# A RELATIONAL-HISTORICAL "LIMIT CASE" PROPOSAL FOR MEANINGFUL DISCOURSE ABOUT GOD

SCOTT HARROWER

Associate Professor of Christian Thought (Theology and History)

Ridley Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

(harrower.scott@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a particular kind of analogy is the proper linguistic mode for Christian discourse about God. This claim is based upon relational, historical, and contemporary philosophical insights.[1] The "relational-historical 'limit case'" model entails a relational aspect in which the person who believes in God the Trinity has their mind and experience reconciled to God. This reconciliation opens people to appreciate the qualitative difference between God's own life and human life, and thus to perceive reality and language in renewed manner. Such a reorientation requires the development of a theological approach to language which is attuned to the God known in Christ through the Spirit. This methodology will hence also be strongly historical as it looks to the history of God's special revelation in humanly perceptible time and space. Whereas the relational aspect of a mind reoriented to God is the *formal methodological and perspectival basis* for a Christian model of God, historical special revelation from God is the *material basis* for a model of discourse about God. The relational and historical aspects of this model converge to the end that properties from the creaturely realm may be meaningfully applied to God. What is unique about the model presented here is that this analogical application of creaturely properties to God is possible only if the meaning of these properties is understood by means of a particular kind of univocity. This univocity occurs in the context of God's work of accommodating his revelation to human capacity along a corresponding trajectory; one which corresponds to a "limit case" scenario.

The uniqueness of this model is that though it does employ forms of analogy and univocity, it does not pursue a Thomistic model of the analogy of attribution and its *a priori* metaphysical commitments. Neither does this work follow a univocal Scotist line in which that which is similar between creatures and God is univocal. What this model achieves over both these traditions is a greater appreciation for (1) the role and modes of special revelation, (2) the constraints placed upon discourse about God by its metaphysical and eschatological location. In addition, this model achieves (3) epistemic humility without disregarding what has been revealed to believers in personal experience and in Scripture. Finally, (4) the "limit case" aspect of this model has the explanatory power to capture much of the foundational Creator-creature genus distinction and its entailments for cross-genus communication.

## PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

A preliminary task to this proposal will be to outline two common types of analogy; this will be carried out in conversation with Aquinas' seminal work. I shall argue that the substance of Aquinas' theology claims that *all discourse about God is understood and applied analogically*. This study of Aquinas will underscore the interrelatedness of the ontological, epistemological, and linguistic presuppositions which underlie theories of discourse about God. In the light of selected issues raised by this survey of Aquinas' work on analogy, I

[1] Christian discourse is the sole focus of this paper.

shall propose a constructive model which allows for the appropriate deployment of analogy in Christian discourse about God.

## UNIVOCITY, EQUIVOCALITY, METAPHOR, AND ANALOGY

Discourse *about* God arises out of the Christian interpretation and contextual re-articulation of God's self-revelation.[2] Positively speaking, discourse about God will be meaning-making and cognitive. Negatively, it tries to avoid the four pitfalls of agnosticism,[3] anthropomorphism,[4] over-claiming,[5] and the non-contextual use of language.[6] Proper discourse about God requires logical classifications which enable predication about God. These classifications are warranted for many reasons. I shall briefly review two of them: the scriptural and anthropological. The scriptural basis is that the Bible speaks of God in many ways including the claim that he is a Spirit as well as a rock. Is God simultaneously a Spirit and a rock? If he is a rock, then what kind of rock is he? A Spirit-rock? Clearly not all biblical language about God is intended to be interpreted literally. Thus, in order to make sense of, and to re-articulate the discourse within the Bible, Christians must distinguish between metaphorical, analogical, and other univocal uses of language. The different kinds of language apply to the language which is both found in the Bible and also in discourse that arises from the Bible. It would be a mistake to unthinkingly generalize from these facts that the character of all discourse about God must necessarily be of a certain kind. For example, it is false in my view to claim that because not all terms that describe God are to be taken literally; therefore all discourse about God is by nature analogical. In addition, it is also not true that the human lack of exhaustive knowledge about God necessarily entails the use of analogy for all discourse about God.

Careful use of language is also warranted for sound anthropological reasons. The anthropological foundation for analogical discourse is based upon the fact that humans are made in God's image. This

---

[2] Therefore, human discourse about God humbly seeks to appropriate God's discourse and in turn construct consistent speech about him. Pope John Paul II wrote that its intent is "to speak in a true and meaningful way even of things which transcend all human experience." Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998) (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), cited in Francis J. Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," *Horizons* 37, no. 1 (2010): 25.

[3] Agnosticism is here taken to include both ignorance and skepticism regarding comprehension with regards to what *can possibly* be said about God, what *is* said about God, and what this means.

[4] Anthropomorphism is that use of language whereby God is described as a property bearer in the same manner as a human is a property bearer. One problem with this view is that some anthropomorphic claims are simply not true—God does not actually possess a "strong right arm." Another issue is that anthropomorphism can be employed in subtle manner with the result God becomes a sophisticated projection of ourselves, and thus an idol made in our own image. The distinction between anthropomorphisms, anthropopathisms, and theopathisms as expressed by Graham A. Cole is methodologically helpful on this point. Graham A. Cole, "The Living God: anthropomorphic or anthropopathic?," *Reformed Theological Review* 59, no. 1 (2000).

[5] Over-claiming is that activity of discourse whereby we claim things about God about which we have no or scant knowledge. This is the level of discourse which proposes "text-less" *theologoumena*—claims which have no basis in the texts of Scripture. In this case discourse about God can become as antirealist as are some non-cognitive and symbolic approaches to religious discourse.

[6] By the non-contextual use of language I refer to the use of language outside of its usual and most appropriate historical use and context. The consensus of many twentieth century philosophers of language was that the contextual use of language provides the most helpful parameters for its source, meaning, use and interpretation. When language is used outside of its natural semantic state, its meaning is subject to radical reinterpretation and redeployment.

provides an ontological platform by which humans can exemplify a communicable attribute in some limited degree of some communicable divine attributes. Hence humans can be those unique creatures who receive and interpret special revelation concerning God's own attributes. These anthropological grounds are extended due to the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, who in being and word reveals aspects of the divine character and divine attributes.

For these reasons (the biblical and the anthropological) various linguistic means have been employed in the attempt to enable, or at least provide the grounds for, discourse about God. These include univocal and equivocal speech, metaphor, and various uses of analogy. These must be clearly defined and differentiated.

Univocal speech, or univocity, "indicates the identical application of a common name, or term, to two things."[7] That is, "the essence… of the things, as signified by the name, or term, is identical."[8] This approach allows for predication such that one feature evidenced in two different entities may have "a single meaning."[9] That is, when a term is applied to God and to humans it does not mean different things or even slightly different things. The term has a single meaning without remainder.[10] There is great resistance to this use of language for discourse about God in contemporary theology.[11] Stephen D. Long is one example of this opposition. He claims the use of univocal language in discourse about God can turn God into a "mythical creature who begins to resemble us."[12] For him, this is because in a "univocal account of language… God must take on the same features as humanity."[13] The outcome can be the "… re-paganizing… of God."[14]

---

[7] Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms: drawn principally from Protestant scholastic theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 37.

[8] Ibid. In this case the belief is that there is a proper one-to-one correspondence between what is said of a quality or attribute seen in creation on one hand and the being of God on the other. This entails a non-figurative relationship whereby univocity enables direct literal predication between people and God. Caponi has contested this model of predication with the suggestion that one cannot use literal as a synonym for univocity. This is because Caponi takes literal to refer to "the purpose of predication as the articulation of the judgement of the intellect" based upon the idea that "words are used to refer to concepts, concepts are used to refer to reality … Intellect achieves knowledge through concepts abstracted from the real." For Caponi univocal predication is therefore, "proper" predication because "proper" refers to non-figurative language. See Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 35.

[9] "Univocus," in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, 320.

[10] Univocity argues that there can only be one distinct meaning to a word, whether it is applied to creatures and to God. See further discussion in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 38.

[11] Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 18. Cited in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 33.

[12] D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth* (The Eerdmans Ekklesia series; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wililam B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 15.

[13] Ibid.

[14] In Long's opinion, the practice whereby people make "… God like us," is widespread: "… from staunchly Lutheran theologies that begin with the assumption that the cross must show us all things about God, to process and openness theologies to more popular forms of theology found in evangelical and liberal protestant preaching." Long continues: "All this is primarily a re-mythologizing of theology that sets itself against the Jewish and Christian tradition of the divine names, which first demythologized 'god.' But this reconception on God's names is a re-mythologizing that assumes our language signifies God just as it is. As Karl Barth and Henri Lubac taught us, the end result is that modern theology adopts Feuerbach's projectionist account of language." Ibid., 16. To my mind, these cautions have some merit, however, they only go so far. These arguments lack the distinction between finding "an adequate religious language" on one hand and the ability to describe God *in se* on the other. It may be true that

The desire to avoid univocal language and its application to God has led some to argue for an equivocal approach to discourse about the divine. Equivocity "indicates the use of a common name, or term, with reference to two essentially different and dissimilar things: equivocals have one name, or term in common, but no real resemblance."[15] On this view God is wholly "Other" to humans, and thus "what we know and say about our world has no intrinsic relation to what we know or say about… God."[16] An objection which this position faces is that its fundamental agnosticism places it at odds with the positive claims of creedal Christianity.

Whereas univocal and equivocal predications are both presently unpopular, metaphor is popular in many circles as the preferred mode of speech for discourse about God.[17] Indeed, the suggestion has been made that we live in an age of "metaphormania."[18] Metaphor is a form of non-literal predication. It is a "rhetorical figure" which transposes "a term from its original concept to another and similar one."[19] Ebehard Jüngel illustrated both the preference for metaphor as well as its ontological foundations when he wrote: "Our language is worldly language, and has only worldly words which refer to and are predicated of worldly beings." For him, this has great entailments for human God-talk, he continues: "The difference between God and the world, and indeed God himself**,** can only come to speech metaphorically. God is only properly spoken about when we speak of him metaphorically."[20]

Analogy is an alternative to the use of univocal, equivocal, and metaphorical language. A general description of analogy is that it "indicates a certain resemblance between two essentially different things,

---

we cannot describe God *in se*, however, this is does not necessarily entail that Christians cannot speak of God meaningfully though not exhaustively. I shall argue that Christians may speak of God truthfully and meaningfully within the ontological bounds of what has been revealed and the purposes for which that revelation has taken place. Revelation of God's life *in se* is not as great a concern in Scripture as is his character. Thus, the fact that human beings cannot comprehensively describe His inner life is not a barrier for an adequate language about the named God who accents his revelation in the economy of salvation.

[15] "Antepraedicamenta," in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, 37.

[16] Gregory P. Rocca, "Aquinas on God Talk: Hovering Over the Abyss," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 641. See Yandell's most recent contribution to this debate: "On Not Confusing Incomprehensibility and Ineffability: Carl Henry and Literal Propositional Revelation," *Trinity Journal*, 35.1 (2014): 61-74.

[17] Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 28.

[18] Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 26.

[19] Lionello Venturi, "Metaphor," in *The Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York, NY: Citadel, 2001), 345.

[20] Ebehard Jüngel, "Metaphorical Truth," cited in Roger M. White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 183. The definition of a metaphor may also be clarified in its contrast with that of analogy. The difference between analogies and metaphors is that whereas analogies "seem to be appropriate… metaphors involve a sense of surprise or initial incredulity." For example, there is a parallel between wisdom seen in God and wisdom seen in people, so to say that "God is wise" does not seem to stretch language far past moderate realism. However, in the case of the statement "God is a lion," there is no direct parallel between God and the lion, thus this is most likely a metaphor rather than an analogy. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology: an introduction* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1994), 138. The main problem that faces the use of metaphor is that without some kind of literal grounding, metaphor can only appeal to other metaphors by which to explain itself. In this case metaphor can ultimately lead to anti-realist claims. The isolated use of metaphor as the mode of religious language, aside from interaction with analogy and univocity, has questionable scriptural warrant and little fruitfulness for Christian theology, life and devotion. For this reason Caponi has argued for "an intimate relationship between metaphor and analogy, one in which their roles in religious speech remain broadly distinct yet inseparable, and in which the imaginative power and cognitive force of metaphor are only secured in a firm relationship with analogy." Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 37. One aim of this project is to pursue an integrated approach to discourse about God.

as signified by the use of a common… term, with reference to both" [21] At the outset it is important to note that the classifications of analogies has evolved over time, and different scholars use various words to describe the forms of analogy. Below I outline key types of analogical predication in line with contemporary usage.[22]

The earliest use of analogy involved that of proportionality. The original Greek usage was "to designate the four-term relation 'A is to B as C is to D'" which is "… a comparison of two proportions or relations." [23] Thus the analogy of proportionality relates to a parallel between the intrinsic properties of two things. What a property P is to X, so a different property D is to Y. A similar use was also applied in early Greek usage where A is to B as A is to C. This may be illustrated by the use of the term "source" as it relates to both "a point" and "a spring of water." That is, a "… point is related to a line as a spring is related to a river"—both the point and the spring are a source.[24] These early Greek types of analogy presume nothing about the nature of the relationship between the two targets of reference—such as the point and the spring. The helpfulness of this for human discourse about God is that it enables the use of analogical language across genus types: it allows predication from the creaturely to the divine. This was especially important for Aquinas' early use of analogy which was an attempt to solve some linguistic problems posed by his ontology. Indeed, throughout his life, a series of foundational ontological commitments continued to drive Aquinas' view on suitable language for discourse about God. These are explored below.

The notion of causality is foundational to Aquinas' theology. Causality establishes the divine-human relationship within the great ontological difference between primary and secondary causes. For Aquinas it follows that "no word when used of God means the same as when it is used of a creature."[25] Hence a first reason for the analogical character of discourse about God is that secondary causes cannot exactly represent the attributes of a first cause.[26] This causality is not remote, it is one in which creatures participate in him. Though creatures do not share in the same species as God, there is a resemblance between them and God via analogy. Human resemblance to God is so "analogically, inasmuch as God exists by nature, and other things partake of existence."[27] The communication of limited existence (*esse commune*) from God's unlimited existence (*ipsum esse per subsitens*) to creatures is the basis for a "community

---

[21] "Antepraedicamenta," in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, 37. A distinction may also be made between equivocity and denomination. For Muller, equivocity "indicates the use of a common name, or term, with reference to two essentially different and dissimilar things: equivocals have one name, or term in common, but no real resemblance." However, denomination predicates an even greater dissimilarity between two named things: denomination "indicates an accidental or incidental relationship as a result of which the name of one thing is used to describe another."

[22] Frederick C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy:* Volume 2: *Medieval Philosophy - Augustine to Scotus* (London: Search Press, 1950), 356-58. Another mode of analogy is the analogy of imitation which appeals to the fact that some divine attributes may be reflected in and by creatures.

[23] White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 8.

[24] "Medieval Theories of Analogy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Revised, 11 September, 2009), n.p. [cited 10 August 2012]. Online: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analogy-medieval/

[25]Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, *Sed Contra*, 63.

[26] "Every effect that falls short of what is typical of the power of its cause represents it inadequately, for it is not the same kind of thing as the cause. Thus what exists simply and in a unified way in the cause will be divided up and take different forms in such effects." Aquinas, *ST*,1a, 13, 5, reply, 63.

[27] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.4.3, ad 3.

of analogy between God and creature."[28] On the significance of causal participation for Aquinas' position on analogy, Caponi writes: "This metaphysical vision forms the indispensable context for Thomas' view of religious speech as grounded in the analogical perfections possessed essentially by God and through participation by creatures."[29] This view argues for analogy, at the same time as disallowing any kind of univocal religious discourse which would presume the same expression of effects in God and people. Because God and creatures lack a common mode of existence: there is no "… *ratio* which is univocally *propria* to both creatures and God could be abstracted."[30] The causal bond exists which between God and creatures paves the way for the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, yet it is deployed at the same time as disallowing univocal predication.[31]

In tandem with his view of God as the (simple) first cause, Aquinas viewed God as the One who was uniquely the full expression of his own essence.[32] God is the pure act of his existence. Further, in God there was no potentiality to be moved or changed by another being.[33] The consequence of this for religious discourse is that God cannot be described in any way by means of language which is fitted to creaturely existence. By virtue of its nature, creaturely language cannot capture the full expression of the potentiality of being which stands behind contingent existence. This provides a limitation on applying language equally to beings who are of different ontological orders.[34]

---

[28]Aquinas, *Super Sent.* 1.24.1.1, ad 4, also *Prol.* 1.2, ad 2; *ScG* (*Summa Contra Gentiles*) I.31.2; *De potentia*. VII. 6, resp. cited in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 42.

[29] Caponi continues: "He takes it as axiomatic that all agents produce things like themselves, and so creaturely perfections are applied to God not just as the cause of creation (we do not call God good simply because he causes created goodness), but as the exemplary cause of whatever limited perfections finite reality presents. Consequently, one speaks both properly and intrinsically in calling God "beautiful"—indeed more properly and intrinsically than in speaking of any creature, since God is beauty himself." Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 43.

[30] Italics are Caponi's. Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 43.

[31] For a discussion of the *analogia entis* as it relates to schools of Thomistic interpretation see the bibliographical summary of what Long calls "Resource Thomism." "Opposing or Ignoring Metaphysics? Reflections on Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics*," presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting 2012, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 4.

[32]Aquinas writes: "For motion [motus, i.e., change] is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself." (*ST* I.q2.a3)

[33]Aquinas argues as follows: "The first being must of necessity be in act, and in no way in potentiality. For although in any single thing that passes from potentiality to actuality, the potentiality is prior in time to the actuality; nevertheless, absolutely speaking, actuality is prior to potentiality; for whatever is in potentiality can be reduced into actuality only by some being in actuality. Now it has been already proved that God is the First Being. It is therefore impossible that in God there should be any potentiality." (*ST* I.q3.a1)

[34] One way of highlighting the significance of Aquinas' ontological foundations for semantic theories is to contrast his view with that of Duns Scotus who was working from different ontological premises. Unlike Aquinas, Duns Scotus' divine ontology did not include a basic metaphysical impediment for applying creaturely language to God. This is because Scotus centered God's ontology on his infinity. Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, 91-98. As Scotus puts it: "if an entity is finite or infinite, it is so not by reason of something accidental to itself, but because it has its own intrinsic degree of finite or infinite perfection." **Ordinatio** 1, d. 1, pars 1, q. 1-2, n. 142 [cited 10 July 2012] Online: http://plato. stanford.edu/entries/duns-scotus/#DivInfDocUni. Duns Scotus' logic is summed as follows by Ginther: "… if God's being is really the cause of our own being, there must be some univocity between the two, so

For Thomas, the radical dissimilarity between God and creatures meant that if any perfection is common to both, it must be present in them in wholly different manners.[35] For these reasons, whereas Aquinas argued for an analogy of proportionality in his early work such as *de Veritate,* he later turned to the use of the analogy of attribution.[36]

The analogy of attribution insists upon an asymmetrical relationship between the targets of predication. The analogy of attribution insists that one target is primary, whereas the other is secondary.[37] This use of analogy is especially fitting in cases where predication is sought between a material and a spiritual reality.[38] This distinction between the material and the spiritual is amplified by the fact that there is no sense of equality between them when the spiritual reality is the cause of the material one. For this reason the use of the analogy of attribution was more in line with Aquinas' later work than was the analogy of proportionality. The later work of Aquinas required a mode of discourse which more strongly reflected the linguistic implications of his stress upon the creaturely causal participation in a simple God who is pure act. The analogy of attribution is particularly fitted to this task as it enabled him to apply

---

that human beings can speak of God's nature in a direct manner. This did not deny any transcendental attributes of God, nor did such a position ever affirm that God is wholly knowable in this life; rather, Scotus and others assumed that the relationship between God and his creation allows such understanding of his nature, but divine revelation was still necessary for humanity to have meaningful relationship with God." Ginther, "God," 74. This meant that language can refer to both God and to creatures with the proviso that God has the predicate to an infinite degree. Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, 91-98. Scouts' theory of univocity is an example of a theory whose metaphysical foundation allows "objectivism to ensure the truth of ... speech." Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth*, 17. For the significance of "being" for underlying both the finite and infinite and thereby providing a platform from univocity between God and creatures in Scotus' thought, see Peter King, "Scotus on Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (ed. Thomas Wiliams; Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2003), 18-21. The central methodological point of departure of my model from Scotus' is that it draws univocal language from the speech and actions of God in the history of salvation whereas Scotus draws his use mostly from the creaturely realm with less of a focus on salvation history.

[35] For Aquinas "God has no genus," *ScG*, 1, 25, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 102. and as such is absolutely remote to human beings. Te Velde sums the implications as follows: there is "no way of isolating a core of commonness, to be expressed in a univocal concept, which would be neutral in both and precede their causal relationship." Rudi A. te Velde, *Aquinas on God : the 'divine science' of the Summa theologiae* (Ashgate studies in the history of philosophical theology; Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 102.

[36] In this work, Aquinas provided the example of two related proportions: "six has something in common with four because six is two times three, just as four is two times two." Aquinas, *de Veritate*, 113. Cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 82. The fact that Aquinas' view on analogy changed over the course of his life is remarkable given that in his earlier work he had found the analogy of attribution wanting. Aquinas, *Commentary on Boethius' 'De Trinitate'*, 23, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 83.

[37]According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the analogy of attribution involves "a relation between two things, of which one is primary and the other secondary. Thus 'healthy' was said to be an analogical term when said of a dog and its food because while the dog has health in the primary sense, its food is healthy only secondarily as contributing to or causing the health of the dog. This second type of analogy became known as the analogy of attribution, and its special mark was being said in a prior and a posterior sense (*per prius et posterius*)." The analogy of attribution was the most common in medieval theology. "Medieval Theories of Analogy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Revised 11 September, 2009), n. p. [cited 10 August 2012]. Online: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analogy-medieval/ Thomas' broad description of analogy is that it is a "...way of using words [which] lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity, for the word is neither used in the same sense, as with univocal language, nor in totally different senses, as with equivocation." The several senses of a word used analogically signify different relations to some one thing. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Latin text and English translation, introductions, notes, appendices and glossaries*: 1a, 13, 5, reply, 66-67.

[38] Hunter Guthrie, "Analogy (in Scholasticism)," in *The Dictionary of Philosophy* (ed. Dagobert D. Runes; New York, NY: Citadel, 2001), 18-19.

analogy across two types of unsymmetrically related beings where God has clear ontological priority and supremacy. For the later Aquinas, discourse about God could not presume the symmetrical relationship entailed by the analogy of proportionality.[39]

Thomas' major distinction between primary and secondary causes was strengthened by his view on divine simplicity. Simplicity entails the unity of the perfections in God as compared to their distinction-in-complexity which is evident in human beings. The simplicity of God and hence the unity of the perfections within God as deployed by Aquinas disallows a strictly realist account of univocal language for God and human beings.[40] In Aquinas' view, God is described in the Bible as having many attributes, and any attribute must be understood in concert with the other attributes.[41] A further implication of God's simplicity is that God has no "aspects"—this belief contributes to Aquinas' thesis that by his very nature God resists description by means of creaturely language. Thus for Thomas, when "wise is used of a man, it so to speak contains and delimits the aspect of man that it signifies, but this is not so when used of God; what it signifies in God is not confined by the meaning of the word, but goes beyond it…"[42]

Aquinas' linguistic conclusion as an outcome of his use of the analogy of proportionality is that humans have a "loose" (*incompactae*) language by which to refer to God. This language is loose to the point

---

[39] In this use of analogy human predicates have a related meaning when applied to creatures and to God, yet a difference remains in place because these predicates apply firstly (and beyond human comprehension) to God and secondarily to humans. White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 83. Thomas and Gilby, *Summa theologiae*: 1a, 4.2; 1a 13.3 ad 1; 13.5; 13.6. "But we cannot in the same way say that God is like a creature, just as we do not say that man is like his image, although the image is rightly said to be like him. All the less proper, moreover, is the expression that God is likeness to a creature. For likening expresses a motion towards likeness and thus belongs to the being that receives from that which makes it like him." *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, ch. 29, 139, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 99. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas brought together causal participation, the fact of creatures being made in the likeness of God and his belief that ordinary language applied to God refers to him primarily and people secondarily. He wrote: "… it is more fitting to say that a creature is like God rather than the converse. For that which is called like something possesses a quality or form of that thing. Since, then, that which is found in God perfectly is found in other things according to a certain diminished participation, the basis on which the likeness is observed belongs to God absolutely, but not to the creature. Thus, the creature has what belongs to God and, consequently, is rightly said to be like God." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, ch. 29, 139, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 99. Aquinas also stated that in this second use of analogy "… we have a primary use of the word to apply to one thing, and secondary uses where we call other things by that word because of their relation to that thing: thus… in the case of the word healthy, we straightforwardly describe cows as 'healthy,' we can also talk of a climate as 'healthy,' but only because, say, it promotes health in cows." White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 7. Here Aquinas was concerned "to maintain that we can use words to mean more than they mean to us—that we can 'try to mean' what God is like, that we can reach out to God with our words even though they do not circumscribe what he is.... The point of this seems to be that when you 'try to mean' God's goodness by using the word 'good' of him, you are not straying outside its normal meaning but trying to enter more deeply into it." Aquinas, *ST,* 1a, 12-13, Appendix 4, 106-07.

[40] Thus Aquinas wrote statements such as he believed that "[i]t is impossible to predicate anything univocally of God and creatures." Aquinas, *ST,* 1a, 13, 5, reply, p. 63. Albert Patfoort, "La place de l'analogie dans la pensée de S Thomas d'Aquin: analogie, noms divins et 'perfections'," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 72, no. 2 (1992).

[41] Aquinas provided a human-divine contrast to prove his point. "when we say that a man is wise, we signify his wisdom as something distinct from other things about him – his essence for example, his powers or his existence. But when we use this word about God we don't intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence." Aquinas, *ST,* 1a, 13, 5, reply, 65.

[42] Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, reply, 65.

that: "… the less determinate our names are and the more general and simple they are, the more appropriately they may be applied to God."[43]

In sum, Aquinas' view was that all discourse about God is analogical. This includes the following beliefs:

(a) There are no human language terms for creatures that can be applied literally to God's substance.[44]

(b) There is no term T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true where "T" is employed in a univocal manner.[45] Thus,

(c) Despite the fact that some terms about God apply properly to him such as "goodness" and "life" we do not know what these ultimately mean.[46]

(d) The agnosticism about what ordinary words have as their true referent applies even once one takes the hypostatic union into account.[47]

---

[43] Aquinas*, ST,* I.13.11, *Response.*

[44] Aquinas wrote the following in the *Summa*, 1.13, 2: "Therefore we must hold a different doctrine- viz., that names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of him. Which is proved thus. For these names express God, so far as our intellect knows God from creatures, it knows him as far as creatures represent him. Now it was shown above (Q. 4 A. 2) that God possesses in himself all the perfections of creatures, being himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents him, and is like him so far as it possesses some perfection: yet it represents him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto, even as the forms of inferior bodies represent the power of the Sun. This was explained above (Q 4, A.3) in treating of the divine perfection. Therefore the aforesaid names signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner, even as creatures represent it imperfectly."

[45] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13, 5, r*eply*, "Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures."

[46] Aquinas, Thomas, *ST*, 1. 13, 2, *reply obj*, 3. "We cannot know the essence of God in this life, as He really is in himself; but we know him accordingly as He is represented in the perfections of creatures; and thus the names imposed by us signify him in that manner only." Further, this relates to names applied to God. He writes the following in *ST*, 1. 13, 3, *reply*, "… as to the names applied to God, there are two things to be considered – viz., the perfections which they signify, such as goodness, life and the like, and their mode of signification. As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures." However, this must be qualified by what Aquinas says after these comments when he addresses the question "Whether what is said of God and of creatures is univocally predicated of them?" His answer begins as follows: "Whatever is predicated of various things under the same name but not in the same sense, is predicated univocally. But no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures; for instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God. Now a different genus changes an essence, since the genus is part of the definition; and the same applies to other things. Therefore whatever is said of God and of creatures is predicated equivocally."

[47] In his *Commentary on John*, Aquinas writes the following: "And just like one of us who wants to be known by others by revealing to them the words in his heart, clothes those words with letters or sounds, so God, wanting to be known by us, takes his Word, conceived from eternity, and clothes it with flesh in time … Therefore, the Father is known in the Son as in his Word and proper image." In the same section he also states: "Now since every created word is some likeness of that Word, and some likeness, though imperfect, of the divinity is found in everything, either as an image or a trace, it follows that what God is cannot be known perfectly though any creature or by any thought or concept of a created intellect. It is the Word alone, the only-begotten Word, which is a perfect word and the perfect image of the Father, that knows and comprehends the Father." Cited in Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth*, 204. Best case ressourcement of Aquinas would highlight the significance of God's self-revelation via the hypostatic union—including how it is built into the structure of the *Summa*, Long writes: "… if we do not recall the discussion of the *prima pars* when we read through the Christological questions of the *tertia pars*, they will lose their poignancy. The Christological developments in the *tertia pars* render intelligible the articles of God's 'attributes' in the *prima pars*, and the language Thomas develops to speak of God in the *prima pars* points to the climax of our tending toward God, which comes to us in Christ, who is the 'way' to God." Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth*, 200. Long is correct to make the claim that if these parts of the *Summa* were held together then the

A detailed critique of the particulars of Aquinas' use of analogy for religious discourse is beyond the bounds of this work.[48] However, a higher order critique of the use of analogy presented above is possible.[49] In my opinion, several points are worth highlighting.

First, there are problematic issues which arise from Aquinas' basic ontological presuppositions about the identity of God. Though this issue is not limited to Aquinas,[50] his metaphysical *a priori* greatly affect, and are reflected in, his work on analogy. Thus, for Aquinas, "analogy is more than a conception of language; it is a metaphysical doctrine."[51] Aquinas' basic ontology, which may not have much affinity with Scripture's presuppositions, clearly drives his use of analogy. Is this problematic? Kevin Hector's recent work would claim that any metaphysical *a priori* for theology which is not grounded in "ordinary social practices" is problematic.[52] However, Long has helpfully clarified the point that it is only certain kinds of metaphysics which are problematic for theology and divine discourse. The problematic ones are those that

---

hypostatic union would be central to a Thomistic view of language about God. What Long has stated makes sound theological sense, however, to my mind, Aquinas himself does not make this connection clear enough. In the first parts of the Summa, Aquinas does not strongly refer the reader towards the christological work which is to come. This *which is precisely why Long's work is so significant*. His ressourcement of Thomas is what we call "contemporary Christological Thomism." Further research will hopefully develop Long's insights along these lines. For example, Long's view entails that the *analogia entis* is founded upon the fact that God becomes incarnate, therefore the Christian knows something of both humanity and divinity, thus this hypostatic union is the true *analogia entis* thus provides the basis of speech about both true God and true humanity. This raises a number of important questions: for example, what is the significance of this for *general revelation about humanity and its sinful state*?

[48] Some points to note briefly include the following. For example, the conclusion that *there is no term T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true and "T" is employed in a univocal manner* is false. There are terms T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true when kind relativity is taken into account. First, it is not true that a difference in genus between two things disallows univocal predication at all times. Secondly, there are statements that are literally true of people and God. Some terms are true of God and for us. For example, "can count to 4," "know they are not a prime number," "can move a 10 pound object." Because these actions are carried out in different ways does not mean that there is no term T which is such that God is T and I am T is true. It is a mistake to require that "moving an object," for example, is different when applied to God and to us because it is done in a different way. Aquinas' proposal largely rests on the view that the *meaning* of terms is kind-relative. A simple example will disprove this. If we take the term "exists" we can apply it meaningfully across kinds. That is, we can take "exist" to be univocal and have no degrees. For example, there are terms T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true and "T" is employed in a univocal manner. Furthermore, humans may univocally apply some properties such as "omniscient" and "omnipotent" to God as literal ascriptions. These can then be used univocally with respect to persons and to God, for example, consider the following two propositions "God is omnipotent" and "I am not omnipotent." In both these phrases, "omnipotent" means the same thing.

[49] To place this work in its contemporary context, we note that for Caponi, the use of analogy in contemporary theology is hampered by the following issues: (a) a lack of clarity regarding the differences between metaphor and analogy, (b) the slight attention given to their connections, (c) their conflation, (d) the treatment of analogy as non-literal speech, (e) a false contrast between metaphor and analogy (in which the latter creates meaning solely through partial likeness rather than through metaphors' dynamic tension of likeness and unlikeness), and (f) profound misinterpretations of Thomas Aquinas' thought. Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 35.

[50] Kevin Hector begins his *Theology without Metaphysics* with the following statement on metaphysics and its influences on Protestant theology: "… although we moderns may want to avoid metaphysics, we have a hard time doing so." Kevin Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

[51] John F. Johnson, "Speaking of the Triune God: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Language of Analogy," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67 (2003): 224.

[52] Thus he writes a "therapy for those in the grip of metaphysics. This is not a therapy for metaphysics itself. Hector rejects correspondentism and constructivism. His proposal relies on non-metaphysical practices (which are explanatorily primitive) within a pneumatological-pragmatic approach. Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*, 37, 66.

condition revelation.[53] In my view, the metaphysical conditioning of special revelation is one powerful consequence of Aquinas' *a priori*. Thomas' views on divine simplicity, essence, and causality have a muting effect on Scripture's witness to who God is.[54] Therefore, Aquinas' ontology has negative consequences for discourse about God which aims to be consistent with the relational and historical grounding of God's special revelation.[55]

Secondly, there are methodological flaws which pose logical and linguistic problems for the use of the analogy of attribution. The analogy of attribution is either inconsistent or a case of circular understanding. First, one can argue that the analogy of attribution is inconsistent in that if the basis for the analogy of attribution is taken to rest on causation; this presumes a univocal approach to causation.[56] On the other hand, if causation is interpreted analogically, then analogy is being explained by analogy which is "a good example of circular argument."[57]

Thirdly, the use of the analogy attribution fails epistemological and linguistic criteria for discourse about God. Though this kind of analogy makes positive affirmations for God, there is only a "related meaning" between what they refer to in creatures and what they refer to with respect to God. What this related meaning is, is not clear, nor can it be made clear by other analogies.[58] Therefore, it appears that the stand-alone use of analogy cannot meet the epistemic criterion of whether or not descriptors for God can be known.[59] This issue is a fundamental problem in the use of the analogy of proportionality in particular. The problem is that whereas in mathematics there is a clear relationship between what 2 is to 4 and what 8 is to 16, this does not hold with reference to this kind of religious language for God. This is because in

---

[53] Stephen D. Long, "Opposing or Ignoring Metaphysics? Reflections on Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics*," presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting 2012, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thus there is no principle objection to the use of metaphysical resources in Christian theology. Indeed, Christian theology is served by ontological/metaphysical concepts which comport with Scripture and allow the restatement of these truths in such a way that they are meaningful and meaning-making. In this way the transition can be made from scripturally harvested analogies to conceptual analogies.

[54] In fact, the charge may be made that his selection of simplicity as the key to God's being is at odds with a "Personalist" ontology which may stand in a closer relationship to Scripture.

[55] Another consequence of Aquinas' ontology is that it yielded an epistemology which conflated our inability to know God exhaustively with an inability to speak of him with precision from what has been revealed. Ultimately, Aquinas' basic premise is that it is "the knowledge we have as creatures… enables us to use words to refer to God", Aquinas, *ST*., I.13.1, *resp.*

[56] "Terms can be ascribed to God analogically because God is the cause of all things. But how is 'cause' used in this case? If cause is used in a literal sense, we have claimed that all language ascribed to God is analogical –based, however, on one univocal ascription, God as cause. This is precisely the univocal approach…" Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), 26.

[57] Stiver continues: "Richard Swanbourne flatly concludes that this traditional form of the analogy of attribution is contradictory." Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, 26.

[58] The question this raises for us is how to understand the "related meaning" between a human predicate and its application to God. How do we uncover this "related meaning" when meaning is primarily related to God, and we have the epistemological problem of not have access to this knowledge? On Aquinas' model when one uses everyday language to refer to "good" with reference to a creature, one knows that this is merely a secondary and imperfect form of good. This raises a very large problem, because if a word has God as its primary referent, yet this God is unknown and the cause is only ever described imperfectly, then how would one know that what one sees in a creature is "good" in the first place? Surely this raises epistemological questions about Aquinas' religious discourse and places his proposal under a dense cloud of agnosticism.

[59] Jan Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 597. See also Jan Muis, "Die Rede von Gott und das Reden Gottes. Eine Würdigung der Lehre der dreifachen Gestalt des Wortes Gottes," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 16, no. 1 (2000).

religious discourse the formula contains too many unknowns—if what God is is unknown as well as if the true meaning of predicates applied to God is unknown, then the formula is so incomplete as to be of little use. That is, in the equation "good (x) is to God what good is to humans" we do not know what good is or what God is. Thus, "we have two unknown terms, which means that the proportionality is useless."[60]

A similar problem presents itself in the use of the analogy of attribution. This use of analogy primarily refers to the extrinsic qualities (and their effects) of one partner in the analogical relationship. This may be illustrated with reference to the Sun and some stones which are heated by it. According to the analogy of attribution, the Sun is hot and the stones are hot. However, the Sun is defined as hot only in the sense that it has the property of heating stones. So when one says the Sun is hot and the stones are hot via an analogy of attribution, this is limited to talking about the extrinsic operations of the Sun which cause heat in stones. The Sun has the property of heating stones, but does necessarily have this property of heat inherently. Though the casual relationship may indicate that perhaps the Sun has the property of heating another object, one moves beyond the analogy of attribution if one is to state anything about the intrinsic properties of the Sun.[61] The final, yet fundamental, problems which must be addressed are that neither the use of the analogy of proportionality or of attribution can meet the linguistic criteria that (1) knowledge of God's properties be adequately expressed "by one of the standard terms for these properties"[62] and (2) precise reference targeting.[63]

---

[60] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, 27. The solution to explain the analogy of proportionality via meaning derived from the analogy attribution, proposed by Mascall, also fails on account of explaining analogy by virtue of analogy. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, 27-28.

[61] White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 101.

[62] Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," 597.

[63] Both Duns Scotus and the recent work by Brodie inform my perspective here. Scotus wrote: "Things are never related as the measured to the measure, or as the excess to the excedent unless they have something in common… When as it is said 'This is more perfect than that,' then if it be asked 'A more perfect what?,' it is necessary to ascribe something common to both, so that in every comparison something determinable is common to each of the things compared. For if a human being is more perfect than a donkey, he is not more perfect *qua* human than a donkey is; he is more perfect *qua* animal." Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, Bk. 1, dist.8, par.1, q.3, Vatican Edition, Vol. 4, 191. Cited in Alexander Broadie, "Duns Scotus and William Ockham," in *The Medieval Theologians* (ed. G. R. Evans; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 253. Broadie comments on the significance between the determinable and the determinant in this Scotus thought: "the term 'animal' signifies any and every animal whereas 'human animal' animal signified more determinately, since the phrase only those animals that are human. It is *qua* animal that the human is more perfect than the donkey *qua* animal. Let us then say that God is more perfect, even infinitely more perfect than human beings are. We are then asked 'A more perfect what?' or 'More perfect *qua* what?' and reply '*Qua* wise being.'" Broadie, "Duns Scotus and William Ockham," 253-54. What the provision of a sortal category such as *qua* animal or *qua* wise being achieves is that it allows for predication with the same sense to occur within a limited set of coherent referents. That is, with respect to X we can say T of God and T of human beings. This form of comparison "implies univocity." Broadie, "Duns Scotus and William Ockham," 254. Broadie continues: "This is not to say that God and humans are wise in exactly the same way, or even in much the same way. It is to say instead that if we cannot form a univocal concept of wisdom under which we can bring both God and humans, then we are wholly unable to compare humans with God in respect of wisdom and conclude that God's wisdom is greater, even infinitely greater, than ours. I assume that we can make the comparison in question. In that case we can form a concept of something, wisdom, which we can predicate of God and humans. We can also make these predications more determinate by saying that God has wisdom to an infinite degree and we have it to a finite degree only. But that God's is infinite and ours is finite does not prevent it being the same thing which is infinite in one case and finite in the other. What has just been said about wisdom can be said also in respect of the other intellectual perfections that are traditionally attributed to God."

In sum, a Thomistic use of the analogy of attribution in religious discourse faces objections on ontological, linguistic, and epistemological grounds. These issues can be compounded by metaphysical *a priori* as seen in Aquinas' case.

## A RELATIONAL-HISTORICAL MODEL

What follows is a constructive counter argument to that of Aquinas above, and it shall be made in three stages. First, its relational foundation; second, its historical dimensions; and third, an outline of a limit case model which sets the ultimate parameters for speech about God. The relational foundation is the model's *methodological and perspectival basis:* our epistemological and ontological location as God's images who have been reconciled into a covenant relationship with him. The second aspect of the model is God's special revelation in salvation history and its appreciation by the believer. These form the *material basis* of the proposal. Thirdly, the notion of a "limit case" as a helpful heuristic tool which clarifies how one can maintain a model which speaks strongly in a certain direction with respect to its object, whilst also strongly restraining what is said for ontological reasons.

### The Relational Aspect

Christian discourse arises from God's revealing and reconciling intent expressed in the establishment of a relationship with particular covenant partners. He is the acting subject who establishes this relationship with people. This relationship is an interpersonal I-thou dynamic whereby he aims to dwell with and within his people. This relationship is far richer than a mere relation whereby he is related to people primarily by, for example, creation or causation.[64] The Scriptures present us with a relational account of knowledge which "is to be exhibited primarily by participating in… relationship."[65] *The particularity of God's relationship with the Christian places the use of religious language within a definite perspectival context.* This is the framework of salvation history and a mind reconciled to God. This is evident in Pauline theology. Paul's relationship with Jesus "… involved recourse to public truths and events, yet it also involved a change in perspective that the new relation to Christ brought about." [66] Thus, in "… the middle of a passage explaining the nature and motivations of his ministry, Paul writes that 'even though once we knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in this way (2 Cor. 5:16)."'[67] Paul intertwines the historically grounded knowledge of Christ with its subjective experience and epistemological effects in the

[64] See Barth's the *Analogia relationis* in G. Deddo, *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations: Trinitarian, Christological and Human: Towards an Ethic of the Family* (New York: Lang, 1999). See Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 74.
[65] Hurtado, God, 37. Cited in Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 65.
[66] Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 268.
[67] Tilling continues: "The change in those included in this 'we' is associated with a developing relationship with Christ, and it brought about new insight into the event of Christ's death, and affirmation of Christ's resurrection." Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 268.

believer. Indeed, Paul develops his Christology *in relationship with the historical Christ* rather than from a technical perspective "from above," "from below," or "from the event."[68]

Thus, human discourse about God is re-shaped relationally within the context of reconciliation to the God who acts decisively in history. This discourse about God is at its best when its *functional metaphysical a priori* takes God as its primary referent. God is revealed in salvation-history and the story of our own salvation. In this way, Christian discourse about God and his works will assume as its ontological presuppositions the facts of God's existence and his saving work of re-creation. God's work of recreation in particular transforms the Christian mind. Paul's prayer is for the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2), this renewal is contrasted with the patterns of thinking which conform to the fallen state of affairs in the world. The renewal of our minds means that the Christian develops a new "theological instinct." Thomas F. Torrance writes the following on the development of a theological instinct: "What really counts in the end is whether a person's mind is radically transformed by Christ and so spiritually attuned to the mind of Christ, that he/she thinks instinctively from the depths of his mental being in a way worthy of God."[69] This means that both our reason and our language for God will be "baptized." [70]

This theological instinct means that the Christian's theological and thus linguistic methodology and content will engage in "scientific theology" which takes the disclosure of God as an objective reality as its starting point.[71] The disclosure of God will require that the study of his revelation, and the language used to speak of the judgements and claim that arise from this, be contoured according to what is disclosed. Hence, Christian language for God is *a-posteriori* to his revelation of himself and the renewal of the Christian mind so that the mind might appreciate it. The language appropriate for God-talk in this light will include an analogical aspect. It will also be doxological language which operates within a unique devotional life in which language for God and human imagination are stretched.

However, this "stretching" only goes so far. The relational dimensions of Christian discourse about God highlights the fact that the devotional aspects of the divine-human relationship includes the use of religious language which meets the linguistic criterion of providing understandable terms for the God who receives our faith, worship, and prayer. Thus, the devotional aspect of a relationship with God requires univocal language to refer to God meaningfully whereby God's properties (such as goodness, mercy, and love) "can be expressed by one of the standard terms for these properties."[72] This is evident in the particular "form of life" in which religious discourse is employed. As described in the OT, an Israelite's form of life required referential precision. The Shema (Deut 6:4), was recited daily by devout Jews as follows: "Hear, Oh Israel, The Lord is our God is one Lord." The response to the one God is a whole-life

---

[68] Italics are Tilling's. Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 268.

[69] Thomas F. Torrance, "The Reconciliation of the Mind: A Theological Meditation on the Teaching of St. Paul," in *Theology in the Service of the Church* (ed. M. Alston Jr. Wallace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 203.

[70]He continues: "Either you think from out of a mind centred in God through union with the mind of the Lord Jesus, or you think from out of a mind centred in yourself, alienated from God and inwardly hostile to the Truth incarnate in the Lord Jesus, that is, in a way that is finally governed by the unregenerate and unbaptized reason." Torrance, "The Reconciliation of the Mind: A Theological Meditation on the Teaching of St. Paul," 203.

[71] Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology* (3 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[72] Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," 597.

devotion which requires meaningful words as predicates applied to God. The verses which immediately follow the Shema outline this as: "You shall love the Lord your God alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you arise" (Deut 6:5-7).[73] Hence, God's self-revelation provides one of the criteria for Christian religious language, it has a precise referent who requires that he be named according to his self-revelation.

In addition to the criterion of precise religious language, Christian God-talk recognizes that the God who reveals himself in relationship to his people has a qualitatively different life to that of his people. Therefore, relational language for God will require some tempering. For example, despite the "givenness" of God in his revelation, the Lord is the one who reveals himself in the form of a theophany. The One who gives the Shema leads his people as a cloud of fire and smoke (Exod 13:21-22). These revelations make clear the fact and significance of the Creator-creature distinction: "… theophanies are understood to be temporary manifestations of God... God is understood to be different and distinct from his creation (i.e. holy), he is in no means limited by it (1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139; Amos 9:2-4)."[74] When a theophany occurs, it is always understood that God is "by no means fully contained by the form the theophany takes when he accommodates his presence to the structure of creation."[75] Thus, though God's personal presence is revealed in theophany, it remains the case that God has accommodated his presence into our spheres of comprehension in time and space while remaining significantly unknown even to his covenantal people. Propp illustrates this by the suggestion that "… God inhabits a polydimensional realm that here and there extrudes into our three-dimensional space as a *projection*, just as a circle is the two dimensional projection of a sphere onto a plane."[76]

Devotional life in the New Testament also accounts for the dynamics of language to cope with the relational parameters of knowing God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is to say that NT believers and those that followed them had to trust and speak of the one who is vastly different to creatures.

---

[73] For the Israelites therefore, the God over creation is "…the stand alone God without rival (Deut. 6:4-5)… So important is this claim that it is to become the heart of Israel's religious pedagogy (6:6-9). Culture shows its values in what must be passed on to its children." Graham A. Cole, "God, Doctrine of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer et al; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 259-63. The nature of the human response to the name of God is exemplified by Moses in Exod 34:8, where he bows done and worships and then people are committed to walk God's ways. Thus there is a twin focus on the greatness of God's name and the call to be his people living his way. This is repeated in instances such as Pss 20 and 23 for example, people are to trust in God's name as they walk his ways, expecting that he will act righteously for his own names' sake.

[74] Mark F. Rooker, "Theophany," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker, and John H. Walton; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 859-60.

[75] Rooker continues: "Thus when he appears in theophanies he in essence limits himself to specific and particular forms within the context of the creation he made. Theophany should be regarded as one of the means whereby God reveals himself to humanity. Whereas God's special revelation may be divided into the broad categories of word and deed, God's revelatory deeds occur as either theophany or miracle. A theophany is a form of divine revelation wherein God's presence is made visible (or revealed in a dream) and is recognizable to humanity." Rooker, "Theophany," 859-60.

[76] He continues his "geometric analogy" by stating that "....While not comprehending the whole essence of divinity, these projections are nonetheless full manifestations within our frame of reference." He states that his analogy is "inspired by Plato's cave" (Republic 7.514-17, 532). William Henry Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (*The Anchor Bible;* 1st ed.; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 687.

Trusting in God who revealed himself (in Christ) and following the ways of the known God is a key theme in Paul's "relational monotheism."[77] In the New Testament Paul's relationship to God in Christ included a devoted lifestyle which presumes very select and comprehensible discourse about God.[78] This devotion is remarkable as it is carried out in praise for the God whose one-ness is such that it includes the Father, Son, and Spirit. At the same time, the very names "Father," Son," and "Spirit" are understood as analogies within the devotional life of believers.[79] Naturally, a human relationship with a God who is the Trinity will require patterns of thought and language which acknowledge the qualitative difference between God's life and our life. This relational context for the knowledge and discourse about God suggests that some form of the analogy of attribution may be in order for the application of creaturely predicates to God.

The inclination towards the analogical application of human language to God is furthered by the eschatological nature of Christian knowledge. The strict application of human language to God is restrained by an eschatological caveat which tempers the scope of the application of creaturely predicates to God. Though NT Christ-devotion requires discourse about God in which predicates for him have univocal meaning, its application to God is limited due to our eschatological locatedness because the nature of the believer's relationship to God occurs within an eschatological horizon which anticipates that a fuller revelation of God is to come. Thus univocal language about God is resisted and analogical language for God finds a natural home in eschatologically-oriented devotion. In this context the Holy Spirit enables the believer to engage in discourse about God in such an imaginative manner that it can include both the "already but not yet" of the inaugurated Kingdom of God. The use of analogy is appropriate in this situation. The "already" of Christian discourse is secured by the ontological, epistemological, and linguistic aspects of historical revelation which are relationally appropriated by the believer. However, Christian discourse must also include the "not yet" of our eschatologically situated special revelation. The use of analogy seems fitting to the restraint required by the eschatological horizon of human discourse.

The historical aspect of the relational-historical model for discourse about God is next. Historical revelation provides the clear divine referent for "who" has disclosed his name to Christians. In addition, it

---

[77] Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 72. Paul not only speaks of the "relation between believers and the risen lord…. By using the sort of language and themes which Second Temple Judaism used to speak of the relation between Israel and YHWH," (Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 72), but speaks of this relation in such a manner that it necessarily includes devotion as an aspect of this relationship. In 1 Cor 8:1-6, Paul contrasts the relational core of OT and NT monotheism with the intellectualized knowledge of the Corinthian church. The contrast is powerfully stated in 1 Cor 8:1-3 where the intellectualism of the Corinthians is set against what Paul calls "love for God." Paul's redeployment of the *Shema* in this relational context allows him to critique the "monotheistic 'knowledge'" of the Corinthians by outlining his relationally "necessary" monotheistic knowing love for God. Moreover, he includes Christ into his pattern of relationship by relating him to the central text for Jewish prayer and the maintenance of relationship between Israel and Yahweh. Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 91.

[78] This included: "Paul's ultimate goals and motivations, this explicit Christ-devotion language, the passionate nature of this Christ devotion, the language contrasted with this devotion, the presence and activity of the risen Lord, but also the absence of Christ, and thus the Lord's presence though the Spirit, the communications between the Lord and believers, and the various ways Christ was characterized and the depiction of the scope of his lordship." Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 255.

[79] Mark Weedman, "Augustine's *De Trinitate* 5 and the Problem of the Divine Names 'Father' and 'Son,'" *Theological Studies* 72 (2011).

reveals the referent's standards and patterns for the use of that name in the context of relational devotion. The historical nature of the revelation of God's identity provides the univocal meaning to the language he offers as the basis for Christian discourse about himself.

## The Historical Aspect

The revelation of God in history has powerful ontological, epistemological, and linguistic entailments.[80] God presents himself to his covenant partners as with a proper name—Yahweh.[81] He is not the "God of the *omni's*" from book 12 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Importantly, God has a self-given name which he defines by his actions. His name is the central focus of his self-revelation. Graham Cole writes, it is "… more than… a convenient designation… in the canon the divine name refers to the very nature of God …"[82] Epistemologically speaking, the name of God functions as the foundational antecedent referent in God's self-disclosure. It is the point of reference which grounds the revelation that will follow. What the name of God means is given meaning in a "storied" form which employs various means of communication.[83] The means which these stories employ include verbs to refer to God's activity;[84] he will be described by adjectives;[85] and other nouns which "name and characterize" him.[86] This suggests that religious discourse should employ various means to communicate who God is and not be overly reliant on one mode of discourse for God such as analogy.

The Exodus narratives provide the foundational revelation of God's name. Though this is initially revealed in an "open ended" fashion, it is subsequently filled out by historical actions which reflect his

---

[80] Finally, biblical language is descriptive and designatory, *controlling as well as informative*. Because the revelation of God's name is descriptive and not just designatory, the revelation of His name can be taken as revelation of himself. This means that human language about God should primarily conform to the testimony of who God is based on the testimony of Scripture (Jesus manifesting the Father's name in John 17). Extra biblical language may help us express the biblical witness more clearly, however, the controlling ideas for our language about God should be the biblical ones because they are the primary designating and informative basis of the doctrine of God.

[81] The particular name *Yahweh* is foundational for a "whole bible" biblical theology of the identity of God because the OT employs this name as the most precise identifier of who God is. Furthermore, the Greek translation of Yahweh, *Kurios*, as applied to Jesus serves as the basis for early Christian devotion to Jesus as divine (1 Cor 8:6).

[82] Italics are Cole's. Graham. A. Cole, "Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 3 (2008), 32. Scobie concurs, for him it is "*an expression of [God's] essential nature*." Charles H.H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108.

[83] Graham Cole writes: "The living God of scriptural presentation… is not deity in general. This God has a name and stories that explicate that name. Creation stories, revelation stories, redemption stories, and judgement stories are just a few of them." Cole continues, and supplies an impetus for a new way of carrying out biblical theology; "The older method of proof texting in the use of scripture needs to give way to a method of contextualized affirmation. With this approach, the text appealed to would be placed in its context in its argument in its book, and in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history." Cole, "God, Doctrine of," 262. The revelation of God occurs "through story or statute" rather than "a systematic analysis." Rooker, "Theophany."

[84] Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction* (vol. 1 of *The Library of Biblical Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 145.

[85] Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: an introduction*, 213.

[86] Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: an introduction*, 229. These nouns include: (1) *'ĕlohîm* and related terms for God/gods, (2) *yhwh*, which is a proper noun "Yahweh, the Lord," (3) 'ădōnai which means "my Lords." Baker, "God, names of," 359.

nature.[87] The expansion of the name of God follows the revelation of his name. In the encounter around the burning bush, Moses asks God what his name is. He asks God for a name which will be the basis of his religious discourse. Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" (Exod 3:13).

God's response is that he is "I am who I am," therefore Moses is to say to the people of Israel, 'I AM' has sent me to you" (3:14). God's name is henceforth fundamental to Moses' religious discourse and to Israel's devotional way of life. This is the antecedent referent whose meaning will be clarified by God's interactions with humanity. The initial revelation of God's name is immediately followed by the divine self-designation of "the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Thus, the identity of God is given specificity which limits the referent range as to whom God might be. The limitation entailed by this specificity secures the epistemological basis for discourse about God because it is specific as well as accessible to people. In Exodus 20:2 the verse preceding the Decalogue, key characteristics of God are revealed.[88] Here God identified himself as Yahweh the Saviour: "I am the LORD [YHWH] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."[89] The earlier self-designation as "I am who I am" is expanded in Exodus 33:19 to "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious."[90] The divine self-designation is expanded again, and given a normative form in in Exodus 34:6**:** "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the Fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation." This is a passage which is a "representative or perhaps even normative expression of Israel's stock of adjectives for speech about Yahweh."[91] These adjectives for Yahweh are drawn upon throughout the OT[92] and the NT.[93] Importantly, the revelation of the name of God provides fitting descriptors for

---

[87] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 355. Cited in Cole, "Middoth," 27.

[88] Rooker, "Theophany," 363.

[89] Baker, "God, names of," 363. It is preferable to understand Yahweh to include "he causes to be/become" in "he is/becomes/will be." This is due to (1) his aseity and creative power, and (2) how it is written out in Greek and Akkadian in particular reveal that its root is a Hiphil not a Qal. Rooker, "Theophany," 362.

[90] Stephen Dempster, "Exodus and Biblical Theology: On moving into the Neighbourhood with a New Name," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 3 (2008): 19.

[91] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*, 269. Cole states: "In Old Testament times, that coming into focus [of God's identity] in general terms is nowhere more evident than in the theophany on Sinai as described in the book of Exodus... it is Exodus 34, which especially brings the living God into sharper relief—albeit not in such a way as to leave mystery behind." Cole, "Middoth," 24.

[92] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*, 215. He also writes the variegated, rich and awesome revelation of God's name leads us to agree with the conclusion that the "ultimate testimony to Yahweh concerns Yahweh's incomparability…." Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*, 228.

[93] This description of God "is the nearest Scripture comes to giving a list of the attributes of God," and is reflected at least in part throughout the Bible (Num 14:17-19; Pss.103:6-14; 145:8-9; Joel 2:12-14; Jon. 4:12; John 1:17 and 2 Cor 13:14)." Cole, "God, Doctrine of," 262. However, only God's back is revealed, and yet this awesome display leads Moses to plead for forgiveness! Dempster points out that "... if this is just the back of God—what must the front be like! That is a lingering question not completely answered in the text." Dempster, "Exodus and Biblical Theology: On moving into the Neighbourhood with a New Name," 19.

God which can be known and understood by human beings.[94] This is the epistemological basis for giving meaning to creaturely predicates as they relate to the divine name.

In Exodus ordinary and general words have taken on particular significance: "non-referring, indefinite descriptions" such as "I AM" and "Lord" have become "definite and referring descriptions" by being aligned with very specific actions in history.[95] Words such as "faithfulness" are given meaning by the committed saving actions of God which have accompanied his use of this term. The meaning of the term "faithfulness" is specific and based in history. A narratival frame of reference provides the framework for the meaning of terms. Each term thus has a limited range of meaning which corresponds univocally with God's specific and unique actions. The same phenomenon is at work in the NT, Jesus is described as "Immanuel"—God with us (Matt 1:23). That Jesus is God means that he "fills out" what God is like beyond the OT descriptions. He does this beyond compare: because he is God, Jesus is able to "exegete" the Father for his people (John 1:18).

The revealer of the name, God, expects his followers to inherit these descriptions as the meaningful basis for their religious discourse, just as Moses and Jesus and the early church did. The expectation is that when a word such as "faithful" is given meaningful content, this content will not be lost when it is applied to God. Therefore, any use of analogy in religious discourse cannot lose the essential meaning of a word if God has defined the meaning via words and referential events in this world. This is a key point in our constructive work: the successful use of analogy must retain the historically based meaning of a word. So there is no valid use of analogy in the absence of either direct or indirect historical referent.[96]

Does the discussion above entail that the historically contingent meaning of a term is univocally applied to God in religious discourse? No it does not.[97]

In Exodus 33, God prepares Moses for a revelation of himself. God is answering Moses' request to see his glory. God responds positively to the request to reveal his identity. However, he does so in a manner which challenges Moses' assumption that power-glory would be God's overriding attribute. "Show me your glory," asks Moses. God replies that instead of showing forth his glory, he will instead only allow a partially hidden Moses to see his back as he makes his goodness pass before him.[98]

---

[94] Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," 597.

[95] Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*, 161.

[96] This is especially pertinent with reference to creedal language. A particular point of interest for extending the model presented in this paper is the usefulness of our approach for constructive theological terms which have indirect historical referents. For example, consider the use of the homoousion with reference to the person of Jesus Christ. Is the homoousion understood and applied as an analogy? If so, is the distinction between a linguistic and a conceptual analogy required? In either case, what is the significance of the fact that the precise language employed *points to* history rather than is being drawn from the plane of salvation history? If a lack of direct historical reference is a problem, then how are we construct theological language to refer to God, which is not found in the Bible such as "Trinity"? We keenly await the fruits of this research.

[97] Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*, 165.

[98] Though the interpreter can never be free from metaphysical assumptions which are extraneous to the Bible, my hope is that the primary ontological presupposition for religious discourse is God in the terms by which he describes himself. The name of God is repeated frequently in the OT, climaxing in the book of Isaiah with the God's own promise to redeem the people of God himself. This is seen in the servant songs beginning in Isa 42. Isa 42:8 "I am the Lord, this is my name, I give my glory to no other."

The fact that God's revealed attributes are not the ones Moses expected, and that Moses must be hidden in a cleft and only see the "back" of God suggests that Christian religious discourse must have recourse to conceptual tools to handle the fact that revelation from God is selective, partial, and accommodated to Moses and his creaturely condition. This story points in the direction of securing Christian discourse about God via a theology of accommodation. The narratival suggestion for a notion such as accommodation is strengthened by the fact that the name of God is understood anew in the NT. Graham Cole writes that the:

> coming of Jesus requires nothing less than a reconfiguring of the divine name. Disciples are to be baptized now in the one name of God, which is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18-20). The divine oneness –so prominent in the earlier Testament and reaffirmed by Jesus in this very Gospel account –is now seen as complex in its nature (cf. 19:17 and 28:18-20). The story of the one God now involves Father stories, Son stories and Holy Spirit stories in ways that so overlap as to underline the reality of the oneness and yet preserve the internal distinctiveness.[99]

The doctrine of accommodation claims that God deliberately alters his behavior and the complexity of the content of his message by modifying it to the ability of people across time.[100] God's revelation is appropriately "scaled-down" to human capacity.[101] Thus Calvin wrote that: "God cannot be comprehended by us except as far as He accommodates Himself to our standard."[102] Calvin expands his understanding of accommodation with an illustration of how both "words and patterns of thought" must be altered according to the intended audience.[103] A key illustration is:

> …as nurses commonly do with infants, God is want in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking with us…Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodates the knowledge of Him to our slight capacity. To do this He must descend far beneath His loftiness.[104]

The analogy of the nurse involves two aspects: the modified content of a message revealed on behalf of the nurse, and the ability to understand on behalf of the baby.

These aspects of accommodation enable world-specific meaning for divine properties corresponding to the revelation of God's name. Thus accommodation assumes a correspondence in which divine property descriptions such as goodness, holiness, mercy and love are the same as these

---

[99] Cole, "God, Doctrine of," 260.
[100] On God's behaviour in particular see J. Balserak, "The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with His People," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 2 (2000).
[101] Ford L. Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," in *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (ed. D.K. McKim; Grand Rapids: Baker Book Company, 1984), 25-29.
[102] Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel*, Ez. 9:3-4, cited in William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 56.
[103] Placher, *Domestication*, 56.
[104] Calvin, *Inst*., I.13.1; II.6.4, 2.10.6; *Comm. Romans* 1:19, cited in Placher, *Domestication*, 56. See also, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (vol. 20-21 of *The Library of Christian Classics*; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.14.3; I.14.11; I.16.9; I.17.12ff.

properties found in "entities, events, and actions in our created world."[105] The supreme example of accommodation is the Incarnation. The revelation of appropriate descriptors for God's character via the incarnate Son and the way in which Jesus used religious language assume a univocal meaning for some terms employed in Christian religious discourse about God. Thus, the doctrine of accommodation carefully binds the meaning of particular words for God's properties to this world and to the abilities of his people. This prevents the simple transposition of univocal language from the creaturely realm to the being of God.

Questions naturally arise if this is the case. How can Christians believe, live, and worship in that tense space created by what is revealed in tandem with an awareness of its incompleteness? The illustration of the nurse finds its natural partner in a robust theology of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. It presumes illumination which is the work of the Holy Spirit by which the promises of Christ are "both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts."[106] The Spirit underwrites "the efficacy of the divine self-disclosure; the divine power that enables human appropriation."[107] This appropriation is not aimed at exhaustive knowledge, rather it is that people be moved to a humble and assured trust in him despite recognizing the limitations of language for God.[108] Therefore, there is no need to "de-accommodate" the message God has revealed in order to access the truth.[109] The Spirit enables the believer to live in trusting confidence and with an illumined religious imagination or "creative reason" in which accommodation stretches referential range and appropriation.[110] This enables a creativity which is "the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)."[111]

Given the truthfulness of the accommodated revelation from God, does this mean that those creaturely property descriptions must then be applied to God by maximal extrapolation? Shall we follow Scotus on this? Doesn't this smack of a form of projectionism? How can we avoid falling prey to anthropomorphism and making God an idol after ourselves? The notion of a "limit case" scenario for the

---

[105] Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," 597.
[106] Calvin, *Inst.*, III.2.7
[107] Philip Walker Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's trinitarian understanding of the divine-human relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 58.
[108] Calvin, *Inst.*, III.2.14; III.2.16; III.2.10; III.6.4; III.2.7
[109] This is consistent with the Johannine presentation of the validity of the testimony of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In fact, the silence of the Holy Spirit on many matters is a warning against speculation: "… in prattling with His very silence proclaims how sober should be our intellectual approach in such high mysteries." John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John, vol. 17 (*22 vols.; trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 1:7.
[110] By creative reason is defined as "…the mental faculty that is able to generate conclusions (about causes and effects) on the basis of reasons and hence makes comprehension possible." Munzinger, "Creative Reason and the Spirit: Identifying, Evaliuating, and Developing Paradigms of Pneumatology," 350, n. 46. Munzinger cites the work of Wolfgang Welsch, *Vernunft: Die zeitgenössische Vernunftkritik und das Konzept des transversalen Vernunft*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995). On the complex of reason, revelation, experience and their synthesis in religious language and claims see the recent work by Jan Rohls, *Offenbarung, Vernunft und Religion: Ideengeschichte des Christentums, Band I* (Tübigen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).
[111] Albert and Runco, "A History of Research on Creativity," 3. Cited in Munzinger, "Creative Reason and the Spirit: Identifying, Evaliuating, and Developing Paradigms of Pneumatology," 350, n. 47.

application of creaturely language and attributes to God may be helpful in preventing both projectionism and anthropomorphism.

## Limit Cases

A helpful way forward is provided by the notion of "limit cases." Applying creaturely properties to God via analogy where these analogies are given meaning via univocal revelation in history can be taken in the context of "limit cases." Limit cases allow for meaningful, yet restrained, referential language for God from his attributes revealed in our world.

An example of a limit case is the "0" found on a speed dial. The reading "0" on a speed dial draws a limit to speed without actually being a speed. In the same way, so God's attributes are related to the continuum of our attributes without belonging to the same category as ours. That is, his attributes are not merely the highest in a scale of particular attributes, but are actually beyond the maximal expression of an attribute revealed in history. They relate to the property as the bounds and final direction of these properties. This may be illustrated further as follows: "A series of polygons, with a progressively greater number of sides, becomes 'rounder and rounder' and closer and closer to a circle. A circle then, is that to which such a progressive series points, or 'implies,'… but a circle is the limit case, not the limit simpliciter, of a series of polygons."[112] Employing a "limit case" scenario for the conceptual boundary for the analogical *application* of univocally understood creaturely predicates to God is extremely helpful. Creaturely properties applied to God in a limit case scenario will be applied with the confidence that these properties really do point towards the properties of God. The direction of the claims is right on, even if their ultimate expression in the being of God is not only beyond our powers of conception but beyond our ordinary use of terms. More positively, because this accommodation is grounded in historical works which are also experientially apprehended, the trajectory of claims made from the revelation of God in history with reference to creaturely properties present in the images of God and the incarnation of Jesus is secured by a limit case scenario. The ultimate limit case is the *logos asarkos* who took on flesh to be one person in whom the two natures are united yet not confused. As such the *logos asarkos* activates the life of Jesus such that he is the ultimate "limit case" for Christian God-talk.

On this model, anthropomorphism is avoided. Does this leave the believer under a shadow of agnosticism? No it does not, because the *meaning* of predicates which God has applied to himself in relation to his work in this world is grounded in a reality which is comprehensible to, and can be univocally described by, human beings. The historical-relational nature of Christian knowing and speaking is based upon a clear divine referent for who God is, and a form of devotional life which accompanies belief. Together these provide sufficient ontological, epistemological, and linguistic bases by which to anchor Christian discourse in univocal meaning. This means that our vision of God will be undercut by

---

[112] Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *The Philosophy of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 73-74

the horizon of God himself as the "limit case" for our language about himself. Rather, Christians can be confidently clear as to its referent, and his character in particular.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this work has made the claim that creaturely properties may be ascribed to God by analogy in a "limit case" setting so long as their meaning is understood univocally. There are three facets to our model. Firstly, the person-to-person self-disclosure of God establishes the *methodological and perspectival basis* for the Christian use and investigation of language about God. Secondly, special revelation from God in history provides the *material basis* in our space and time from which comprehensible claims and terms about God can be articulated meaningfully with respect to their object. This discourse is carried out in a devotional-relational context such that language and its imaginative use are re-envisioned and extended by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, the notion of a "limit case" is a helpful tool which clarifies that one can maintain a model in which one can speak strongly in a certain direction with respect to its object, whilst also strongly restraining what is said for ontological and epistemic reasons.