


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## A Harrean perspective of theology

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### Abstract

The object of this article is to present Christian theology as a case of a Harrean theory, as a mapping which links the members of one set of entities to those of another in a systematic way. I will divide the article into four parts. The first one will be devoted to a brief presentation of the main characteristics of Harré's proposal. Once the fundamentals of the Harrean perspective are presented, the second section will be the presentation of Christian theology as a case of a Harrean theory. The third and fourth sections are concerned with showing how two classic theological topics, conversion and prophecy, can be framed within this perspective in a cohesive and fruitful way.

**Keywords:** Rom Harré; conversion; prophecy; theological models; analogy

### Introduction

The object of this article is to present Christian theology as a case of a Harrean theory, namely as 'a mapping which links the members of one set of entities to those of another in a systematic way' (Harré 1995, 50). In order to do so, I will divide the article into four parts. The first one will be devoted to a brief presentation of the main characteristics of Harré's proposal. Because Rom Harré developed his position over many decades, I will use works from his latter phase in the 1990s to the 2010s. Once the fundamentals of the Harrean perspective are presented, the second section will be the presentation of Christian theology as a case of a Harrean theory. The third and fourth sections are concerned with showing how two classic theological topics, conversion and prophecy, can be framed within this perspective in a coherent and fruitful way.

Questions about the epistemic nature of theology are of course nothing new: Augustine defined it as *intellectus fidei*, and Aquinas asked of the sacred doctrine *if it is a science* (*S. Th.* I, q. 1, a. 1). Aquinas's answer is that it is and, moreover, presenting it as a deductive science, whose principles are not known by a natural use of our intelligence, but instead from revelation. His is an attempt to present theology as a case (albeit a special one) of a science in the Aristotelian sense, as proposed by the Stagirite in his *Posterior Analytics* (Turner 1997). In general, the intention is to present theology as a rational enterprise which can be compared to other disciplines considered as scientific. Epistemological considerations are central to this task, because in order to say that theology is a science, first we need to know what science is. However, if the Aristotelian conception of science is no longer adequate to fully capture the reality of modern science, medieval

considerations about the scientific nature of theology need to be reconsidered. In that sense, here I aim at proposing how theology can be incorporated into a wider epistemological framework, only this time one that was developed having modern science and its peculiarities in mind.

A clarification is needed about the main subject of the article: Christian theology. The following exposition will be made having Catholic theology in mind. However, I have chosen to use the term ‘Christian’ since I think that most of my analysis will be applicable to many other religious communities that identify with that name. Regarding the term ‘theology’, I will use it in a broad sense, as the set of beliefs and their systematic development within a community, together with the way in which it has been embodied by that community of Christians. While this embodiment has certainly changed through time, it also contains common stable elements, for example: a canonical list of sacred books, a number of authoritative dogmatic determinations made in councils, and to many – if not most – Christians, even a hierarchical structure grounded on apostolic succession.

### Harré, theories, and models

Rom Harré’s philosophical investigation is extensive in the number of works it produced, in the breath of its subjects, and in the time period they were developed and published. He worked on philosophy of perception, psychology, philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of science, among other subjects. Here we will focus on his analysis of scientific theories, a work that he started in the early 1960s and continued until his death in 2019. As I pointed out before, I will give an extremely concise version of his proposal. The main elements of his view, however, will hopefully be clearly presented. The Harrean approach to scientific theories can be seen as a reaction to both the syntactic approach of the Vienna Circle and the historicist approach of Kuhn and Lakatos. He is part of the semantic tradition, whose most famous author is Patrick Suppes. In particular, Harré would propose that:

A theory . . . consists, as we shall see, of at least three sets of sentences, the successful deductive organization of any of which is quite fortuitous. There will be one for the description of the phenomena for which the theory is devised. There will be another for the description of the central model, and one or more describing the material upon which the central model is based. These sets of sentences are tied together by various relations of analogy, that is by further sets of sentences whose extent cannot be discovered a priori. (Harré 2004, 3)

This tripartite structure of a theory is at the core of Harré’s view of theories as models. First, he proposes that all theories have a descriptive model, which is a model that captures a variety of phenomena via simplifications, abstractions, or other unificatory means:

One must assume that common experience is first differentiated and categorized by the use of some loosely organized common-sense scheme. There are no brute facts, though for each such scheme there are phenomena which cannot be further analyzed or recategorized. Further refinement of the abstractions from such phenomena requires the use of supplementary schemes. Many of these take the form of analogues. An analogue used for such purpose is the source of a descriptive model. (Harré 1995, 61)

No theory deals with mere facts, but instead with facts which are categorized and ordered. So, in this way the *explanandum* of the theory becomes tractable. Harré gives the example

of treating the sound emitted by birds as 'songs'. This categorization of phenomena which are the *explananda* of a certain part of biology allows the biologist to attack it as a tractable problem. But when they do this, they are still not explaining anything. In this sense, this step is just the construction of a *descriptive* model.

Now, for Harré every model has a subject and a source. The subject is the very thing which is being modelled, and the source is the dominion or dominions from which the model takes inspiration. In our example, the subject is the sounds emitted by birds and the source is human singing. The sounds are modelled as songs following the case of human singing, where *we know* that there are sets of sounds emitted by ourselves which *are* songs. The analogy that justifies the model is, in this case, quite obvious, and in itself preannounces the general sort of explanation the biologist is going to give. In this regard, when we look at the descriptive models of a theory we can usually already recognize it as theoretically loaded.

In order to give a proper explanation, another model is needed, that which Harré dubbed the *central model* in the above text, or in other places the *explanatory model*. The goal of the explanatory model is to explain the phenomena as modelled in the *descriptive model*. Because many times the real causal relations that ontologically ground the existence of the real phenomena are, either circumstantially or by necessity, hidden from us, then it is necessary to devise a model of that causal mechanism.<sup>1</sup> The subject of that model will be the causal mechanism itself, and the source will be, again, the dominion or dominions from which the model takes inspiration. In Darwin's case, for example, the real mechanism for the variation of the species is unknown. Darwin models take inspiration from the mechanism of *selective breeding*, which he knew and understood,<sup>2</sup> and from the Malthusian theory of population.<sup>3</sup> The evolutionary process is thus a model of a causal mechanism that is hidden from us. Because we know the sources of the model, and because we understand the analogies that justify the use of those dominions as sources for the explanatory model, we can make inferences from it. In our case, we can make the inference that, just as in selective breeding the presence and absence of some traits determines the survival and reproduction rate of a given hereditary line, in nature so does the presence or absence of some traits produces an analogue effect. The Malthusian source will in turn provide the analogy that tells us that those traits are to be related to the ability to survive and reproduce.

Finally, the success of the theory relies on there being a correspondence between the phenomena as modelled in the descriptive model and the phenomena derived from the explanatory model. This is the stage of observational verification. In our case, from the Darwinian explanatory model it is to be expected that natural selection would operate to preserve traits that help in the attraction of potential reproductive mates, including behaviours such as singing. Note that we are not necessarily talking about novel predictions, since in our case *singing* is part of the theory from the very beginning of the construction of the descriptive model.

I will argue that it is possible to present Christian theological doctrines as a theory in the Harrean sense. It would be impossible to give a full account of the *brute facts* which are considered in it though. To do so would be to give a full theological treatise. So, instead I will offer some fundamental examples, and propose that they may be generalized to other areas of theology.

### Theology and its models

The Scriptures are not a manual of metaphysics, although one can draw a fair amount of metaphysics from them. They are not a treatise on morals, even if they convey many moral lessons. Instead, in them we find a heterogeneous set of works. Among them we

find books that describe events: the Fall, the Flood and how Noah's family prepared for and survived it, Joseph's brothers betraying him and his ulterior rising to prominence in Egypt via his service as an interpreter of dreams, the tales of the kings and prophets of Israel, and of course the episodes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Other books contain poems or proverbs (the Song of Songs, the Psalms, Proverbs), while yet others are mainly concerned with prophecies, such as the apocalyptic (parts of Daniel and Revelation, for example).

I argue that all these constitute part of the brute facts which are to be modelled in the descriptive model of Christian theology and, as such, they are the subject of that model. The main concern of Christians is not to do with mere historical facts about the Jewish people, Jesus, or the Church, nor with wise sayings, consoling poems or great literary constructions, even if they are taken to be inspired by God himself. Christians view all of these things as part of a History of Salvation. The episode where Adam and Eve eat the Forbidden Fruit is not important in itself, but as the opening act of a drama that encompasses the whole of human history, including each and every one of us. Many, if not all, the events in the rest of the Pentateuch make sense as a story of how the Covenant came to be. The Sapiential Books receive their importance inasmuch as they convey the nature of the Covenant between God and the Jewish people or the Church and our place in it, albeit through various genres. In the Gospels we do not just find that the Son of God was made human flesh, and that He died and resurrected, but instead that He fulfilled the promises of salvation given to the human race since the beginning, and that by dying on the cross and being resurrected He defeated death and sin, and restored our relationship with God, which was broken in the Garden of Eden. The Scriptures themselves refer to the storylike nature of the contents of the Bible: Matthew opens with a genealogy that traces Jesus's lineage all the way up to Abraham, and Luke 3 does the same, but goes all the way back to Adam. Jesus presents himself as the fulfilment of the story presented in Scripture: 'Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"' (Luke 4:20–21); 'And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself' (Luke 24:27); 'Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil' (Mt. 5:17).

Because of the promise of the Second Coming and the End of Times, the historical life of the Church is also part of the History of Salvation which began with Adam and Eve, and so are its institutional successes and failures. Moreover, Christianity claims that each of our own lives, in every one of its details, is part of that History of Salvation. A Christian believer sees their own joys and sorrows as episodes of the same Story that involved Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ruth, Jesus, and Saint Paul. Indeed, to view it in that way is part of what it is to be a Christian. In that regard, no theologian worth their salt would leave our personal stories as something external to the interest of theology. In Aquinas, for example, we find an extensive treatment of the personal virtues which are involved in our personal salvation. These subjects are completely intertwined with his treatment of Fall, Grace, and Redemption. This personal aspect of the Christian faith is an important one for our purpose, for it shows that the descriptive model not only incorporates aspects of reality that are, according to the believer, beyond our possibilities of experience, but that it also encompasses all natural aspects of reality.

The analogy between the descriptive model of Christianity and the case of the birds' songs is straightforward: as biology deals not with isolated, unrelated sounds, but instead with a whole which is made up of sounds, a whole that has an encompassing harmonic structure, so does Christian theology deal with a Story that is made up (like all stories

are) of individual actions and situations. Harré also referred to the novel point of view that opened up for Darwin the problem of variation:

The young Darwin looked at the bewildering diversity of plants and animals, both living and extinct, with the eyes of an English countryman. He constructed an abstract, descriptive model of the natural world by treating it as a subtype of the supertype to which both farms and stretches of a Galapagos forest belonged. He saw lines of descent, blood ties and so on where Captain Fitzroy saw instances of the creative munificence of God. (Harré 1995, 61)

In this example the analogy is even clearer. For Darwin's success rests on the fact that he really saw the realm of living things as a family history that has been unfolding for millennia.

So, the Christian descriptive model is narrative at heart.<sup>4</sup> This means that the source of the descriptive model must also be so. God is presented as the King, the Lord of Hosts, the tender Lover, the forgiving Father, the Innocent Victim, the Ultimate Judge. All of these images are not presented in isolation, but as central characters in a general story conveyed through Scripture and Tradition, or in partial stories that serve a specific purpose in the more general narrative. I am thinking, for example, of the image of God as the Beautiful Beloved in the Song of Songs. Given the narrative source of the descriptive model, we should not be surprised that many parallelisms are to be found between the Story we are dealing with and a multitude of stories that are part of different human cultural traditions. The literary recourses, the aesthetic elements used in its composition, all of that is expected to be found also outside the model, precisely because it is a model. It is in the very nature of the descriptive model that, when dealing with complex things such as these, the source must come from dominions external to the subject of the model.

These considerations do not take away anything from the claims of divine inspiration this model enjoys. Even if they are truly divinely inspired, from our point of view the descriptive model draws its comprehensibility from its analogies to the domains that serve as source, and which are epistemically closer to us. Moreover, the fact that the descriptive model relies on analogies to the source dominions does not mean that we are necessarily talking about something like mere metaphors. In Christianity, to say that Jesus is the Saviour of Man is just as metaphoric as saying that the sounds that birds make are songs. Although metaphoric analogies are not out of the question when looking for a suitable source of a model, this does not mean that this must always be the case.<sup>5</sup>

To say that we have a descriptive model means that we have all the *explanandum* of the theory informed in a comprehensible and tractable manner. We do not have atomic pieces of poetry, wisdom, or single events that concern important religious or political figures. We have a Story that started in the Beginning, and that will conclude in the End; a Story that involves God, angels, and demons, the peoples of the world, the natural world, and also me in particular. What we don't still have is an explanation why the Story goes how it does, why the Protagonist behaves like He does, and in particular why we should take a side in the Story. In order to do that, we need an explanatory model. Christian theology, like biology, does not provide the descriptive and explanatory models as separate epistemic entities. The dissection of the theory into its models is a *post hoc* philosophical exercise. The explanatory model is embedded in the way in which Christian theology is transmitted within the community and in religious predication, just as it is embedded in the way in which evolutionary biology is taught in universities. This, however, does not prevent for us to be able to make the proper distinctions.

To understand the real causal mechanisms that explain the phenomena as modelled in the descriptive model means, at least partially, to understand the nature of God, and of His relation to the human race, to the natural world, and to my life in particular. This is something that is to some extent beyond our reach. God, as presented in the Scriptures, exceeds our epistemic capabilities: 'Behold, God is great, and we know him not, neither can the number of his years be searched out' (Job 36:26); 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live' (Ex. 33:20). The main character in the Story is essentially unreachable in epistemic terms. And in some very concrete ways, so are many other important persons involved in it: as an example, the Fall is preceded by a temptation from a character whose nature is also foreign to our experience. And so in many other cases. Christian sacred texts and the theological doctrines that are part of that tradition provide, nevertheless, the explanatory model that is necessary for giving a causal account of the phenomena. In order to support this claim, I will provide a paradigmatic example of an explanatory model, of its subject and source.

It would be impossible to understand Jesus's predication without referring to his proclamation of God as a Father. The image is present in many ways. Jesus talks about God being our Father ('Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect', Mt. 5:48) and his ('If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love', John 15:10). It is in that way that he teaches we must pray to God ('In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name', Mt. 6:9). Even more, he explicitly puts divine Fatherhood in relation to our own fatherhood ('If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? . . . If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!', Luke 11:11–13). The figure of the Father plays a key role in many of his parables: the parable of the Great Banquet, of the Wicked Husbandmen, of the Prodigal Son.

Jesus's emphasis on God being a Father is a clear case of a Harrean model. On the one hand we have the subject, which is God's relation to us, and on the other we have the source, which is our understanding of human fatherhood. The causal mechanisms in a son-father relationship are mapped onto the relationship between us and God. So, given that we understand those causal mechanisms in the human case, we can by analogy understand something about the causal mechanisms involved in our relation to God. So, if God is our Father, He will be expected to behave as such. As we saw, Jesus himself says that in the Gospels. The expected outcome of such a relationship are the phenomena derived from the explanatory model: because God is a father He will forgive us, guide us, correct us, protect us. These phenomena hold a close analogy to the phenomena as modelled in the descriptive model.

In this way, both models get connected into a theory: the phenomena, which were modelled in the descriptive model, are the result of the real causal mechanisms that involve God, other supernatural beings, the human race, etc. In many of the relevant cases, those real causal mechanisms are not known, and cannot be known, by us. But they are modelled in the explanatory model. Both models, the descriptive and the explanatory, have their own sources: the descriptive model has Narrative, and the explanatory has (at least) Fatherhood. We know how fatherhood works, and from divine revelation the Christian accepts that there is an ontological plausibility in this analogy. From pseudo-Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* up to today's discussions on religious language, theology grapples with how these analogies work. Such problems and discussions are not exclusive to Christianity. The delineation of the extent to which the source of the explanatory model helps us understand its subject constitutes part of the results of exploring that source and its mechanisms. It is possible that while some aspect of the source domain might have been the occasion to its being adopted as such, later



exploration shows that other of its aspects could also be applied analogically in the model in a fruitful way, and also that the analogy should not be taken further in some respects.<sup>6</sup> The distinction between the *via positiva*, the *via negativa*, and the *via eminentiae* in Christian theological tradition maps the successive results of that exploration, and in a way reinforces the Harrean nature of theology as a discipline which is to be understood as essentially modellistic. Moreover, it seems that Harré's distinction between *positive analogy*, *negative analogy*, and *neuter analogy* would not be foreign to Dionysius, Aquinas or any of their modern successors.

### Conversion and Christianity's models

In the previous section we listed, among the brute facts that are modelled within Christianity's descriptive model, those that constitute the private life of the believer. In that sense, Christianity claims to encompass not just the events that involve some gods and heroes, kings and chieftains, but those of everyone who walks on this earth. Even more, it is not unusual to find that many of the greatest events in the History of Salvation involve those that are in the peripheries of political, religious, and social life.

This characteristic has the consequence that, from the point of view of the believer, the History of Salvation is a personal history, and the descriptive model is thus somewhat different for each and every believer. Of course, a great deal of the model is common to the community. Were it not the case, we could not have a community at all. But the particular way in which each life gets embedded within the general narrative varies. Correspondingly, not everyone will demand exactly the same things from the explanatory model provided by Christianity.

These two aspects that result from the emphasis our Harrean perspective puts on the personal nature of theology are central to understanding religious conversion. I will argue that in many situations, conversion arises as the result of two parallel processes that go hand in hand: first, how the person comes to successfully embed significant events of their lives within the Christian descriptive model, that is, how they turn their lives into part of the Christian Story. Second, how well the explanatory model of Christianity addresses the descriptive model of the person.

As I said, both processes are deeply intertwined: a person comes to view their life (or some of its significant event/s) as something that is indeed part of the Christian descriptive model if at the same time they find the Christian explanatory model satisfactory in answering the challenges that this descriptive model poses, including the challenges that come from their particular point of view. Accordingly, it is impossible to describe in a general manner how this will take place: conversion cases can and will be as varied as the persons that are involved in them. A mother may find in Christianity the place where the loss of a child becomes purposeful, a Jew can find in Jesus the fulfilment of the prophecies of his religious tradition,<sup>7</sup> a geneticist will conclude that the ultimate origin of morality cannot be found in naturalistic terms (Collins 2006, 22).

Were it not for this personal aspect of Christian theology, Christian evangelization would just be the exposition of a theological theory that tells the audience about some phenomena that are modelled in some particular way, and of a theoretical apparatus that accounts for those phenomena. This is clearly not the case. For Christians, to evangelize is to communicate the *evangelion*, the good news that everyone is part of a History of Salvation in which a loving, fatherly God is looking for them. It is, essentially, an attempt to emplot the audience within the Christian descriptive model, and at the same time provide its corresponding explanatory model. This explains why it is not uncommon to find that the effort is in many cases focused on particular, significant events in the interlocutor's life. Were those events to be successfully framed within the

Christian narrative, and were the Christian worldview to give a better explanation for them than the worldview currently held, then it is likely that conversion will take place. Paul tells the Athenians that he has come to proclaim He whom *they* ‘worship without knowing’ (Acts 17:22–25). Augustine gives us in his *Confessions* a reinterpretation of his life in light of the Christian faith he has accepted. The entire work can be read as the result of an effort to understand how each and every significant event in his previous life can be seen as a personal chapter of the Christian redemption story. Augustine explains in great detail how in his youth the Christian explanatory model, as transmitted in Scriptures and through his Christian mother, seemed unsatisfactory. It was not until his erratic life gave him a more profound glimpse into the human condition (his personal *addenda* to the common Christian descriptive model), and until he again received the Christian message, only this time via the enormous figure of Bishop Ambrose (a more sophisticated version of the Christian explanatory model), that he came to consider Christianity acceptable, and ultimately, true.

It is worth noting that what has been said about the road *towards* Christianity can also be said for the one *away* from it. Many stories about the abandonment of the Christian faith have in common that the person abandons their understanding of their life as something that is taking place within the Christian History of Salvation. This can happen in the form of a sudden realization that follows an event that, for some reason, cannot be embedded within the Christian narrative. But it can also take place gradually, after a period in which for some reason the person simply does not think about their participation in something that had seemed, in the time previous, significant and all-encompassing. When such processes take place the explanatory model either becomes unsuccessful in accounting for the phenomena, or it simply becomes meaningless and redundant (as it happened with Augustine in his youth).

In the next section we will focus on another topic of Christianity where the Harrean perspective of theology can be a useful approach: prophecies and their role in Christian theology.

### **Prophecies: evidence for Christianity or narrative device?**

In his *First Apology* Saint Justin (AD 103–165) presents a strong defence of the Christian faith to the Roman authorities. Not content to argue for the Christians as good citizens of the Roman *civitas*, he then proceeds to give reasons for the truth of Christianity. One of the main strategies he follows is summarized in chapter 30 of the book:

We shall do so [argue for the truth of Christianity] not by trusting in mere statements, but by necessarily believing those who predicted these things before they happened, for we are actual eyewitnesses of events that have happened and are happening in the very manner in which they were foretold. This, we are sure, will appear even to you the greatest and truest proof. (Justin Martyr 1948, 66)

The next thirty or so chapters are devoted to examples of biblical prophecies being fulfilled, mainly in Christ, but also in the first communities that spread the faith throughout the empire.

According to Justin, one of the roles prophecies have is to serve as evidence of the truth of the Christian claims. Justin’s passage can be interpreted as him using the prophecies as analogues of *novel predictions*: whatever one may say about the Christian faith, it has produced predictions about the future that have been fulfilled, thus giving sufficient proof of the legitimacy of its claims about being of divine origin. So, just as realists would argue that Einstein’s novel prediction about the solar eclipse in May 1919 constitutes a



strong evidence of the truth of the theoretical assumptions of his theory of general relativity, so Justin argues that the fulfilment in Christ's crucifixion of the Psalm that prophesizes the one whose hands and feet will be pierced<sup>8</sup> is strong evidence of the divine inspiration of the Psalms, and consequently of the Christian faith of which the Psalms are an integral part (Justin Martyr 1948, 72). In relation to the history of the early Church, he points to Psalm 19 as a prophecy of the initial evangelization by the Twelve and the early community (Justin Martyr 1948, 76).<sup>9</sup> However, a closer examination of the examples given by Justin, and of prophecies in general, manifests an important problem when trying to carry the analogy with novel predictions.

The most obvious problem is the fact that prophecies seem to be too unprecise to be considered as predictions. Christianity points to Jesus as the one that fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament,<sup>10</sup> but he seems to have fulfilled them in a way only a few (in any) expected them to be fulfilled. Paul's declaration that he devoted his life to preach 'Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness' (1 Cor. 1:23) is the admission that while the Psalms and Isaiah's Suffering Servant, for example, were in his eyes prophecies of Christ, they were not predictions in the relevant sense.

I think that the problem arises only when we consider the role of prophecies in Christianity in the light that Justin proposed, as novel predictions made by divinely inspired predictors. As I just argued, this is not the case, not only because they lack the precision which must go together with any true novel prediction, but also because Christian doctrine itself denies them that place within it.

So, if they are not the religious version of novel predictions, what are they? Can our Harrean interpretation of Christian theology provide any clue as to their role or place within Christianity? The first step we might want to take regarding the last question is to define whether prophecies should be understood as being part of the descriptive model or the explanatory model. I think that it is clear that they are part of the descriptive model, that is, they are part of the History of Salvation in which the supernatural and natural events we already talked about are embedded. Prophecies do not provide explanations in Christianity. They rather pose problems that the explanatory model has to address: how is it that the prophet knows what he or she is prophesizing? How can we distinguish true prophets from false prophets? How can we know if a prophecy has been fulfilled, etc.?

As I indicated before, I think that the Christian descriptive model is narrative at heart: the Christian *explanandum* is a Story, even if it one that it is also a History (in the sense that it is presented as actually taking place), and it also claims to include all other histories. Following Harré's analysis of models, it must have a source. As I pointed out, the source can only be human narrative devices, techniques, etc. In this perspective, I think that the prophecies we have been talking about can be seen as narrative devices akin to *foreshadowing*. As a modern example, we can point out the famous way in which Tolkien made use of this device in *The Lord of the Rings*. Early in their quest, Gandalf is discussing with Frodo the case of Gollum, the corrupted character who craved the Ring. After Frodo laments that his relative Bilbo had not killed Gollum when he had the chance, Gandalf replies:

do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement . . . he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least. (Tolkien 2004, 59)

As is well known, in the end it is Gollum, and not Frodo, who destroys the Ring, even if not voluntarily. Gandalf's words foreshadow the resolution of the quest. The reader knows from the beginning that Gollum is not just an antagonist to the true heroes. They know that there is more to him. There is something to be expected, although it is not

known exactly what. There is a tension that is maintained throughout the story regarding Gollum. And as the final act approaches, the tension becomes more acute. Finally, after the resolution is known, the meaning of Gandalf's words becomes clear, and the reader has no doubt that he was referring to the event that has just transpired. With that device, Tolkien provides a new layer of unity to his story. A reader who remembers Gandalf's foreshadowing and reads about Gollum's demise knows that they are witnessing the conclusion of something that always been in the making.

In this modern literary example, the fact that there is something unnatural about knowing what is going to happen is not at the centre of the matter. It is the layer of unity that the foreshadowing provides that is important. The same interpretation can be made regarding the role of prophecies in Christian theology. The way in which the early Church, for example, made use of Old Testament prophecies as arguments for Jesus's messianic claims, can be mapped onto this description. They found in Scriptures many books or passages which could be read, after Jesus, as a foreshadowing of his deeds.<sup>11</sup> To the Jews, this could provide a good basis for receiving the Christian descriptive model, the Christian Story, as an expansion of their own, a chapter that resolved the tension that was set up by the messianic prophecies they all knew. To the non-Jews this provided an element of unity in the Christian model, which included the Jewish one.

If this is the case, if prophecies can be understood fundamentally as a narrative device that provides both a tension towards the future and a source of narrative unity, then it is no surprise that prophecies are almost invariably not precise in the way they describe the future events. For a foreshadowing or a prophecy to be effective in narrative terms, it has to occupy a middle ground between giving a precise description of the future events, and giving a statement that could be fulfilled by almost any event. Had Tolkien made Gandalf say 'Do not wish Gollum's death, Frodo, for when in  $x$  time the moments comes, you will fall under the power of the Ring, and it will be Gollum who, after taking it from you, will trip into the fires of mount Doom and destroy the Ring', he would have completely ruined the entire story, because he would have destroyed the tension of not knowing how it will end. Because we would have known the resolution in its minor details, all the intervening adventures would have seemed to be pointless, void of any true significance. Had the book of Isaiah, for example, unambiguously indicated the date and place of birth of the Messiah, or the contents of his predication, or the manner of his death, and indicated that he was going to rise after three days, the History of Salvation would have lost its appeal *qua* story. Make the foreshadowing too precise, and you loosen the tension, make it too vague, and the narrative satisfaction obtained when it is fulfilled will be lost. For Christians, the book of Revelation of which we already talked has a content that, although it is difficult to understand, still tells them something about how things are going to end. Christ is going to come back. There will be a final battle between the Son of God and Satan. The Church is going to be persecuted as never before. This will take place soon. In what way is Jesus going to come back? What kind of battle is there going to be? How will Satan manifest? What does 'soon' mean in this context? All of these are questions that no Christian can confidently answer, and if they believe in Jesus's words, they could never do, not until the prophecies are fulfilled. If Christian theology is divinely inspired, one would expect that its ultimate Author is a talented one. If it is not, given the success it has had, one should recognize that, even if not true, it is still a master work of literature.

## Conclusion

In this article I proposed that Christian theology can be analysed into the main elements Harré claims scientific theories can be analysed into: a descriptive model and an explanatory model. The Christian descriptive model has as its subject the significant events in the

history of the relationship between God and Man, as these are told in the Scriptures. But it also has as subject the history of the community of believers, the Church, up until an End. Finally, it models the lives of each and every one of the believers. These events are modelled following a source of inspiration which is Narrative. The Christian Story is one that takes the modes, techniques, and recourses of human narrations, and brings them to a *magna narratio*, a Story that binds all stories. Moreover, it claims to be not just a Story, but History.

Intertwined with this, Christianity also claims to possess an explanatory model. It doesn't just tell the argument of History, but also the reasons, intentions, and powers which are behind it. To a great extent it is not possible to us to know these hidden variables that explain the development of the Christian Story. To do so would mean that we are in direct epistemic contact with the Protagonist. So, as in any Harrean explanatory model, the Christian one takes inspiration from sources whose causal mechanisms are known to us. In the article I talked about the Father-Son relationship as an example of an explanatory model. There are many more. The central event in the History of Salvation is the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a cross. It is part of the core belief of most Christians that by doing so Jesus has delivered Mankind from the power of Sin, and restored our relationship with God. Why there is a causal relationship between Jesus's sacrifice on the cross and the redemption of humankind is a question that goes through the entire history of theology since Paul's prediction. The very fact that it is called 'atonement' already shows us that we are using causal mechanisms with which we are acquainted from human relationships, and applying them to a relationship between Man and God. All theological theories of atonement follow the modellistic path we have been discussing: the ransom theory, the penal theory, etc. They take the dynamics of a given field which is well known to us, and apply them analogically to a mechanism which is not within our reach.

In this article I have not addressed questions regarding the truth content of Christian theology. That is not my interest here. The focus is put on how to describe Christian theology as a theory, regardless of its correspondence to reality. Just as modern philosophers of science can evaluate the epistemic structure of Ptolemaic astronomy or Aristotelian biology without discussing its merits or shortcomings, so here I have used Rom Harré's modellistic view of scientific theories to analyse the epistemic structure of Christian theology.

The considerations about conversion and prophecies are aimed at showing the potential this Harrean perspective has for framing Christian theology as an epistemic enterprise. In that regard, it is important to note that my approach, which relies heavily on a narrative analysis, is one that has seen much scholarship in recent years.<sup>12</sup> Conversion as the embedding of the believer's life into the Christian descriptive model and prophecy as a narrative device of that same descriptive model were presented as examples of how well these approaches can fit within a Harrean view of theology. Moreover, I do not pretend to say that in these analyses I have exhausted the nature of religious conversion or prophecies. Questions about the reasons a person might have to find the Christian descriptive and explanatory models more appealing are not considered here, for example. Also, the roles that prophecies have are surely not just limited to their narrative effects. A prophecy can serve as a warning or a consolation. Each has a proper place and is always an event itself in the development of the narrative.

My interest in the examples of conversion and prophecy is to show that the Harrean approach can be useful in encompassing different theological themes within a coherent epistemological structure that, while it can successfully model the reality of theology, at the same time can, and has, model the reality of science. But just as a medieval theologian could tackle any theological problem without assuming the Aristotelian description Aquinas provides for the epistemological basis of theology, so can any theologian today

work on any of the issues mentioned here without espousing my Harrean approach. In that sense, conversion and prophecy are merely presented as two examples that, in my opinion, are very helpful in illustrating the Harrean character of theology, while at the same time remaining interesting topics that can be worked on independently of the Harrean framing I am proposing here.

There are many topics that could be considered from this Harrean perspective: the nature of liturgy as a representation of the salvific acts of Christ, the role that prayer has in the believer's relation to God, and how it is related to the causal mechanisms of the explanatory model. But in general I think that the classical theological works can be understood as parts of this framework. I pointed out earlier that the study of analogy and its place in theological language as it is carried out in apophatic theology is well suited to be considered as part of the study of the nature of the theological explanatory model. Exegetical studies can be easily framed as the analysis of the Christian descriptive model and its relations to the relevant parts of the explanatory model.

Although Harré's proposal was aimed at capturing the nature of scientific theories and how they relate to the phenomena they explain, I think that his view can be applied to explain the main features of Christian theology, a theology that is essentially historical, and one that at the same time calls for an analogical approach to its deepest questions. These two are the reasons that drive this proposal on the epistemic nature of theology.

## Notes

1. I do not in the least intend anything specifically mechanical by the word 'mechanisms'. Clockwork is a mechanism, Faraday's strained space is a mechanism, electron quantum jumps is a mechanism, and so on. Some mechanisms are mechanical, others are not. I choose the word 'mechanism' for this use largely because it is the word most usually used for this purpose. We talk of 'the mechanism of a chemical reaction', 'the mechanism of bodily temperature control', 'the mechanism of star creation', and so on. (Harré 2004, 4)

2. *On Origin of the Species* begins with a chapter on *variation under domestication*, setting the stage for the following chapter on *variation under nature*, which is presented as a non-guided analogue to the first.

3. The third chapter of *On the Origin* is focused on the *struggle for existence*. For the Malthusian inspiration of the ideas contained there, see Desmond and Moore (1991, 264ff.).

4. See Alter (1981), Barr (2011), Busch (2015), Carter (2015), Hindmarsh (2014), for examples of narrative analyses of biblical texts.

5. See Soskice (1985) for an excellent discussion on metaphors in science and religion. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to that work.

6. God's Fatherhood has been, for different reasons, at the centre of theological debates both in Patristic times and today. In Soskice (2007, 69) it is pointed out that, early in trinitarian theological reflections: the insistence that God really 'is' a Father occurs within Christian heresy. Certain Arians insisted that the Bible does not speak symbolically of God, and thus that God is the Father and Christ is the Son. From this followed the heretical conclusion that the Son, Christ, must have been non-existent before begotten. The orthodox consensus is that calling God 'Father' is a metaphor, however central. While the focus of the Nicene fathers was put on the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, and not on the male connotations of the 'Father' image, this last aspect has not escaped later theologians, particularly in recent times, when (as the title of the book referenced before by Janet Soskice suggests) the gendered qualities of our language about God has received more attention. As I pointed out, the exploration of the limitations of the images used both in Scriptures and the theological reflection grounded on them are part of the development of the Harrean relations established between the source and the subject of the theory. To take a modern and popular example, in Ratzinger (2007, 140) the German Pope asks: Is God also mother? The Bible does compare God's love with the love of a mother . . . The mystery of God's maternal love is expressed with particular power in the Hebrew word *rahamim*. Etymologically, this word means 'womb', but it was later used to mean divine compassion for man, God's mercy. After stating that nowhere in the Bible God is called 'Mother', Ratzinger theorizes that the use of a male title instead of a female one might have its origin in the emphasis the Bible puts on God's transcendence: Of course, God is neither a man nor a woman, but simply God, the Creator of man and woman. The mother-deities that completely surrounded the people of Israel and the New Testament Church create a picture of the relation between God and the world that is completely opposed to the biblical image of God. These deities always, and probably inevitably, imply some form of pantheism in which

the difference between Creator and creature disappears. Looked at in these terms, the being of things and of people cannot help looking like an emanation from the maternal womb of being, which, in entering time, takes shape in the multiplicity of existing things. (Ratzinger 2007, 140) Whatever the value of this reconstruction (which Ratzinger himself admits is just 'tentative'), he adds that the language of the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in Jesus's preaching, 'remains normative for us . . . We make our petitions in the way that Jesus, with Holy Scripture in the background, taught us to pray, and not as we happen to think or want' (Ratzinger 2007, 140). This last one is an interesting statement, because it shows that the use of a certain source domain can, for some believers, not only be fruitful in intellectual terms, but even mandatory regarding their liturgical and spiritual practices.

7. 'We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph' (Jn. 1:45).

8. Ps. 22:16–17.

9. 'There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world' (Ps. 19:3–4).

10. The term 'Old Testament' denotes a collection of writings which are referred to differently by different people. 'Hebrew Bible' is a widely used alternative term. As Alister McGrath (McGrath (2017), 105) points out, though, it 'does not reflect the specifically Christian understanding of continuity between the people of Israel and the church'. Because of the relevance this sense of continuity has in my argument, I will use 'Old Testament' to indicate these writings.

11. See Albl (1999, 30) for a basic list of these texts curated by the early communities.

12. See note 4.

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