

On Mapping the Theological Landscape

Modelling the (Protestant) Debate on Divine Action

by Matthias Ruf

To gain an overview of plausible contemporary interpretations of Christianity, it is helpful to begin with the different ways in which talk of God's action is understood. Key interpretations can be captured particularly well through modelling. Yet established modelling approaches are beset by a range of difficulties. These can be addressed by consistently attending to what, in light of central contributions to the debate, can responsibly be *meant* by the claim »God acts.« This yields not only a more accurate survey of the discussion, but also a map of contemporary theology that is as inclusive and as problem-sensitive as possible – one that does not distort positions from the outset.

1. Introduction

How can we gain an overview of those fundamental interpretations of Christianity that still offer orientation today – and that might serve as promising starting points for further work? For systematic theology and the philosophy of religion, this question is both indispensable and notoriously daunting. Without such orientation, blind spots readily emerge, and one's basic theological stance can seem uncomfortably arbitrary. Yet any such overview is almost bound to fall short, given the sheer volume of material and the inevitability of perspective. How, then, should we proceed?

In the following considerations I propose, as a first step, that we should start with different ways in which our talk about divine action might be understood.¹ This is where modern theology makes foundational decisions – decisions that shape nearly every question in systematic theology. Second, I aim to show that major interpretations of God's action can be captured through models. Existing proposals for compiling and comparing such models, however, require revision. Accordingly, in a third step, I develop an alternative, linguistically grounded taxonomy of models. This taxonomy is oriented toward what, on prominent theological readings, can responsibly be meant by saying »God acts«. Not only can an

¹ With regard to questions concerning the meaning of the term »divine action«, I am going to summarize some reflections from that are elaborated on more detail in: *Matthias Ruf, »Handeln Gottes«, Zur Hermeneutik theologischer Rede von Gott (RPT 120), Tübingen 2022*. I will supplement these considerations in the following article with reflections how the debates on divine action can also serve as a map for the landscape of Protestant systematic theology as a whole.

overview of questions of God's action be gained from this. This also results in a map of contemporary theology that is as inclusive and sensitive to problems as possible and that does not distort different positions from the outset through modeling.

In the present article, this map can be drawn only in broad strokes, and primarily with reference to Protestant positions. The following reflections are nonetheless meant to suggest why the approach may also prove heuristically illuminating also from an interconfessional perspective.

2. Talking about Divine Action: An Alternative Point of Departure

Beginning with the question of God's action is not the standard route to an overview of the 'live hypotheses' (William James) that shape contemporary theological thought. More commonly, orientation is sought through surveys of the history of theology and philosophy (a), sketches of confessional differences (b), or reference to guiding themes that have proved especially influential in particular periods (c). Yet each of these points of departure is useful only up to a point:

On (a): Even though historical overviews are indispensable for reflecting on one's own positionality, they do not by themselves settle the present normative standing of past decisions. This can be seen, for instance, in debates shaped by Hume's theory of causality or by logical positivism's 'verification criterion of meaning.' However influential these may once have been, simply rehearsing them today does not necessarily yield an adequate grasp of the issues that now matter.

On (b): Moreover, at least some traditional denominational demarcations have meanwhile turned out to be relatively subordinate differences of theological schools.² One of the characteristics of modern paradigm conflicts in theology is that they run right through the confessions. In the 19th century David Friedrich Strauß already observed remarkable shifts in theological fault lines in this regard: "In today's scientific context, the orthodox Protestant theologian is closer to the orthodox Catholic than to the rationalist or even the speculative theologian of his own confession."³ A similar picture of confessional allocations could also be drawn from contemporary debates in which, for example, Protestant analytic

² The reassessment of relevant points of contention from the Reformation period, such as the doctrine of justification, is connected, among other things, with developments in exegesis since the 1980s, cf. relevant studies by E. P. Sanders or James D. G. Dunn or new developments in questions of "Paul within Judaism". Moreover, some of the differences that were so important at that time could be settled or identified as mutual misunderstandings. Cf. the important ecumenical study: *Karl Lehmann; Wolfhart Pannenberg* (eds.), *Lehrverurteilung – kirchentrennend? I. Rechtfertigung. Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute*, Freiburg 1986. Certainly, there are still confessional differences that so far could not be overcome. But overall and at least with regard to theological questions, the denominations seem to move closer together.

³ *David Friedrich Strauß*, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft*, Bd. 1, Tübingen 1840, vi.

philosophers are in some places closer to Catholic theologians than, for example, to the classical Protestant reference points like Schleiermacher, Barth or Tillich.⁴

On (c), as far as I can see, the theological field is most often mapped by way of guiding themes – ‘religion,’ ‘revelation,’ ‘history,’ ‘gender,’ ‘race,’ and the like. While such headings can indeed indicate different methodological orientations, it is far from obvious that they track correspondingly deep differences in how central theological matters are understood. Do revelation-theological approaches necessarily overlook questions of religious relevance? Do theories of religion, conversely, inevitably sideline the question of God? Surely not – at least not as a rule. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the most widely used classificatory proposal in the Protestant context – Dirk Evers’s – does not clearly register where substantive differences obtain among the main approaches (which he groups under “theological work on the concept of religion,” the “hermeneutical tradition,” and the “return of metaphysics”), as distinct from mere shifts in emphasis.⁵ A closely related problem arises in attempts to distinguish contemporary (Catholic) fundamental theological positions by appealing to the contrast between “analytical” and “continental” theology.⁶ What, then, are the alternatives for charting the contemporary landscape of theology and the philosophy of religion?

The central differences that must be marked within the horizon of modernity lie – so the thesis pursued here – in how talk of God’s action is understood in key contributions to the debate. I assume, first, that decisions at this point shape almost every theological topic and, second, that influential accounts diverge on the relevant questions. The first claim is easier to see:

Beginning with talk of God’s action is heuristically fruitful because the vast majority of Christian claims about God are cast as claims about what God does. This includes statements such as: »God creates the world, reveals himself, saves Israel, sends the Son, accompanies, blesses, redeems human beings, consummates the world,« and so forth. How each of these assertions is understood depends, in turn, on how the claim *God acts* is understood – since, in each case, the latter is semantically implied. Of course, one might choose other points of comparison: more basic, perhaps, is the question of God’s existence; and, theologically, questions of Christology or soteriology may seem even more decisive. Yet one can

⁴ Cf. the remarks on the Anglo-Saxon »science and religion debate« in Philip Clayton, *The Fruits of Pluralism: A Vision for the Next Seven Years in Religion/Science*, in: *Zygon* 49/2 (2014), 430–442, here 437: “The last 15 years have seen a virtual bifurcation of the field into evangelical research programs and ‘liberal’ research programs. [...] Whereas once the breakdown of communication happened when scientists wouldn’t talk with theologians (or vice versa), today the breakdowns are occurring because the two halves of Christianity are failing to find common ground.”

⁵ Cf. Dirk Evers, *Neuere Tendenzen in der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Dogmatik*, in: *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 140 (2015) cols. 1–22.

⁶ This is also implicitly expressed in the fact that, for example, Christian Bauer, at the end of his sketch of the “overall map,” attributes – primarily with regard to Catholic theology – the distinction between analytical and continental theology to “biographically and contextually conditioned ‘affective structures’.” (cf. *Christian Bauer, Allianzen im Widerstreit? Zur Internationalität deutschsprachiger Theologie zwischen analytischen und kontinentalen Diskurswelten*, in: *Theologische Revue* 118 (2022) 21). Such a difference might help to explain the intensity of some debates; however, but it would evidently fail to make clear where the fundamental differences in the matter itself lie in the interpretation of Christianity.

argue with good reason that, with respect to God's existence (even where the question is dismissed as religiously insignificant), there is often comparatively little principled disagreement. On the one hand, this has to do with the fact that classical works also contain strongly apophatic motifs (for example, due to the assumption of divine simplicity or due to certain conceptions of revelation).⁷ On the other hand, even theological approaches that substantially revise 'traditional' dogmatic assumptions often still seek to preserve some reference to God as a transcendent counterpart, for all their emphasis on divine mysteriousness (see, for instance, the discussion of Schleiermacher's doctrine of God below). Moreover, from a religious perspective, questions of soteriology and the like may well be more urgent. For the more specific task of surveying basic theological approaches, however, interpretations of »God's action« are especially illuminating, given their comprehensive conceptual entanglement with other *loci*. In this sense Ingolf U. Dalferth is surely right to observe, more generally, that our understanding of talk of God determines "how everything else is understood."⁸

One might readily concede that the question of God's action is indeed fundamental, and that much depends on how it is answered. Yet one might still object (this concerns the second point above) that, at least in the major studies of Christianity, there is no principled disagreement on this matter. Such an assessment is not uncommon; in my view, however, it is mistaken. One reason is that attempts to capture basic interpretations of talk of God's action by means of models often import substantial distortions into the discussion. This is the issue to which the following turns.

3. Models of God's Action: Promise and Pitfalls

Since the 1960s – building especially on the work of Ian G. Barbour and Ian T. Ramsey – studies of »God's action« have regularly sought to articulate basic interpretive options by means of models.⁹ Typically, models condense a set of compatible leitmotifs into a manageable form. To this end, scholars appeal to images of God, to salient metaphors for the God-world relation (for example, 'watchmaker-watch' or 'parent-child'), or to distinctions

⁷ See, for example, Karl Barth's prominent placement of the topic of God's 'hiddenness' at the beginning of § 27 of his *Church Dogmatics*; cf. *Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II/1: The Doctrine of God, ed. by G. W. Bromiley; T. F. Torrance, transl. by T. H. L. Parker u. a., Edinburgh 1957.

⁸ Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Radikale Theologie*. Berlin 2013, 170.

⁹ According to Mary Hesse a comprehensive and "serious analysis" of concepts of models can be observed in various sciences since about the 19th century. This increased interest is primarily due to a "proliferation [...] of theoretical entities" in classical physics, for which, as in the case of atoms or electrons, there was no directly observable evidence and for which a description in analogous models offered itself, cf. *Mary Hesse, Models and Analogies*, in: W. H. Newton-Smith (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, Oxford 2001, 299–307, esp. 299. From the side of the philosophy of science, this development has been adopted more intensively since the 1920s at the latest and further developed theoretically until the middle of the 20th century. One attraction of the use of models was that it represented a fruitful alternative to a positivist understanding of theory that was primarily oriented towards propositions, cf. *Stephen M. Downes, Scientific Models*, in: *Philosophy Compass* 6/11 (2011) 757–764. Taken together this ultimately also opened up points of contact for a theological reception of models, cf. for example *Ian T. Ramsey, Models for Divine Activity*, London 1973.

drawn from theories of causation. Especially where the aim is to model divine action itself (rather than merely to map the surrounding debate), the epistemic claim attached to such models is often framed in deliberately modest terms. According to Barbour, models should be understood in terms of “systematic and relatively permanent metaphor[s].”¹⁰ On the one hand, this emphasizes that they should not be misunderstood as “useful fictions.”¹¹ On the other hand, it is often stated at the same time that their use should signal a demarcation from an “unbroken realism.”¹² Overall, the aim is a tentative middle position, and this is justified, among other things, by epistemological considerations: “All models are partial and inadequate representations of what is beyond our ordinary categories of thought.”¹³

Against this background, individual contributions on divine action can be rendered more accessible by assigning them to particular models. As a rule, however, the point of modelling is not exhausted by this classificatory function. When models are arranged in schemata, they are also brought into relation with one another by way of meaningful points of comparison – whether by identifying characteristic ‘poles’ toward which strands in the history of theology tend to converge, or by registering basic theological options that still diverge, even today, at sensitive junctures. Recent debates have developed a range of such schemata. In a first step (a), I present two frequently used variants; in a second step (b), I argue that both share important weaknesses.

On (a), a major typology within the »science and religion dialogue« was developed by Robert J. Russell in the 1990s. Russell’s taxonomy served primarily as a “common framework” for the *Divine Action Project*.¹⁴ At the same time, it was intended not only to articulate the core intuitions of the NIODA program (*Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action*), but also to map more basic interpretive options. For a first orientation, one may consult a condensed excerpt of the scheme (in the full version, the left-hand column distinguishes nine different models).¹⁵

¹⁰ Cf. Sally McFague cited in: Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science. Historical and Contemporary Issues*, San Francisco 1997, 123.

¹¹ Cf. Barbour, *Religion and Science* (see fn. 10), 119.

¹² Cf. Ted Peters, *Models of God*, in: Jeanine Diller et al. (eds.), *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, Dordrecht 2013, 44.

¹³ Cf. Barbour, *Religion and Science* (see fn. 10), 122.

¹⁴ Niels H. Gregersen, *Special Divine Action and the Quilt of Laws. Why the Distinction Between Special and General Divine Action Cannot Be Maintained*, in: Robert John Russell et al. (ed.), *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress*, Vatican 2008, 179–201, esp. 180.

¹⁵ Cf. for the taxonomy Robert J. Russell, *Introduction*, in: Robert J. Russell et al. (eds.), *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Vatican 1995, 1–34, esp. 11.

	Creation	Uniform Divine Action		Objectively Special Divine Action	
		Sustenance	Subjectively Special	Interventionist	Non-Interventionist
Atheism					
Deism	✓				
»Theism«	✓	✓			
»Liberal«	✓	✓	✓		
»Traditional«	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Theology and Science (here in 4 subcategories)	✓	✓	✓		✓

Figure 1: Extract from »Working Typology of Divine Action«

While a relatively large number of models are still being compiled here, there is a tendency to condense and reduce the models in one of the most elaborate schemes of models by Ian G. Barbour.¹⁶ This further development makes sense, as it can increase the explanatory power of the schemes. It was implemented in a particularly influential way by Reinhold Bernhardt, whose work has been well received and is still present in more recent publications (also from a Catholic perspective).¹⁷ Bernhardt's basic idea may be summarized as follows. In order to identify and thematically organize the "most significant concepts of God's activity in the world presented in the history of theology," he proposes – by way of an initial orientation – a distinction between two basic models, under which contributions

¹⁶ Barbour uses similar models to Russell but observes commonalities among individual models in their proximity to or distance from classical theism. Or he differentiates them along the lines of their assessment of interventionism and classifies them according to their performance in the face of further problem areas such as the question of theodicy or challenges from the conversation with the natural science, cf. *Barbour*, Religion and Science (see fn. 8), 305–332. If one summarizes the indications, four main models emerge: the "monarchical model," which represents "classical" theology, the model of "primary-secondary-causes," which is based on "neo-thomistic" theology, thirdly a model that interprets the speech of God's action deistically, and fourthly, various contributions from the *science and religion debate* or also process-theological interpretations can be subsumed under "non-interventionist" models.

¹⁷ Cf. for example *Simon Maria Kopf*, Reframing Providence. New Perspectives from Aquinas on the Divine Action Debate, Oxford 2023, 3; or the rather loose appropriation of Bernhardt in *Bruno Niederbacher*, Vorsehung als Tugend? Systematische Überlegungen zur Rede vom Handeln Gottes, in: Simon Maria Kopf; Georg Essen (eds.), Vorsehung und Handeln Gottes. Analytische und kontinentale Perspektiven im Dialog, Freiburg i. B. 2023, 45. The influential modelling of the debate by Klaus von Stosch also adopts the basic distinction proposed by Reinhold Bernhardt. However, his reflections tend toward integrating the models into a higher-order model, thereby diminishing the heuristic value of the modelling; cf. *Klaus von Stosch*, Gott – Macht – Geschichte. Versuch einer theologisch verantworteten Rede von Gottes Handeln in der Welt, Freiburg i. B. 2019. For a more precise specification of how far such a tendency obtains, see *Ruf*, Handeln Gottes (see fn. 1), 27.

to the topic can be grouped: “According to the ‘actualistic model’, God brings about individual (indeed, potentially all) events in the course of the world through action that may be indirect or direct, but is in any case unconditional and aligned with his will. By contrast, the ‘Sapiential-Ordinative Model’ emphasizes that God’s efficacy is mediated through the order of being – or nature – established in accordance with divine wisdom.”¹⁸ This basic idea, as well as typical representatives of the models, can be illustrated by the following overview:¹⁹

	<i>Actualistic Model</i>	<i>Sapiential-Ordinative Model</i>
<i>Intention of God</i>	Free divine acts of will	Normative orientation based in the divine essence
<i>Mode of action</i>	Individual particular act	Universal, mediated effectiveness
<i>Typical representatives</i>	e. g. Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, contribution from the <i>Divine Action Project</i> , Plantinga; Borderline case: Occasionalism	e. g. Thomas Aquinas, Molina, Leibniz, Rahner; Borderline cases: Stoa and Spinoza

Figure 2: Basic models according to Bernhardt

While this taxonomy is primarily introduced to serve as a heuristic foil for structuring positions in a historical perspective, in another section of his book, Bernhardt additionally connects his schematics to the claim that it also depicts fundamental possibilities of thinking of the relationship between God and the world.²⁰ For this purpose, Bernhardt enriches the models with “fields of metaphors” from the more recent debate or adds concepts from theories of action.²¹

On (b): Even if these schemata provide an initial orientation, closer inspection shows them to be overly imprecise. To begin with, it should be noted that models can be constructed with very different degrees of exactness. Modelling need not aspire to mathematical precision: across the sciences, the spectrum of (more or less detailed) models ranges from classificatory trees in genetics, to animal specimens in museums, to poetic images in literature.²² A certain degree of vagueness has its advantages: it allows positions that are not identical, yet relevantly similar, to be accommodated under shared models. Moreover, it must be conceded that talk of God’s action can plausibly mean only something akin (i.e.,

¹⁸ Cf. Reinhold Bernhardt, *Was heißt „Handeln Gottes“? Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung*, Berlin 2008, 36.38 [Translation; MR].

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 37–39, 234, 280.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 274.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 274, 332.

²² Cf. Downes, *Scientific Models* (see fn. 9), 759. Occasionally, the view can be found that models must be constructed in the form of mathematical equations. However, such a prerequisite would represent an unnecessary restriction, as Downes states in his plea for plural model concepts. It would have the unattractive consequence of excluding the application of models in the natural sciences, for example in certain areas of evolutionary or molecular biology, in which mathematical modelling is largely dispensed with and “pictorial representations of idealised molecules” are used, cf. *ibid.*

analogical) to talk of human action; some indeterminacy in theological categories is therefore to be expected. In the two model-compilations sketched above, however, the categories risk becoming overly elastic. In addition, they fail to register sufficiently that there are different ways of specifying conceptual analogy. The result is a series of serious misalignments in how the debate is represented:

As far as Russell's overview is concerned, it is immediately apparent that the main categories in the left column may be helpful for a first orientation; but they remain nonetheless very ambiguous.²³ More problematic, however, is that labels such as "traditional" misleadingly suggest that the first eighteen centuries of Christian theology form a relatively homogeneous development – and that, for example, theologians were broadly in agreement about construing divine action in interventionist terms. Yet this is already called into question by Thomas Aquinas, who in the *Summa Theologiae* differentiates between *contra* and *supra naturam* (cf. S.Th. I^a, q. 105 a. 6). In addition, the scheme implies that a large portion of theological interpretations share an identical – or at least sufficiently similar – understanding of »creation« and »sustenance«, and that disagreement arises only with respect to »special divine action«. The differences, however, run far deeper, even within theology itself. Although there is scarcely a theologian who does not speak of »creation«, what is meant by the term can vary dramatically. Where the doctrine of creation dispenses with cosmological claims altogether and is directed *solely* toward reflecting on finitude (see below), it becomes conceptually impossible to bridge the distance to notions of creation operative in analytic philosophy of religion or in the *Divine Action Project*. This applies, for instance, to attempts to enlist quantum mechanics in explicating different forms of divine creative action, or to efforts to defend divine causation of the Big Bang as a plausible position by appeal to fine-tuning or to the principle of sufficient reason. A meaningful taxonomy of models must therefore register the fact that, while »creation« is invoked in each case, what is meant is not the same.

A similar difficulty arises with Reinhold Bernhardt's typology, as becomes clear once one looks at how particular authors are assigned to the two models. At first glance, Alvin Plantinga appears to fit neatly into the 'Actualistic Model:' he maintains that God performs particular acts in history, such as raising Jesus from the dead. One might therefore assume that Plantinga has no place in the alternative model. However, this is not the case. Despite important differences of emphasis, Thomas Aquinas likewise affirms particular divine acts and the resurrection of Christ (cf. ST I^a, q. 105; III^a, q. 53); in this respect, his position is conceptually close to Plantinga's. A genuine alternative to Plantinga within Bernhardt's taxonomy would seem to be Schleiermacher. And yet Bernhardt assigns both to the same

²³ The problem of ambiguity can be illustrated by the concept of »deism«. According to Robert J. Russell, in the deist view, God only acted 'at the beginning' of world history, and after the creation of the universe and its laws (e. g. through a 'Big Bang') no longer had any influence on the course of the world, cf. *Russell*, Introduction (see fn. 15), 10. This understanding, however, does not coincide with the classical position of deism. Emanuel Hirsch has worked out that the English deists of the 17th century can best be understood as Christian "freethinkers" who in parts represented a "clearly supranaturalistic concept of revelation," cf. *Emanuel Hirsch*, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie: Im Zusammenhang mit den allgemeinen Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens*, vol. 1, Gütersloh 1975, 293.

model. Admittedly, Schleiermacher, too, speaks of free acts of God and of the resurrection. But by these expressions he intends something quite different than Aquinas or Plantinga. For example, he can take the resurrection to mean that the apparently dead Jesus in fact lived for some time after the crucifixion – and that the symbol of the resurrection serves above all to underscore the enduring significance of Jesus' life.²⁴

Overall, what stands out is that the most significant conceptual strains run *within* the individual models, rather than *between* them. The inconsistencies and imbalances exposed by these two schemata are anything but negligible. Left unchecked, they foster spurious alliances, conceal genuine alternatives, and – through forced placements – blur what is most at stake in the positions under review. The result is a diminished capacity to bring divergent strands of the discussion into productive contact. For this reason, prevailing proposals for modelling divine action require revision. The most direct way forward is to examine where – and why – these distortions arise.

4. The Talk of God's Action – Foundations of an Alternative Taxonomy

The preceding critique of model schemata concerned, first, categories that were overly vague and, second, an insufficient differentiation of the various relations of analogy at work. Both difficulties can be addressed constructively by introducing the following distinctions into an alternative taxonomy:

First, it is helpful to attend to what key contributions *directly communicate* by the utterance *God acts* – that is, to what is *meant* (in the relevant respect), rather than merely to what is *said*. One should therefore not be guided simply by shared terminology (for instance, by assigning positions to the same model merely because both speak of »creation«). The distinctions proposed here are basic linguistic ones, though their detailed explication is notoriously complex.²⁵ However, they can be introduced, provisionally, by means of a simple utterance such as »The cat avoids having its tail pulled«. In most contexts, what one intends to convey is: »The cat does *not* like having its tail pulled.« And one will often also mean, more implicitly: »Let go!«²⁶ The first dimension of meaning (of what is meant) can be called that which is *directly communicated*. The second dimension of meaning (of what is meant) (the »Let go!«) can be called that which is *indirectly communicated*.

A second assumption concerns the content of what is *directly communicated*. Here the decisive question is whether the predicate attributes (a) an *action*, (b) a *process* (perhaps together with a resulting state), or (c) a *state* alone. This is the well-known differentiation of basic 'predicate classes,' which groups predicates according to recurring patterns of content. On the basis of this distinction, *three* basic models can be developed for how talk of God's action is typically understood. They may be characterized as follows:

²⁴ Cf. for example the overview on Schleiermacher's lectures on the life of Jesus in *Hermann Patsch*, Schleiermachers Berliner Exegetik, in: Martin Ohst (ed.), *Schleiermacher Handbuch*, Tübingen 2017, 327–340, esp. 336–337.

²⁵ Cf. *Ruf*, *Handeln Gottes* (see fn. 1), 32–76.

²⁶ Cf. for the example *Adrian Akmajian et al.*, *Linguistics. An Introduction to Language and Communication*, Cambridge 2011, 383.

On (a) within the framework of personal theism, certain panentheistic proposals, and the *Divine Action Project*, the statement »God acts« is often construed – and defended as properly construed – in the sense that »God does things on purpose.« This does not, of course, imply that every assertion of divine action encountered in theology or in church history must be read this way, still less that it must be affirmed as true. Biblical texts in particular abound in metaphor, and it would be untenable to ascribe historicity – or even a determinate historical core – to all (biblical) narratives of God's action. Even so, proponents of this model typically maintain that such an understanding is required by the logic of religious practices such as petitionary prayer, or by central 'root experiences' (for example, the resurrection of Christ). Wolfhart Pannenberg, among others, has developed this point in explicit contrast to existential-hermeneutical approaches in the wake of Bultmann.²⁷ If the phrase »God acts« is understood in the sense of »God does things intentionally«, then the predicate 'does things intentionally' attributes a feature to the referent of the word »God«. In other words, the utterance employs a predicate that belongs to the class of *action predicates*.²⁸ The model can therefore be called "action model."

As already noted, the model's basic commitment can be developed in quite different ways. Over the past few decades, however, a number of more robust versions have taken shape. In response to the recurrent charge of anthropomorphism, proponents typically concede that divine and human action differ in important respects (for instance, with regard to the physical embodiment of the agent or the moral quality of the agent's intentions). Yet they then proceed in one of two ways. Either they argue that such differences do not touch the meaning carried by the (human) predicate »acts«. Or – especially in the wake of William Alston – they propose that predicates such as »reason«, »will«, or »acts« should be understood in a 'partially univocal' manner: the terms are refined, or straightforwardly interpreted, by reference to a 'univocal core' so that they can apply to God and human beings alike despite the differences.²⁹ On this reading, the relevant predicates remain analogical in meaning; unlike in the Thomistic tradition, however, the relation of similarity is spelled out more explicitly, insofar as God is conceived as essentially personal. In further developing the model, proponents often aim to show – often with particular emphasis – that talk of divine action poses no serious difficulty from a scientific point of view. To this end, they

²⁷ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland: Von Schleiermacher bis zu Barth und Tillich*, Göttingen 1997, 215 f.

²⁸ "Predicates of action" are characterised, among other things, by the fact that an imperative can be formed with them, that they can be used in final clauses or that passive reversals are possible here, cf. Peter von Polenz, *Deutsche Satzsemantik*, Berlin 2008, 160.

²⁹ Cf. the influential essays in William Alston (ed.), *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Ithaca/NY 1989. This variant is also considered in theological contexts: Johannes Grössl characterizes 'open theism' accordingly, cf. Johannes Grössl, *Die Offenheit eines handelnden Gottes*, in: Benedikt Paul Göcke – Ruben Schneider (eds.), *Gottes Handeln in der Welt. Probleme und Möglichkeiten aus Sicht der Theologie und analytischen Religionsphilosophie*, Regensburg 2017, 335–346. Armin Kreiner likewise, in view of potential aporias in interpreting the classical doctrine of analogy, draws on motifs that closely parallel William P. Alston's considerations, cf. Armin Kreiner, *Das wahre Antlitz Gottes – oder was wir meinen, wenn wir Gott sagen*, Freiburg i. B. u. a., 2006, 83–91.

appeal to considerations from quantum mechanics and the “dispositional theory of causality,” or they challenge the “principle of the causal closure of the physical.”³⁰

On (b). In theological contributions, model (a) often encounters principled reservations. Particularly influential alternatives pursue a twofold aim: when interpreting utterances such as »God acts«, they foreground the self-interpretation of religious subjects, while at the same time insisting that God nevertheless bears in some way upon the world – without thereby exposing themselves to the classic critiques of theism (especially those associated with Spinoza, Hume, or Kant). Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher articulates this strategy paradigmatically. In § 50 of his *The Christian Faith*, he maintains, on the one hand, that the attributes “which we attribute to God” do not “denote something special in God, but only something special in the way of relating the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ to him.” Yet he also argues that the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ is accompanied by a knowledge of absolute causation. Talk of God thus serves not only to interpret religious feeling in a distinctively theological register, but also to speak of absolute causality: »omnipotence« means that divine causality is coextensive with natural causality; »omniscience« denotes the »liveliness« of absolute causality; and so on. It is crucial, in this context, to avoid any theistic associations: Schleiermacher regarded such associations as a decisive reason why atheism was able to establish itself from the 18th century onwards.³¹

When Schleiermacher speaks of divine »causation«, he has in view only the causal nexus between the “wherefrom of the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’” and the world. Precisely for this reason, he insists that one need not infer that God is a cause – still less an agent – in any ordinary sense. If one were to assert »God acts« in this Schleiermacherian key, what one could responsibly mean is only: »I have a religious feeling, and I know myself to be determined in it by an absolute causation.«³²

³⁰ See *Alvin Plantinga*, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, Oxford 2011 or *Robert J. Russell et al.* (ed.), *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action. Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress*, Vatican 2008. For the reception of the ‘dispositional theory of causality,’ see, for example *Georg Gasser*, *Handeln Gottes aus analytischer Perspektive*, in: *Georg Essen; Simon Maria Kopf* (eds.), *Vorsehung und Handeln Gottes. Analytische und kontinentale Perspektiven im Dialog*, Freiburg i. B. 2023, 189–215.

³¹ As for the criticism of theism, Schleiermacher remarks in his important *Sendschreiben an Lücke* that “in the history” of his “education he knows of no rapprochement” to theism, “but only of [an] ever more definite distance.” Also, since his ‘boyhood,’ the experience had “impressed itself ever more deeply” that ‘French atheism’ “most of all” because of such attempts at rational theology “found its way among us”, cf. *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, *Über die Glaubenslehre. Zwei Sendschreiben an Lücke* (1829), in: *F.D.E. Schleiermacher, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Hans-Joachim Birkner (ed.), Erste Abteilung, Bd. 10, *Theologisch-dogmatische Abhandlungen und Gelegenheitsschriften*, Berlin 1990, 307–394, esp. 333. Against the background of such considerations, it may come as no surprise that Schleiermacher himself raised the question in the second edition of his *The Christian Faith*, whether propositions about God (and also about the world) should better not be part of *The Christian Faith*, namely to be “safe from the creeping in of strange purely scientific propositions,” cf. *F. D. E. Schleiermacher*, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt* (1830/31), vol. 1 and 2, Rolf Schäfer (ed.), Berlin 2008, § 30, 195. However, he does not take this step; rather, he pragmatically argues that such a work would stand “isolated without any historical attitude” and would also lack “the actual ecclesiastical character”, cf. *ibid.* However, such a character could certainly also be lacking if one retains the expressions alone.

³² Cf. *Schleiermacher*, *Der Christliche Glaube* (see fn. 31), §50.

To feel and to know are psychological *states*. By contrast, to be determined by absolute causality asserts not only a state but also a *process*: something occurs in me (or happens to me) that is not traced back to the intention of an agent. The predicates needed to express what is meant therefore belong to the classes of *state predicates* and *process predicates*. Because this processual aspect – the influence of absolute causality – is integral to what is meant by »God’s acting«, while no divine intentionality is being claimed, I call the model derived from this the ‘effect model.’ On this account, any assertion of divine action must be read non-literally – metaphorically or symbolically (or, with Schleiermacher, ‘poetically’) – unless one is prepared simply to dismiss it as false.³³

Whatever its more detailed articulation, the model is typically attractive to its proponents precisely because it neutralizes a range of familiar pressure points: the problem of theodicy does not arise (having been addressed by an internal critique of theism); neither do points of friction between natural science and theology, tensions with basic principles of historical inquiry, or the objections to the doctrine of God noted above. Along these lines, one often finds little interest in rendering classical construals of the doctrine of God plausible *vis-à-vis* the natural sciences. Thus, with regard to justificatory efforts of the kind pursued in the *Divine Action Project*, Bernhard Grom remarks that they are “not relevant to our everyday world and technology.”³⁴ Against this background, Ulrich Barth – among the most influential theologians working in the Schleiermacher tradition – has brought renewed attention to a critique of theological cosmology. In his view, attempts to *explain* the world in religious terms rest on “misunderstood piety” and are encumbered by a “jumble of pseudo-challenges on a basically popular-scientific level.” Since Schleiermacher, according to Barth, the “dispute between theology and natural science over questions of cosmology is basically no longer an issue.”³⁵ The transformations of Christianity associated with this were by no means a “negative outcome,” but “a gain for religion, because on such a path it becomes more and more itself, ‘more and more perfect religion, i. e., more and more pure only religion’.”³⁶

On (c) some theologians find even the assumption of divine causation expressed in model (b) too presuppositional and the ‘purification’ of religion from metaphysical motives implied therein not yet sufficiently thorough. They understand statements such as »God acts« in such a way that something can be responsibly said about the status of the religious

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, §17, 2, 137.

³⁴ Bernhard Grom, Deistisch an Gott glauben? Biblische Spiritualität und naturwissenschaftliches Weltbild, in: StZ 1 (2009), 40–52, esp. 42.

³⁵ Ulrich Barth, Abschied von der Kosmologie. Welterklärung und religiöse Endlichkeitsreflexion, in: Religion in der Moderne, Tübingen 2003, 401–426, esp. 424.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 424 f., taking up a quote from Simmel.

subject *alone*. This view can be found, for example, in “ground and end of being theologies”³⁷, religious naturalism, in “neoliberal” approaches or, as a tendency, also in more recent contributions to event-hermeneutics,³⁸ as well as in the work of the late Gordon Kaufmann.³⁹ In their interpretation, these conceptions cut off the reference to transcendence or declare it insignificant. Statements about God refer solely to the religious subject who interprets himself or is interpreted through linguistic events. According to Christian Danz, for example, God is the religious “expression for the underivable event of the becoming transparent of self-consciousness.”⁴⁰ If, in an act of self-interpretation, one were to say »God acts,« what one would thereby communicate is: »I am oriented.« To be sure, one might also say »I have oriented myself« – which would describe an action; yet this belongs to a self-reflexive meta-perspective that, if needed at all, would be conveyed only indirectly. What is communicated directly is the *status* of the religious subject. For this reason, it is appropriate to speak here of a ‘status model.’

On a further development of this model, more specific statements about divine action can be read as increasingly determinate indications of *how* one is oriented. Thus, »God created the world« may, on this approach, be understood as: »I am aware of my finiteness.« Within such a framework, there are no longer points of friction with inquiries that presuppose the classical idiom of God as an agent. For ease of comparison, the models can be analyzed as follows:

	<i>Action model</i>	<i>Effect model</i>	<i>Status model</i>
<i>Class of the predicate</i>	Action predicate	Status predicate + Process predicate	Status predicate
<i>What is directly communicated with »God acts« at the level of what is meant</i>	(literal): »God does things on purpose.«	(non-literal): »I have a religious feeling« + »I know myself to be determined in it by an absolute causality.«	(non-literal): »I am oriented.«
<i>Exemplary representatives</i>	Personal (Panen-) Theism	F. D. E. Schleiermacher	Christian Danz

Figure 3: Contours of an alternative schematics of models

³⁷ See for example *John Bishop*, Christian Conceptions of God, in: Graham Oppy (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, London 2015, 138–152.

³⁸ See for example *Hartmut von Sass*, *Atheistisch glauben*, Berlin 2023.

³⁹ Cf. *Gordon D. Kaufman*, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, Cambridge 1993.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Christian Danz*, *Wirken Gottes: Zur Geschichte eines theologischen Grundbegriffs*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2007, 187, 191.

5. Extensions and Advantages of the Model Taxonomy

Debates can, of course, be modelled from many different points of comparison. In general, a model taxonomy is informative to the extent that it (i) groups genuinely kindred positions under shared models, (ii) separates positions where the differences are theologically decisive, and (iii) renders any higher-order affinities between the models themselves visible. The present proposal, I suggest, meets this standard insofar as it brings into view genuine fault lines: the models do not merely disagree about solutions to a common set of problems, but often face different problems altogether – or at least confront them with markedly different intensity (for instance, with respect to theodicy or cosmological fields of conflict).

At the same time, the taxonomy is presented here only in a preliminary form. A fuller elaboration would need to incorporate additional major voices and to register borderline cases more carefully (there is, for example, some evidence that Rudolf Bultmann – at least with respect to God's action in particular revelatory events – defends a reduced variant of model (a)). A more serious challenge, however, lies elsewhere: some influential approaches do not appear to fit the three models at all. This is especially evident where modern theories of metaphor provide the controlling framework, or where one proceeds from the Thomistic theory of analogy – or from the (in this respect, *de facto* similar) Barthian account.⁴¹ Such borderline cases regularly pose serious difficulties – not only for modelling, but for the debate about talk of God's action as such – since, on these accounts, what is meant by that talk cannot be fixed with any determinacy.⁴²

To sharpen the heuristic value of the taxonomy – and to assess such borderline cases more carefully – it is helpful to overlay the scheme, at this point still only gradually unfolding, with an additional analytical foil. To this end, I introduce the distinction between a literal and a non-literal understanding (as already indicated in the schematic representation in *Figure 3*). Crucially, »literal« here must not be conflated with »literalistic« or »univocal.« Nor does the distinction concern questions of meaning – though it is often (and misleadingly) taken to do so. Rather, it concerns *formal modes of understanding* utterances, that is, the *interpretive strategies* operative within processes of communication:⁴³

⁴¹ Cf. on Karl Barth's closeness to a Thomistic interpretation of analogical speech of God, at least since CD III/1, the important contribution by *Keith L. Johnson*, *Reconsidering Barth's Rejection of Przywara's Analogia Entis*, in: *MoTh* 26 (2010), 632–650.

⁴² In *Quaestio* 13 of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas, for example, claims that propositions about God can be considered true, cf. Article 12. However, we would not know exactly what they mean or in what form certain attributes belong to God, cf. especially articles 3 and 5. These assumptions are connected to the opening statement that God is 'simple' (*Quaestio* 3). In his study on Thomistic epistemology, Gregory P. Rocca aptly summarised Thomas' core insight under the title "Truth's Light and God's Darkness." This, according to Rocca, "would capsize in a lapidary fashion the tensile equilibrium of his theological epistemology, which is a study in contrasts as it strives to interweave positive and negative theology and preserve their close relationship", cf. *Gregory P. Rocca*, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God. Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology*, Washington D. C. 2004, 356.

⁴³ An important role in the differentiation of comprehension strategies is played by the assumption that successful communication presupposes being able to communicate and understand intentions. According to a basic assumption of linguistic pragmatics shared here, listeners/readers use various 'comprehension strategies' to find out what the other person wants to communicate with an utterance. In the process of comprehension, the violation

Literal communication obtains where speakers intend – and hearers (or readers) infer – that what is *said* and what is *meant* coincide. In non-literal communication, by contrast, what is said and what is meant comes apart. This distinction would need far more careful development and remains the subject of extensive debate, especially in linguistic pragmatics. Even these brief remarks, however, already bring into view a promising line of criticism for the present modelling that has often been overlooked:

Once questions of interpretive strategy (or communicative process) come into focus, a distinctive weakness of models (b) and (c) emerges: on these accounts, non-literal interpretations of talk of God's action are, in a strict sense, not intelligible. I do not mean to suggest that the underlying theological programs cannot be reconstructed, or that their intentions are opaque. The point is rather this: the better we understand how ordinary processes of understanding typically work – and linguistic pragmatics has offered remarkable accounts in recent years – the more extraordinary it would seem if believers could nonetheless arrive at the 'correct' construal of basic biblical or ecclesial utterances in terms of these two models. They might, of course, learn the relevant paraphrases by rote. But how, without such instruction, should they independently arrive at what the models propose? Where, precisely, do the difficulties arise?

Relevant work in linguistic pragmatics suggests that utterances typically provide cues as to whether they are to be understood metaphorically or symbolically. Metaphoricity is therefore not simply a matter of an interpreter's discretionary decision to 'metaphorize;' it must be signaled by the utterance itself.⁴⁴

Many biblical or confessional statements, however, provide no clear indication that they are to be read in a generally *non-literal sense*. How, then, is understanding supposed to succeed – and what could prompt a reader to infer what is actually meant? In any case, it is not enough simply to insist that utterances such as »God saved Israel or God made Jesus alive« would be mistaken if taken literally. At the end of that route, one has merely concluded that the statement is false.

Theological interpretation typically seeks to supply a remedy here by offering additional reading-instructions: »Always ask what is being said about your existence,« or »always ask what is being said about your religious feeling and absolute causation,« and so forth. There is no doubt that such guidance works in many cases; to some extent it belongs to Christian common sense to think first of an inner 'calm of the soul' when one hears of the 'stilling of the storm.' Yet in numerous cases these instructions do not seem sufficient to bridge the gap between what is said and what is purportedly meant – especially where the utterances are comparatively abstract, as in the Creed or in the doctrine of God. One may have worked

of commonly shared 'communication maxims' can signal that the communication is non-literal. The utterance *The cat loves to have its tail pulled*, for example, would in ordinary contexts violate, among other things, the maxim of 'quality': According to Herbert P. Grice in communication situations we usually assume, among other things, that the other person is communicating truthfully and has a deviating communication intention in mind when it obviously violates this maxim. Linguists try to reconstruct how more precisely the actual communication intentions are inferred via 'comprehension strategies', cf. *Herbert P. Grice, Logic and Conversation*, in: Herbert P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge 1989, 21–40.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Klaus Hofmann, Die Metaphoreszenz jüngerer Theologie*, in: *NZStH* 57/4 (2015) 521–549, here 525.

through § 4 of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* and still be unable, *without further direction*, to determine what is meant by the claim *God is omniscient*. In § 51, Schleiermacher proposes as the adequate construal: »I have a feeling of absolute dependence, and I know myself to be determined by a particularly *lively* absolute causality.« But who would independently suspect that this is the theologically appropriate sense of *God is omniscient*? From the perspective of models (b) and (c), then, we may in many instances have to reckon not with understanding but with literal *misunderstanding*. Taken together, would this not force us to treat a considerable portion of biblical and confessional language about God as rather unfavorable semantic raw material – at least for those models? And would it not be more straightforward, especially within theology, to replace personal talk of God with a more precise, less hypertrophic idiom? To describe absolute causation, one would presumably need only a small fraction of the semantic resources of Bible and Church.

These remarks are not meant as a full-scale evaluation of the contemporary debate about *divine action*, and they are not the main concern of this paper. They do, however, point to an important condition for using the present models to map the landscape of systematic theology: talk of »God's action« can function as an appropriate point of reference only so long as Christian theology continues to regard itself as bound by central expressions from Scripture and the Creeds – expressions that, as we have seen, largely take the form of predicates of action. The more implausible it becomes to retain this vocabulary (because it no longer fits what one ultimately intends to say), and the more this is reflected in theological transformations of Christianity, the less likely it is that the proposed taxonomy will capture systematic-theological debates at their most basic fault lines.

Um einen Überblick über plausible zeitgenössische Interpretationen des Christentums zu erhalten, ist es hilfreich, mit den verschiedenen Interpretationen der Rede von Gottes Handeln zu beginnen. Schlüsselinterpretationen lassen sich besonders gut durch Modellierung erfassen. Dennoch sind etablierte Modellierungsansätze mit einer Reihe von Schwierigkeiten konfrontiert. Diese können angesprochen werden, indem man konsequent auf das achtet, was angesichts zentraler Beiträge zur Debatte verantwortungsvoll mit der Aussage: »Gott handelt« gemeint sein kann. Dies führt nicht nur zu einer genaueren Übersicht über die Diskussion, sondern auch zu einer Karte der zeitgenössischen Theologie, die so inklusiv und problemsensitiv wie möglich ist – eine, die Positionen nicht von Anfang an verzerrt.