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PART I

Choosing a model

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CHAPTER I

Models and metaphors

My dear friends, let us love one another, because the source of love is God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God, for God is love. This is how he showed his love among us: he sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him ... Thus we have come to know and believe in the love which God has for us. God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him.

(1 John 4: 7–9, 16)

This passage suggests that in the Christian faith, love is not merely an aspect of God's relation to us humans and to the world in which we live, but rather the very key to understanding what this relation is all about. Of course, our relation to God is very complex, involving as it does many other aspects, like God's power, authority, justice, wisdom, knowledge, goodness, steadfastness, presence, etc. However, God's love is in some sense central to our understanding of his relation to us and hence, presumably, to the way we are to understand all these other aspects of the relation as well.

In the context of systematic theology, this would suggest that 'love' is an obvious candidate for the role of key conceptual model for structuring the way we conceive of our relation to God. What would be the implications of this suggestion for theology in general and for our concept of God in particular? That depends of course on what we mean by 'love' and how we understand the role of conceptual models in theology. The chapters that follow will be devoted on the one hand to an inquiry into the nature of love as a personal relationship and of the various attitudes involved in this relationship, and on the

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other hand to exploring the implications for Christian theology of using this as a conceptual model for talking about the relationship between God and human persons. This first chapter will deal with the preliminary methodological issues: in what sense is all human thinking metaphorical¹ and what does this entail for the use of conceptual models in scientific inquiry, religious belief, and systematic theology? How should the systematic theologian set about testing the adequacy of 'love' as a key conceptual model for theology?

1.1 METAPHORICAL THINKING

Comparisons are odious, as the saying goes. And this is quite true, of course, since we all resent being compared to other people. I want my own individuality to be acknowledged, since in my own eyes I am myself and not like everybody else. Comparisons are odious because they tend to ignore our individuality. Furthermore, this is true of all things and not only of people. Every thing is itself and not another thing. By comparing any thing to something else, we ignore its individuality and look upon it as an instance of some general characteristic shared by many things. In this way we forget that every individual thing *is not* like any other thing.

On the other hand, all human thought and experience would

¹ The recent literature on metaphor is immense. The following small sample includes a number of important works on the metaphorical nature of religious thought: Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (London 1974); Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca 1962); M. Gerhart and A. Russell, *Metaphoric Process. The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth 1985); Mary B. Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (London 1963); Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (Durham NC 1976) and *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge Mass. 1985); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (London 1983) and *Models of God* (London 1987); Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge 1979); Ian T. Ramsey, *Models and Mystery* (Oxford 1964); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto 1977); Sheldon Sacks (ed.), *On Metaphor* (Chicago 1979); W. A. Shibles, *Metaphor. An Annotated Bibliography and History* (Whitewater Wiss. 1971); Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford 1985); T. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford 1987), especially chapter 4 which provides a useful introduction to the subject. For an interesting attempt to apply these developments in metaphor theory to an analysis of the doctrine of atonement, see Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Edinburgh 1988). See also chapter 2 of my *Speaking of a Personal God* (Cambridge 1992).

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become impossible if we refused to compare things to each other. Thus one of the most basic conceptual activities which are characteristic of human thinking is that in which we classify entities according to the characteristics which they have in common. In a variety of circumstances we do this deliberately – for example in botany, zoology, and populations surveys. More important, however, is the intuitive or unconscious classification in which we bring order to our experience.² Thus all perception involves a classificatory organization of the data perceived. On this point Kant is correct in his view that our perception and cognition of the world around us are not merely a passive registration of sensory impressions but an active ordering of such sensory data. If we wish to get a hold on the chaos of sensory impressions we receive in perception, we must recognize the similarities and differences between the things we perceive and classify them according to these similarities and differences. In perceiving the world we do not merely register chaotic sensory impressions, nor do we perceive random undefined objects. We always perceive objects as belonging to a kind (people, chairs, tables, houses, trees, etc.) and therefore as having recognizable characteristics in common and differing in recognizable ways from other objects. In this sense all experience is ‘experience as ...’³ which involves comparing things. Without making comparisons we would not be able to experience anything at all.

This classificatory organization of experience constitutes our horizon for understanding the world: we seek to understand things by comparing them to similar things with which we are already familiar. I try to understand how A works or what value I should attach to A by comparing it with B whose workings or value I already understand. We understand one thing in terms of another. For this reason understanding the world around us would become impossible if we refused to compare things to one another.

² D. E. Cooper points out the metaphorical nature of such classification in *Metaphor* (Oxford 1986), 139. See also the examples in G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago 1980).

³ For this term, see John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London 1973), chapter 3.

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Clearly, then, human thought and human experience require that we assert of every individual thing that it *is* like other things. And yet, even while saying this we have the suspicion that it *is not*.⁴ Comparisons may be unavoidable; they are odious nevertheless. We remain in two minds about the way we classify things and bring order to the world of our experience. Let us take a closer look at the process of classification in order to find the reason for our uneasiness.

Classification⁵ is the division of entities into classes according to the characteristics which they have in common. The same set of entities may be classified in an infinite variety of ways, depending on which characteristic or set of characteristics we adopt as a basis for the classification. We could classify in such a way that any two random entities fall in the same class, since any two entities will always have some characteristic in common (if only the characteristic that we are now thinking of them). We could also classify in such a way that any two random entities fall in different classes, since there will always be one or more characteristics which they do not have in common – otherwise they would not be *distinct* entities.

Three points are important for our understanding of classification. First, the similarities and differences between things are given to us in experience. We do not produce them ourselves. When doing a population survey, we will have to find out how many people share which characteristics; we cannot think this up for ourselves. Secondly, which characteristics are to serve as a basis for classification is a matter of choice on the part of the classifier – a choice made on pragmatic grounds in the light of the latter's aims, interests, concerns, etc. Thus we could divide up the same group of people in widely different ways, according to the various ends our classification is to serve. Consider for instance the different classifications of persons in a population register, a police register, a medical aid fund register, a school register, a church register, a textbook on cultural anthropology, etc. Thirdly, we are only able to divide things into classes if we

⁴ See Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 224.

⁵ For a more extended discussion of these features of classification, see my *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry* (London 1981), chapter 3.

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have developed the skill to recognize the similarities and differences on which our classification is based. We are not born with this ability but have to acquire it like all our other conceptual skills, if not on our mother's knee or in the nursery school, then in some other way in the course of our dealings with the world in which we live.

These features of the activity of classification apply also to the way in which we intuitively organize our experience of the world. Thus the characteristics which things have in common and in which they differ are *given* to us in experience. Although we are the organizers of our experience, we are not its creators. Secondly, we intuitively choose and apply certain similarities as principles of order. There is, however, nothing sacrosanct about this selection. It is also possible to take other similarities as principles of order. In different cultures and historical situations, people organize their experience in different ways, depending on their interests, concerns, and the requirements of their social, cultural, and physical environment.⁶ To put it differently: the hermeneutical horizon in terms of which we interpret our experience is not timeless and immutable, but subject to cultural variation and historical change. Thirdly, we are not born with these principles of order, but must acquire the ability to apply them to our experience. This is done in the process of socialization⁷ in which society imparts its cultural standards to us as we grow up. This can happen at a conscious level through education and training, but also unconsciously through the language we learn to speak. The language in which we talk about our experience expresses the ways in which we organize it conceptually.⁸

It is now clear why we always have a lingering suspicion that our comparisons are odious, even though they are unavoidable. Every classification is one-sided, since it only takes certain similarities into account while others are ignored. When

⁶ For some good examples, see Paul Henle (ed.), *Language, Thought and Culture* (Ann Arbor 1966), chapter 1.

⁷ See Denis Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (London 1976), 35f.

⁸ On this point see Henle, *Language, Thought and Culture*, chapter 1; Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, chapter 1; and my *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, chapter 3.

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including things in the same class, we take note only of those similarities in terms of which we group them together and ignore their differences or further similarities as irrelevant. More generally, this also applies to the horizon of understanding in terms of which we interpret our experience of the world around us. When we understand A in terms of B, we know deep down that it is also in many respects unlike B.

What we have been describing so far is in fact the fundamentally *metaphorical* nature of all human thought and experience.⁹ The term ‘metaphor’ does not only refer to a figure of speech distinguished from literal language (as is usual in literary theory), but can also be used to refer to a basic characteristic of all our thinking. In this sense Sallie McFague defines metaphor as

seeing one thing *as* something else, pretending ‘this’ is ‘that’ because we do not know how to think or talk about ‘this’, so we use ‘that’ as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.¹⁰

McFague also stresses the openness and relativity of all such metaphorical understanding: metaphorical statements ‘always contain the whisper, “it is *and it is not*.”’¹¹

An ever-present danger, however, is that we shall fail to hear this whisper. We become so used to looking on A as B that we fail to notice the differences between them. When we become accustomed to a specific classificatory organization of our experience, we become sensitive to and observant of the similarities between things on which it is based, and both insensitive to and unobservant of the differences which are ignored by it. The psychologists Bruner and Goodman show how this process can lead to a form of conceptual blindness or

⁹ On this connection between classification and metaphor, see Mary Hesse, ‘The cognitive claims of metaphor’, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2 (1988), 1–16. See also M. A. Arbib and M. B. Hesse, *The Construction of Reality* (Cambridge 1986), chapter 10, and J. Van Brakel and J. P. M. Geurts, ‘Pragmatic identity of meaning and metaphor’, *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 2 (1988), 205–26.

¹⁰ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

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‘mental set’ in which ‘subjects can be conditioned to see and hear things in much the same way as they can be conditioned to perform such overt acts as knee jerking, eye blinking or salivating’.¹²

Language is an important conditioning factor in this connection. Class words or descriptive terms are the instruments by means of which we explicitly exercise our classificatory skills. Since all of us acquire a specific vocabulary, we have words only for the exercise of *certain* classification concepts, and find it hard to organize our experience differently since we lack the instruments to do so. ‘General words tend to *fossilize* our conception of the ever-changing, infinitely varied world of things to make us conceive the world as being composed of static *types* rather than of different things, each of which are similar enough to each other to be given the same name.’¹³ Our language and our forms of thought or concepts determine each other mutually. On the one hand, our cultural interests and concerns determine what classificatory organization we need to give to our experience, and hence which classification words we require. On the other hand, the words we have (in the language we have learned) determine which classification concepts we can apply and hence how we organize our experience of the world. This in turn reinforces our cultural interests and concerns.

This circle becomes vicious and dangerous when the circumstances of our lives change in ways which make it essential for us to notice those features of the world which we have become conditioned to overlook. If, under such circumstances, we view our conceptualization of experience as absolute or as ‘expressing the essential nature of reality’, our thought forms become irrelevant¹⁴ and we become unable to cope conceptually with the new circumstances in which we have to live. In brief, when our metaphors die and become literalized so that we fail to hear in them the whispered ‘and it is not’, the comparisons they express become not only odious but positively dangerous.

¹² Quoted by Henle, *Language, Thought and Culture*, 6.

¹³ John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (London 1967; 2nd edn.), 44.

¹⁴ On the danger of irrelevance, see McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, chapter 1.

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When this happens we need new ‘iconoclastic’¹⁵ metaphors which make us experience the shock of recognition needed to break down our mental set and thus enable us to see those features of the world which we have been conditioned to overlook.

1.2 MODELS IN SCIENCE

The metaphorical nature of human thought is fundamental to scientific discovery and explanation. Thus scientific discoveries very often consist in the shock of recognition by which an imaginative scientist suddenly notices a significant similarity between two very different things or situations. The similarity had up to then gone unnoticed because in the generally accepted conceptual structuring of experience the things in question were quite unrelated. Such discoveries are in fact iconoclastic ‘breakthroughs’ since they break down the mental set which prevented people from noticing what was there all along before their eyes. Arthur Koestler¹⁶ provides many examples of such discoveries in which similarities are seen which had previously been blocked. The classical example is of course that of Archimedes in his bathtub. Another is that of Newton who discovered a property of the moon by noticing that it behaved like the apple falling from the tree beside him: like the apple, the moon was subject to gravity.

One of the fundamental procedures of scientific inquiry consists in turning certain metaphorical comparisons into *conceptual models*, i.e. ‘sustained and systematic metaphors’.¹⁷ The scientist does not merely look on A as B (the moon as an apple) but does so in a sustained and systematic manner in order to see how far the analogy goes.¹⁸ Of course not all metaphors can be fruitfully developed as conceptual models.

¹⁵ For this term, see *ibid.*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York 1964), 119–21. According to Colin Gunton, metaphor serves as ‘the vehicle of discovery’: *The Actuality of Atonement*, 31. On this point see also Richard Boyd, ‘Metaphor and theory change: what is “metaphor” a metaphor for?’ in Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*.

¹⁷ Black, *Models and Metaphors*, 236.

¹⁸ Mary Hesse argues that these analogies examined in science could be positive, negative or neutral. See Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science*.

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The analogy between the moon and an apple may have been very significant for Newton, since it enabled him to make a momentous discovery about the functioning of the moon. Nevertheless, it remains a very limited analogy which does not lend itself to sustained and systematic development in the form of a scientific theory. Other metaphors prove to be more fruitful in theory formation. The nature and workings of A can be fruitfully explored and explained by comparing it systematically to B. Thus the behaviour of gases can be fruitfully explained by comparing it systematically with the behaviour of billiard balls, and the behaviour of light rays can be fruitfully explained by comparing it systematically with the behaviour of waves or of moving particles.¹⁹

The use of conceptual models is not only characteristic of scientific inquiry but of human thinking in general. Thus, in the words of Sallie McFague, ‘just as individuals model themselves after others, so entire cultures seek and achieve defining metaphors that provide ways of organizing and speaking intelligibly about a vast array of details which, without the models and metaphors, would be chaos’.²⁰ In the context of scientific inquiry, such conceptual models function as grids which enable us to organize the way in which to proceed, to decide on the avenues to explore, and to determine the sorts of questions to be asked. When we look upon gas molecules as upon billiard balls, we ask the sorts of questions about the molecules which are familiar to us in connection with billiard balls, and we try to apply the mathematical calculations to the molecules which we usually apply to the billiard balls impinging on each other on a billiard table. When we interpret light rays in terms of waves or of moving particles, we ask the sorts of questions about the behaviour of light which we would otherwise ask about the behaviour of waves or of particles. In this way conceptual models are indispensable for scientific inquiry. Without them we would not know how to set about it. On the other hand, a conceptual model can be very dangerous

¹⁹ See Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 30 (on the billiard ball model) and 71f. (on the wave and particle models in light theory).

²⁰ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 68.