us from treating our concepts as idols.

What is key is to note is that these concepts represent better or worse ways of interpreting what the Bible says. The Bible all by itself does not deliver a

single concept of God. We need to construct the concept, and this is what the theologian does. So, get ready. You'll now become a theologian.

Exodus 3:14

Although it is difficult to rank in importance various passages within Scripture, we cannot begin thinking about God without reminding ourselves of what happened to Moses when confronted by the mystery of the burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai. This is a moment of revelation, what scholars would call a *theophany* or appearance of the divine.

In this account, Moses sees a burning bush which is not being consumed by the fire. He's puzzled. Out of the bush comes a voice. The voice commissions Moses to become a prophet who will lead the enslaved Hebrew people out of Egypt into liberty. This is Moses' call vision, the moment when he gets his vocation. Our word 'vocation' (like 'vocal') means literally 'a calling'. Moses' calling is to mediate the Sinai Covenant between God and the people of Israel.

Moses considers accepting his call, which includes returning to Egypt and leading the Hebrew people. But, Moses does not quite get the picture immediately. So he quizzes the strange voice in the bush, "If they ask me who sent me, what shall I reply? What is your name?"

Oops! Although Moses has removed his shoes, he's verbally treading on what is holy. This is a dramatic moment, far more dramatic than most modern readers of the Bible at first realize. Here's why. In the ancient world at the time of Moses, people believed far more than we do today in the power of words. Words and realities belonged together. To know the name of something was to have power over it. This is why witches and sorcerers were thought to have power; they could pronounce curses and devastating things would happen.

When as a young boy the bullies in the neighborhood would call me names, I would feel sad. My mother comforted me with a jingle, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." My modern mother did not think like the culture of the ancient Near East. Words were thought to have power, then.

In Moses' era, to pronounce the name of a god in a liturgy was to gain power over the god. Priests like sorcerers could make the gods do human bidding, it was assumed. So, when Moses asks the one speaking in the bush for a name, we have arrived at a threshold moment. If the voice would give Moses a name, then Moses like a sorcerer would gain power over the voice.

Now, how does the voice in the bush respond? Very cleverly. The voice says, '*ehyeh asher 'ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14). We translate this as "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." What we find here is the Hebrew verb, 'to be'. If we stop quoting the voice and render what is said in the third person imperfect causative intensive form, we get what is called the Tetragrammaton (four letter word) _____ or *Yhwh*, which we today write, *Yahweh*, sometimes *Jehovah*. The point is that the word we sometimes use for God's name, *Yahweh*, is not a name at all. It simply says, "God is" "or "God will be what God will be" or "God will cause to be whatever will be." It is a form of a name that is no name. By the term *Yahweh*,

Moses will have no power over the voice. The voice will remain mysterious and elusive.

The voice goes on to tell Moses that this word is okay to use when identifying the sovereign God of Israel. "This is my name for ever, and this is my title for all generations" (Exodus 3:15). The prophet Ezekiel reports repeatedly God saying, "And they will know that I am Yahweh." But, *Yahweh* is not literally a name. *Yahweh* is more like a cipher, a place holder, a title, an identifying word, In the final analysis, the God of Israel does not have a name in the same way that we have a name.

The theological significance is this: no one of us, nor any creature in creation, can get power over the mysterious Holy One of Israel. Jewish and Christian theologians in the later tradition will go on to describe God with the Latin phrase, *a se*, as being-unto-itself, or totally and utterly independent. The term for this is God's *aseity*.

With this in mind theologians like to speak of God in contrasting terms, as *transcendent*, meaning beyond our reach or understanding, plus *immanent*, meaning God is present within our domain or realm as creatures. The dynamism of the God of the Bible is that the transcendent and incomprehensible God becomes an immanent partner with the covenant people.

The result of the Moses story is that we refer to the God of Israel with titles rather than names. We refer to God or address God as Lord, Father, Holy One, and such. Even our English word 'God' is not a name. It is a translation of the Greek word, *theos*, which simply refers to the gods of the ancient Greek pantheon. God remains nameless even for modern Christians. The use of titles rather than a name preserves in our understanding the mystery and power of the God who transcends us yet calls us into covenant. It helps guard against conceptual idolatry.

Emmanuel: God with us

With Jesus, something else dramatic happens. The mysterious God beyond all names enters time and space and takes up residence with us creatures. ^{NRS} **Matthew 1:23** "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us'." Jesus is the name of a baby boy; yet as Emmanuel he also has a title, "God with us." The God of the beyond has become intimate with us. Theologians call this the *incarnation* which means God took on flesh in the person of Jesus.

Now, the New Testament can be a bit confusing when it comes to how it uses the word "God." On the one hand, "God" can refer to the first person of the Trinity, sometimes spoken of as God the Father. Jesus can pray to God the Father as if he and God have distinct wills: ^{NRS} **Matthew 26:39** "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." On the other hand, "God" can refer to the entire Trinity, inclusive of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus can say, ^{NRS} **John 10:30** "The Father and I are one." Some theologians have tried to straighten out the confusion by using 'God' exclusively for the Father and 'Godhead' for the Trinity. But, this idea has not caught on. So,

we continue to live with an ambiguity. It's a minor confusion that creates relatively few problems.

What is so important when thinking theologically is that the mysterious God of Israel has become present in the finite and personal conditions of ordinary human life. Even though Yahweh of Israel is being revealed in the person of Jesus, the mystery almost increases rather than decreases. How can an *a se* divinity who's power transcends what any human enter into such a humble incarnate state? What is revealed is that God is not merely a spiritual or immortal entity in contrast to us physical and mortal creatures. We now speak of God on both sides of the ledger, both the divine side and the human side. The God of Israel is free to become human, and this only adds to the original mystery.

Built right into every healthy concept of God must be a tension between the beyond and the intimate, the sublime and the mundane, the transcendent and the immanent. On the one hand, the God of Israel is majestic. ^{NRS} **Psalm 93:4** "More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD!" On the other hand, we can find God sleeping tenderly in a Bethlehem manger. ^{NRS} **Luke 2:7** "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Without both the beyond and the intimate, we don't have the distinctively Christian idea of God.

God as Trinity

The Holy Spirit adds to God's presence in our personal and communal life in a non-physical way. The Holy Spirit places the suffering and rising Christ within our hearts to comfort and empower us from within. As Spirit, God is Emmanuel or "God with us" just as Jesus is "God with us" in the flesh. The Trinity has become the emblem of our the Christian understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent. ^{NRS} **Matthew 28:19** "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"

We will postpone exposition of God understood as Trinity for another lesson. Here in this lesson for thoughtful Christians we will build concepts of the divine in a more general and abstract way. Tackling the idea of the Trinity will require another venue, so to speak.

Now we turn to a variety of mental models for God. Some represent Scripture better than others. Some not at all.

Atheism

The term *atheism* puts the privative 'a' in front of 'theism' to mean belief that no god exists. Although there were very few atheists in the ancient world, there were some, as the Psalmist acknowledges. ^{NRS} **Psalm 14:1** "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'."

In our modern society, atheism is associated with naturalism or secular humanism allegedly based on science. Marxists and Maoists are the chief examples. Science is not itself atheistic, but naturalism or secular humanism is.

The essential belief is that physical nature is the only reality, and nature is self-explanatory. The only knowledge that counts as knowledge comes from science, and science makes no conceptual room for God to create the world or to act in the world. From the point of view of an atheist, what religious people believe is false knowledge or old fashioned superstition.

Is atheism an option for thoughtful Christians? No. During the 1960s some theologians tried to fly a kite of “Christian atheism” by stressing that God the Father had died and disappeared during the incarnation, so that all that remains is God incarnate in Jesus Christ and in the history that followed. Christian atheists did not gain much of a following. Through the centuries, most thinking Christians have identified themselves with theism, with belief in God as the world’s creator and redeemer.

Agnosticism

This word, *agnosticism*, places the privative ‘a’ in front of the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. An agnostic is one who affirms that he or she does not know whether a god exists and, further, that it is in principle impossible to know for certain. It was Thomas Huxley, a friend of Charles Darwin, who gave the modern world this term. He associated it with evolutionary science. As a scientist, we cannot know let alone prove whether or not the God of Christianity exists.

Buddhism in its more ascetic forms can be agnostic or even atheistic. At the center of reality for the Buddhist is emptiness. The logic of divinity and the logic of nothingness are the same to a Buddhist. On the one hand, infinite reality cannot be known by our finite human minds, making it agnostic. On the other hand, Buddhism teaches that no personal god exists to relate to us, making it atheistic.

Can a Christian rightfully claim to be an agnostic? No, even though a mild sympathy for agnosticism could be mustered. As we noticed in Moses’ conversation with the voice in the burning bush, God is mysterious. Even in revelation, God is mysterious. When we get to know God, the mystery remains. So, it is not unusual for a thoughtful Christian to say “I’m agnostic” about one or another matter regarding God.

Yet, despite the mystery, a person of faith trusts in the God who cannot be fully known. Faith is first trust, and only later does understanding or knowledge grow.

Deism

Deism is an English word based upon the Latin for God, *Deus*. It has a specific conceptual meaning. According to deism, a single God created the world at the beginning out of nothing. God created matter and energy. God also established the laws of nature, the same laws of nature that scientists can discover. Once the world was established, the God of deism withdrew. God went on permanent vacation, so to speak. God no longer intervenes in the world. The laws of nature take care of everything.

Among the implications of deism are the elimination of miracles and the evaporation of petitionary prayer. Because God does not intervene in natural events, what we believe to be miracles must in fact be natural events that we only interpret as extraordinary. Because God does not intervene, we cannot expect God to end a drought with rain, heal the sick, or save us from other adversity.

Deists were very influential in Great Britain, France, Germany, and colonial America in the 17th and 18th centuries. They were impatient with the denominational wars in Europe; and deism became a religious position associated with reason and the Enlightenment. Freemasons openly embraced deism, as did Unitarians. The pyramid pictured on the obverse of the U.S. dollar bill depicts the all-seeing eye of the deistic God. Mozart's *Zauberflöte* (Magic Flute) is dedicated to deism.

Can thoughtful Christians be deists? Deists affirm that God creates the world from nothing, as does most of the Christian tradition. And, thoughtful Christians can be rationalists. Yet, deism presents a problem. The God of Moses and Jesus is an active God, one who is immanent and involved. The God Christians worship comes to us as Emmanuel, God with us. Deism is unsympathetic to this emphasis within the Christian understanding.

Pantheism

Our word *pantheism* places 'pan' meaning 'all' in front of the Greek word for belief in God, *theism*. Pantheism is the belief that all things are divine. The being of God and the being of the world are co-spatial and co-temporal.

Pantheists distinguish between plurality and unity. Our everyday experience seems to indicate that the world is plural, made up of a wide diversity of things. Even you as a subjective person seem to be an individual, one person among others. However, this is an illusion. Down deep, below the level of perception, all things are only one thing. That one thing is the divine reality. The spiritual task is to get beneath the surface illusion and discover the deeper unity, to realize that even you as an apparently independent self are at one with the All, the divine whole of reality.

It is difficult to tell if a pantheist believes the divine is transcendent or not. If the divine is co-extensive with the world, then the divine is finite or limited just as the world is. Yet, an element of transcendence peeks through with the idea of levels of reality. The deeper level is more real than the superficial level. Here is how it works. Even though on the surface the world may look ordinary, down deep it is sacred. The created world is a manifestation of the underlying being of the divine reality. We creatures and all living things are actually divine. We are a part of God. Could we describe this deeper level where all separate things are united into one thing a form of transcendence?

The Hindus in India call the All or unity of reality *Brahman*, and the illusion of multiplicity *maya*, in Sanskrit. When Hindus speak of the gods, *devas*, they mean intermediate entities such as Shiva or Vishnu who represent Brahman to our finite and limited human minds. Brahman is a reality that lies beyond the

gods. What is transcendent for a Hindu is Brahman, more primary than the gods, so to speak.

In our own era in the Western world, pantheism is on the rise. New Age Spirituality has incorporated pantheism. The New Age emphasizes the sacredness of all things. This translates into ecological ethics. By emphasizing that the planet earth is divine and hence sacred in its depths, some ecologists argue that we should leave nature alone. We should withdraw our attempts to transform nature through technology, because this is a form of profaning what is sacred. Rather, we should acknowledge that the natural world is intrinsically valuable and protect the ecosphere from further deterioration.

Can a thoughtful Christian be a pantheist? Certainly not, if the God of Israel is equated with Shiva or Vishnu. These Hindu gods are less than ultimate. They merely mediate Brahman, which is more ultimate. Well, then, can a thoughtful Christian equate God with Brahman? No, not quite. Both Brahman and God are ultimate, to be sure. Yet, there is a decisive difference. Brahman is impersonal. God, according to thoughtful Christians, in sharp contrast, is personal. We speak of the Trinity as made up of three persons. In fact, in Western civilization our concept of a human person is in large part derived from the Christian understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as persons. Our relationship with God is interactive, interpersonal. We are not manifestations or extensions of the divine life in an illusory creation. Rather, we are a separate reality being brought into the divine life through the work of redemption.

God for the Christian stands against the world while loving the world. The world is not a manifestation of the divine, for Christians. The world is a creation, something God created from nothing. God relates to the world as something other-than-God. God loves the world, and love requires that the world be other-in-relationship to God. God does not love the world as an extension of God's own being.

Even so, one aspect of pantheism is attractive to Christian eyes, namely, the idea that the sacred is everywhere present, that we need only look beneath the surface to see the presence of the ultimate divine reality. Christians agree with Hindus and New Agers on this point. However, the New Age version of pantheism which renders all of nature sacred and decrees technology to be profane presents a problem. For Christian theology, nature is not sacred. Only God is sacred. God may be present everywhere in the world of nature, to be sure; but this does not make nature itself sacred.

Polytheism and Henotheism

Polytheism is belief in many gods, as the prefix 'poly' implies. In its most primitive or basic form, polytheists believe spirits inhabit and direct the forces of nature. Native Americans before the arrival of the Europeans believed in the *manitoos*, spirits belonging to various species of animals they would hunt. Jesuit missionaries from France in the 16th century tried to convey what Christians mean by God, and found it a challenge. They invented the concept of the "Great Spirit" who is the source of all the elemental spirits. The natives resisted joining

the Christian church, but they loved the idea of the Great Spirit. The concept of the single Great Spirit spread from tribe to tribe across the continent and became a major part of Native American religion.

In biblical times the polytheism of Greece and Rome framed the experience of the first Christians. The gods were associated with natural forces. Zeus in Greece renamed Jupiter in Rome was the sky god, with the thunder bolt as his emblem. Aphrodite in Greece renamed Venus in Rome was the goddess of love; and her son, Eros or Cupid, is still seen on Valentine cards with an arrow aimed right at your heart.

Henotheism is polytheism with an emphasis on loyalty to only one of the gods, or in the superiority of one's own god over the gods of foreigners. In the ancient world when one nation would conquer another, the statues of the native gods would be torn down and replaced with statues of the conquerors. Change rulers, change gods. In the biblical story of Ruth, Naomi in Moab tells Ruth she will follow her back to Israel. Naomi's words have become the song, "Whither thou goest," sung today at weddings. ^{KJV} **Ruth 1:16** "And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God." Note that when Ruth moves to Israel, she will worship the God of Israel. Change countries, change gods. This is henotheism.

The Hindus combine pantheism and polytheism. Every individual Hindu can select which god to worship, because the worship of a god is a means to a further end, namely, the acknowledgement of Brahman. The various gods are subordinate to Brahman. The plurality of gods funnels down into the unity of the one, Brahman.

Can Christians make themselves at home with polytheism? No, not likely. Already in New Testament times the Christians realized that their belief in the one God of Moses and Jesus could not be reconciled with the nationalistic gods of the various peoples, nor with the nature gods of polytheism. Christians steadfastly avoided ascribing symbols or pictures of God the Father for more than a thousand years, because they wanted to avoid any resemblance between their concept of God and that of Zeus or Jupiter. From the Christian point of view, the gods of polytheism are too ordinary, too this worldly, to match the sublime majesty of the Holy One of Israel.

Theism or Monotheism

If Christians would be compelled to join a club of believers in God, they would most likely join with other monotheists such as Jews and Muslims. The word 'theism' simply means belief in God; and 'monotheism' confirms belief in one divine reality, not many. What is distinctive to theism has to do with God's relationship with the world. According to theists, God is a *se*, totally independent and totally free. Without God, the world would not exist.

Further, theists claim that God created the world out of nothing. "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists," writes Martin Luther in the *Small Catechism*. Without God, the Big Bang could not have banged. Even

today, the world of nature is utterly dependent on the will of God to sustain it in existence. Should God change the divine mind and withdraw support, all of reality would suddenly drop into nonbeing and we would not even be aware of the loss. Everything, including our consciousness, would blink out of existence. Conversely, the fact that we wake up in the morning and celebrate the singing of the birds is a gift of God's grace through creation.

The key element in this model of God is creation out of nothing, known as *creatio ex nihilo* in Latin. ^{NRS} **Romans 4:17** God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

Because God begins with nothing and then creates the world, we have testimony that God is all-powerful. Biblical symbols such as Lord and King suggest that we construct a model of God with *aseity* and omnipotence.

There is more to theism. In contrast to deism, God for the theists is active. Rather than let the world just run itself, the God of theism monitors nature and history in such a way as to ensure that over the long run the divine will is done. God daily provides for the world; and theologians use the word 'providence' to describe God's continued activity in the world.

Theists tend to believe in miracles and also in prayer. Miracles are rare, because God's main way of providing for the world is through matter, energy, and the laws of nature. Theists are close to deists here. Yet, God may intervene from time to time in an act of special providence. This is a miracle. Miracles are invisible to science, because they cannot be reduced to an incident within the laws of nature as those laws are currently in effect.

Similarly, theists pray for rain and healing and comfort and world peace. When theists pray, they expect God to listen and to incorporate such prayers into the divine will for the entire creation.

Recently, some American evangelical theologians have been proposing *open theism*. By 'open' they mean God is open to an inter-dependent relation with the world. God begins with *aseity* and freedom; but then God sacrifices this independence. God decides freely to limit the divine self. God decides to limit the exercise of divine power. This divine self-limitation opens up freedom for the world to engage in self-organization and even to fall into sin and evil. By being open, God then abides with the fallen world and works within the world for its redemption.

In summary, in contrast to deists, theists believe God acts in the world. In contrast to polytheists, theists believe there is only one divine reality. In contrast to pantheists, theists believe God is personal and that God is qualitatively different from the world; God loves the world as one person would love another. Although most Christians over the centuries have been theists, some have considered other options, such as panentheism.

Panentheism

As the word *panentheism* indicates, what is affirmed here is that all things exist within God's being. The entire world of nature and history exist within God's

being; but they do not exhaust God's being. There is a little bit of God left over, so to speak.

Sometimes panentheists use a human analogy. They say that God relates to the world like our mind relates to our body. Our mind is totally dependent on our body to exist, of course; yet, our thinking seems to transcend our body at certain points. Our mind can look at our body and even guide our body. The world is God's body; and God is the mind of the world.

This means that God did not create the world out of nothing. Panentheists reject *creatio ex nihilo*. They prefer the idea of continuing creation, *creatio continua*, to emphasize the shared temporal relationship between the world and God. Continuing creation for the panentheist is similar to providence for the theist.

This further implies that world must have existed backwards in time just as long as God has. And, the world will continue to exist into the future as long as there is a God. According to panentheism, God loses *aseity*, loses independence. The world and God are mutually inter-dependent. Similar to pantheists, panentheists believe that everything in the world is connected to everything else; and everything is connected to God. God's being and the being of the world are inseparable.

The God of panentheism is finite, not infinite. Big, maybe, but not infinite. The physical body of God is co-extensive with the physical make-up of the universe. Only the mind of God transcends the physical plenitude.

This also means that God cannot love the world as we would love another person; rather, God must love the world as we would love our own body. God's love for the world is a form of self-love.

Process theologians and some contemporary feminist theologians find panentheism attractive. They object to the cultural connotations of theism, where God is pictured as an omnipotent King or Lord or Father. These symbols of dominance have tended to reinforce hierarchical thinking and patriarchy over the centuries. Feminists object as well to the idea of creation out of nothing, because it implies total power over the world. Panentheism provides an attractive alternative model for feminists, because it pictures God as connected, as more relational. The love of God for the world according to the panentheist is an extension of God's love for God's own body; and feminists find this a good model for a woman. A woman should love others as an extension of her own self-esteem and self-care.

A Bible Quiz Along the Way

Take a look at what Saint Paul says in ^{NRS} **Acts 17:28** "For 'In him [God] we live and move and have our being'." Now, which model best interprets what is said here? Pantheism? Theism? Panentheism?

Concept of God	Creator?	Active in The world?	Aseity?
Atheism	No	No	No
Agnosticism	No?	No?	No?
Deism	Yes	No	Yes
Pantheism	Yes	No	No
Polytheism	No	Yes	No
Henotheism	No	Yes	No
Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panentheism	No	Yes	No
Trinitarian Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes

Eschatological Panentheism

As of this point you have just reviewed the standard models of God, many of which have been floating around religious circles for centuries. Now let's construct an experimental model of God that combines some of the best features of theism and the best features of panentheism. This model will side with theism in affirming that God is a se, independent, free, and omnipotent. It will also side with panentheism in emphasizing relationality and connectedness. This model will affirm both creation out of nothing as well as continuing creation. Then, in addition, it will fold in two characteristics of God described in the Bible but not yet built into the above models, namely, God's promise to act in the future and, further, that this future act will be redemptive.

Let's put together three passages from Scripture which are not normally associated. The first is from the creation account in Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." In this new model, "very good" will apply to the future, not the past. The second passage is Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." The new heaven and the new earth God promises here are actually our present heaven and earth in their final and perfected form. God's future redemption will be the completion of the creation begun back in Genesis 1. The third passage reminds us that God remains mysterious even in revelation. It is 1 Corinthians 13:12, "now we see in a mirror dimly." Because we see God only in a mirror dimly now, our concept of God must be a construction, and a blurry construction at that. Still, we'll do our experimental best.

Now, here is the key principle of this new model: *God creates from the future, not the past.* Did you get that? Let's try it again in slightly different words: God creates by giving the universe a future. More. God's creative work is also God's redemptive work. Now, you might be saying, what does this mean?

Here is what it means. God starts with redemption and then draws all of creation toward it. Or, perhaps better said, God's ongoing creative work is also God's redeeming work. Only a redeemed creation will be worthy of the stamp of approval we read in Genesis, "very good."

The first thing God did for the creation way back at the beginning—back in Genesis or back at the moment just prior to the Big Bang--was to give the world a future. To have a future is to have being. To lack a future is to lack being. The very definition of the creation includes its future.

At creation, God gave the world a future in two senses. The first sense of the future is openness. The gift of a future builds into physical reality its dynamism, openness, contingency, self-organization, and freedom. The bestowal of this kind of future is the bestowal to reality of the possibility of becoming something it had never been before. God provided the condition that made and still makes ongoing change in our world possible. And, what God did at the beginning God is continuing to do every moment, every second. At the very moment you are reading this, God is dispensing to our world a future that is open for variation, creativity, and newness. God unlocks the present from the grip of past causation. And this frees the present for newness in the future. God is unceasing in serving the world in this manner.

The second sense of the future is fulfillment. God gave the world a promise that, in the end, everything would be "very good." Creation is not done yet. God is still creating the world. When it is finally completed, then we can say, "very good." Anticipating fulfillment, we want to say that future-giving is the way God both creates and redeems the world.

It should be obvious that this model does not limit the concept of creation to a single act back at the beginning, back at the Big Bang or back in Genesis 1. John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I.XVI) that we should not limit God to being only "a momentary Creator," but recognize "the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception." This means both creation at the beginning and continuing creation can be affirmed. Still more. God has not yet completed his creative work. God's creative work will be completed when the world is redeemed.

This model differs from deism, according to which God created the world once upon a time and then went on vacation to let the world run on its own. Instead, this model says that God's creative act of imparting an open future is an ongoing one. Affirmed here is creation from nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. Yet, also affirmed is the creative power by which God brought being out of nonbeing continues to sustain the world today.

Now, what about the name, *eschatological panentheism*? The term *eschatology* is a theological word for 'last things', for the final consummation of God's entire drama with the creation. When the New Testament mentions the Kingdom of God or new creation or resurrection, it is talking about eschatology. This is the future dimension.

As we noted above, most thoughtful Christians in the past have conceived of God according to the model of theism, or monotheism. This model requires that God and the world be different, separate, independent of one another. Yet,

as we look forward to the future God has promised, we look forward to a world in which God dwells fully. That future world—the one God declares to be “very good”—will enter and remain *within* the divine life. The creation will no longer be other. It will dwell within God’s own personal and interactive life. The term ‘panentheism’ is the best one to describe what God promises. We may be theists today, but panentheists tomorrow.

Conclusion

Much more could and should be said about God. We have provided here only the briefest description of some of the mental models of God articulated in the minds of Christians and non-Christians. In the two millennia of Christian tradition, theism—especially Trinitarian theism—has become the preferred model for conceptualizing God. The reality of God in Godself, however, is not reducible to the theistic model or any other model. God is fundamentally mysterious. ^{NRS}
Romans 11:33 “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” writes Saint Paul.

We relate to God through our faith, not through knowledge that eliminates the divine mystery. Yet, our faith seeks understanding. And constructing concepts of God is one way to pursue further understanding.

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