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### **The Significance of Indeterminacy Metaphor, Analogy, and the Dangers of Determinate Univocity**

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**The Significance of Indeterminacy  
Metaphor, Analogy, and the Dangers of Determinate Univocity**

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**Abstract**

In the work of the feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen, rejection of the 'doctrine of analogy' as the 'domination of the phallus' goes hand-in-hand with critique of the so-called metaphysics of presence. I contend that the 'pan-metaphorist' strategy employed by Jantzen reacts to the static approach to theology adopted by the majority of Anglo-American analytic philosophers. Here, focusing on David Burrell's reading of Aquinas, I show how Burrell's analogy escapes Jantzen's critique. Throughout, I defend a robustly apophatic interpretation of analogy. While strongly endorsing Jantzen's 'masculinist' reading of analogy in the work of one of her main targets, Richard Swinburne, this article also challenges the correctness of Jantzen's assumption that analogy is necessarily concomitant with the idolatries of a determinate univocity. Without analogy, it is further argued, we are left with a competitively 'zero-sum' standoff between divinity and humanity. The result is that we are no longer talking about God but 'merely' about ourselves. I argue that feminists cannot afford to dismiss the liberating potential of the way of analogy, especially in its negative or apophatic dimensions.

## Introduction

Within religious feminism over recent decades, it is beyond question that metaphor has been privileged over analogy. Liberal feminist theologians, in particular, tend to adopt a ‘non-literal’ understanding of theological language. The influence of Kant in modern philosophy, especially his doctrine of noumena or his transcendental idealism, has caused many philosophers (not just feminist philosophers) to claim that all our thinking and talking about the divine is metaphorical. It is one of my intentions in this article to challenge this view. Without analogy, we are left with a theology which conceives transcendence and immanence, as well as God and the world (or God and humanity), in opposing terms. Our *human* names cannot be names of *God*.<sup>1</sup> The question we need to ask is this: Is language about God merely, and without remainder, language about ourselves, or is it also – in and through human desire and projection – the earthly vessel of divine self-revelation? Clearly, these options offer two radically different alternatives. Whereas the ‘modesty’ of the former denies the possibility of metaphysical speculation, the latter, in my opinion, offers a less dogmatic view. Feminists cannot afford to dismiss metaphysics. Concrete solutions to the aporias of modernity are not to be found in the ‘liberal’ subordination of ontology to ethics, but by attending to questions of being. Feminist concerns about injustice need not result in the wholesale rejection of metaphysics. Without a strong account of the True, there can be no ultimate obligation to choose the Good.

When it comes to the use of religious language, the postmodern feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen takes (what William Alston calls) a ‘pan-metaphorical’ approach. The ‘doctrine of analogy’, so Jantzen’s argument goes, is fundamentally ‘masculinist’. Driven by a (male) desire for utterly determinate intelligibility, it ‘pins down’ (or attempts to pin down) the meaning of concepts used in discourse *in divinis*, rather than allow for a ‘fluid poetics’ in relation to the divine horizon. Below, I discuss Jantzen’s understanding of the way of metaphor in relation to her use of postmodern thought – in particular, the critique of ‘ontotheology’. Ontotheology involves theorising about the divine in a way that presumes that reason can arrive at *clear* knowledge of God, so that ‘reasoning about God can ultimately remove the divine mystery’.<sup>2</sup> Underlying Jantzen’s rejection of (what she takes to be) analogy is a disdain for conceptualist or representational understandings of theological meaning. In order to unpack what is at issue,

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<sup>1</sup> In her impressive work, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void*, Tina Beattie complains that, even today, in the case of liberal feminist theologies, the ‘divine mystery’ invariably ‘dissolves in the shadowy Feuerbachian projections of women’s experience’ (T. Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void – A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 6–7).

<sup>2</sup> M. C. Rea, ‘Introduction’, in O. D. Crisp & M. C. Rea (eds.), *Analytic Theology: New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9.

I briefly examine Richard Swinburne's take on analogy. As we shall see, Swinburne's reading largely reduces the classical view to a univocity thesis.

If the theology of male philosophers such as Swinburne shows an inadequate awareness of God's dynamic transcendence, there are continuing influences on feminist thinkers that lead them to believe that our language says nothing at all about God's nature, which is wholly unknown and unknowable. Sallie McFague, for example, whose work I examine in the first part of the article, relies on a distinctly modern form of (so-called) 'negative theology' (as distinguished from classical Dionysian apophaticism) and, again, on a pan-metaphoricism. All theological language applies properly only to our existence, not God's. Consequently, we are permitted to invent theological metaphors for the sake of ourselves.

My positive arguments are closely allied to the analogical reflections of the philosophical theologian David Burrell. Building upon Burrell's work, I show that analogy (properly understood) has no dealings with static notions of theological truth. Burrell is radically opposed to all theologies which presume to situate God on a common ontological ground with creatures. For him, speaking analogously implies a similarity within an ever-greater dissimilarity. My overarching contention is that feminists cannot afford to ignore the potential that the use of analogy holds – analogy, that is, not in the popular sense of the term, which emphasises the ultimate similarity between God and creatures, but in that particular sense which emphasises their ultimate difference.

## **The Way of Metaphor**

Sallie McFague's theology in general is strongly in the tradition of liberal Protestantism. In her best-known work, *Models of God*, McFague is clear to assert her radical Kantian dualism between the way we experience the world through the categories of our understanding (the phenomenal realm), and the way the world is in-itself, the noumenal realm of which nothing can be said (apart from saying that there is such a realm). This is an intellectual tradition derived from late medieval nominalism. Only appearances, says Kant, not 'things-in-themselves', can be known by human beings. With this distinction in place, McFague proceeds to defend a position on metaphor that is highly agnostic and that denies all knowledge of the reality of God. 'All language of God "misses the mark"',<sup>1</sup> she writes, and 'no language about God is adequate'.<sup>2</sup> The names of God are *all* metaphorical utterances, because God is, in Godself, wholly *absent* or *unavailable*.

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<sup>1</sup> S. McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

The crucial conceptual point that lies behind this epistemology is that, since it is impossible to speak any literal truth about the transcendent itself, only *our experience* of relating to God can be expressed. Consequently, ‘theology is *mostly* fiction’,<sup>1</sup> but ‘some fictions are better than others’.<sup>2</sup> Here, McFague applies a pragmatic criterion of ‘truth’. The issue is not whether one of our theologies is true and the other false, but ‘which one is a better portrait of Christian faith *for our day*’.<sup>3</sup>

The task of McFague’s metaphorical theology intrinsically involves a commitment to the claim that talk of God is merely, and without remainder, humanly created. Our worship makes no claims that extend into the realm of actual affirmations about God. Here, theological predications are no longer predications *about God* but predications about our own being. McFague stands within the same metaphysical tradition as Ludwig Feuerbach. *Theology* is inevitably reduced to *anthropology*.

McFague’s argument is quite similar to a claim made by Aquinas. He said that we could never step outside of the temporally situated mode of our assertions. In analogical language about God, there is always a difference between the *way* in which we speak about a perfection (*modus significandi*) and the perfection itself about which we speak (*res significata*). The *modus significandi* will be a moment of imaginative ‘projection’, and thus ineluctably derived from creaturely understandings. With this basic point, I have no quarrel. However, there is also a fundamental difference between McFague and Aquinas on this point. For Aquinas, the reminder of our mode of signifying does not mean that we cannot speak properly or affirmatively about God.

Here, it is deeply unfortunate – and, on this count, I am in agreement with Sarah Coakley<sup>4</sup> – that feminists have waxed sanguine towards the Kantian or neo-Kantian view that any talk of God is just as good as any other. *All* speech of God is, in fact, ‘metaphorical’ and, given God’s noumenal status, subject to endless revision simply according to the feminist’s imaginative construction. Because we know *a priori* that our speech is always restricted by its finite historicity, we also know it can never be capable of the infinite. *Because* it is human, it falls short. Having bracketed off truth-questions, we are thereby free to engage in theological construction for the sake of ourselves.

Below, I will contest many of McFague’s most basic theological assumptions – in particular, the notion that all language of God must *wholly* and *necessarily* ‘fail’. To be sure, from the perspective of the *ordo cognoscendi*, our finite predications are inadequate to God. We cannot know what God is, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. xi; emphasis hers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. xiii; emphasis hers.

<sup>4</sup> S. Coakley, ‘Shaping the Field’, in D. F. Ford, B. Quash, & J. M. Soskice (eds.), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 46, 47, 51.

therefore (from our side) no sign is adequate to his being. Burrell, however, while agreeing with this point, also insists (following Aquinas) that human words are used positively and literally of God. Language does not fail for Burrell in the same way that it does for McFague.

### **Masculinism, metaphor, and ‘ontotheology’**

Jantzen claims that contemporary philosophical discussions in the analytic school remain within a ‘masculinist’ dream of ‘self-presence’,<sup>1</sup> attempting to ‘pin down’ the precise meaning of words about the divine reality, rather than offering new horizons for divine becoming.<sup>2</sup> It is in connection with her discussion of the Dionysian strategies of ‘unsaying’ that Jantzen launches her radical critique of the ‘doctrine’ of analogy. Notable, here, is Jantzen’s ‘complete disdain’<sup>3</sup> for the Christian tradition of apophatic theology, a tradition one might have expected her to utilise as a way of moving beyond analytic attempts to stabilise the flux and fix truth determinatively. All orthodox Jews, Christians, and Muslims would agree that God is, indeed, transcendent, ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ all finitude, in contrast with pantheists who hold that creation is out of God (*ex Deo*). According to metaphysical tradition, however, God qualitatively exceeds not only all finite beings, but also every knowable, finite category. Just as God differs from the world, ontologically, so too God ‘refuses conceptual and linguistic assimilation’.<sup>4</sup> Expressed otherwise, God must be beyond univocal determination. Or, as Victoria Barker puts it, ‘the experience of God cannot be thematized, rationalised, or normalised within the “discourses of man”’.<sup>5</sup>

Women within the Church have often been alienated or repressed by theologies dominated by relentlessly male projections. However, together with its strong patriarchal bias against women, the Christian tradition has also maintained the insuperable ontological difference – the ‘analogical interval’ – between God and creation. Sarah Coakley reminds us of the importance of the apophaticism to be found in female mysticism and spirituality, where ‘voices of dissent’ against the predominance of patriarchy have flourished. It is here, ‘at the margin’ of the institutional Church, that women have broken free of rational (‘symbolic’) attempts to master God, in order to construct new ‘dwelling places’ where their own subjectivities can be affirmed:

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<sup>1</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172–173, 175.

<sup>3</sup> S. Coakley, ‘Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion’, in W. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 500.

<sup>4</sup> V. Barker, “God, Woman, Other”, in *Feminist Theology* 18:3 (2010), p. 317.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The ‘mystics’ of the church have often been from surprising backgrounds, and their messages rightly construed as subversive; their insights have regularly chafed at the edges of doctrinal ‘orthodoxy’, and they have rejoiced in the coining of startling (sometimes erotically startling) new metaphors to describe their experiences of God. Those who have appealed to a ‘dark’ knowing beyond speech have thus challenged the smugness of accepted anthropomorphisms for God, have probed (to use the language of contemporary French feminism) to the subversive place of the ‘semiotic’.<sup>1</sup>

Although one might have thought a robust account of how God ultimately transcends *all* our speech – both our affirmations *and* our negations (as Dionysius says) – would help to disrupt the masculinist language of traditional philosophy of religion, it is evident that, for Jantzen, however, the dominant use of male signifiers is only part of the problem. As she sees it, the classical claim that ‘God cannot be named’ sets up the conventional problem of theological language – a problem which is standardly resolved by Anglo-American analytic philosophers by way of appeal to analogical speech about God, wherein questions of realism, reference, and truth take centre stage.<sup>2</sup>

Among the thinkers that Jantzen relies upon to develop a new feminist philosophy of religion, it is probably (excluding Luce Irigaray) Jacques Derrida with whom she resounds the most. One note that sounds throughout *Becoming Divine* warns us against the dangers of the wholly referential (univocal) discourse and of the quest for mastery. This philosophical and theological tendency privileges the static over the dynamic, sameness over difference, the intellectual over the possibility of new divine horizons. The analytic philosopher, one might say, looks at the ‘divine horizon’ as something to be *mastered*, brought to completion, by an articulation more immediate and direct.

Jantzen claims that analytical philosophy of religion is ‘logocentric’, lacking a sense of the indeterminacy of meaning. Swinburne and others seek a divine guarantee for God’s names; the divine functions as a ‘transcendental signified’, which authorises the correctness of the masculinist imaginary and its expressions.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to religious language, Jantzen prefers metaphor to analogy. Metaphor, in her view, works very differently to analogy. Metaphorical theology does not attempt to ‘pin down’ meaning. Theological metaphors generate an instability of reference that keeps meaning open, fluid, and groundless. The best metaphors, moreover, continue to evoke or generate newer and more ‘adequate’ models of God. These new models, in turn, may ‘disclose a different imaginary and new paths of female

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<sup>1</sup> S. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 174ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 184–192.

subjectivity'.<sup>1</sup> Analogical predication, by contrast, with its fixation on establishing the precise sense of propositions about the divine, merely serves to foreclose the divine horizon.

Jantzen's investigation does not focus upon the determinacy of signification. Language, rather, is to be understood as a process of semantic dissemination, the 'continuous interplay of shifting signifiers';<sup>2</sup> meaning is 'not fixed by defined presence',<sup>3</sup> but is always being supplemented and deferred. On this view, the point of discussing religious language is not to pin God down conceptually, but rather to open up the gap through which we can move to new horizons for human becoming. For Jantzen, one of the central goals of philosophy of religion should be to develop or invent alternative 'names of God' – a new symbolic of the divine – which will allow women as well as men to 'become divine'.<sup>4</sup> The way of metaphor is, therefore, of crucial importance for a feminist philosophy of religion.

I am inclined to conclude that Jantzen regards analogy as a concealed version of univocity. There are, though, times when Jantzen appears to be criticising certain interpretations of analogy, rather than analogy as such. In her *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, she writes:

Thomas Aquinas's 'doctrine of analogy' is often nowadays taken as a formal doctrine of predication, specifying exactly how language can and cannot be used of God. It might be more illuminating, however, to consider his remarks first of all as an exploration of *method*: how can language best be used to open windows to that which is beyond our conceptual grasp? Thinking along these lines would make it possible to treat the use of analogy more like a *literary skill* rather than as a theological dogma. Skilfully used, analogy, like the paradoxes of Dionysius or the metaphors of Augustine, could enable the reader to enter into the subtleties and nuanced interplay of meaning, and thereby enable the mental ascent into the silence of the divine mystery.<sup>5</sup>

There is much here with which we can agree. It seems likely, however, that many Anglo-American philosophers might not favour the idea that the language of theology is best seen as 'beyond our conceptual grasp'.

Whereas Continental thought has been extensively used by Christian theologians for decades, it is now some twenty years since the first publication of *Becoming Divine* and very few Anglo-American

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 184ff.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 182, 184, 173.

<sup>5</sup> G. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 285; emphasis hers.



philosophers have so far taken it seriously. The way of univocity (or what one might sometimes call ‘univocal analogy’) continues to emerge as the ‘default position’ for analytic philosophers of religion. The aim of these thinkers is to find a stable foundation for the masculinist language of traditional theology, rather than allow for the flux and fluidity of an open divine horizon. This discussion is helpful insofar as Jantzen tries to sketch a way of thinking about language that refuses to be bound by the determinacy of signification, but is released in terms of ambiguity and metaphoricity. Underlying her rejection of analogy is a disdain for modern theological conceptualism. It is, she urges, ‘from new liturgies and creative metaphor and poetry, in the expansion of a feminist imaginary’, not with a preoccupation with propositions and static attempts to nail things down, that the masculinism of the West can be transformed.<sup>1</sup> However, while Jantzen correctly observes that it is precisely this understanding of language as ever-shifting which is problematic for the majority of Anglo-American, analytic philosophers of religion, we might nevertheless want to question the idea that analogy and the attempt to fix truth determinately necessarily go hand-in-hand. I suggest, in fact, that Jantzen’s rigid separation between metaphor and analogy is a significant reduction of the problem.

Jantzen is undoubtedly correct to highlight the tendency of Anglo-American, analytic philosophers to treat the question of religious language as though the main purpose were to nail things down – to find certain terms that would make the divine transcendence *conceptually* manageable.<sup>2</sup> Such philosophy of religion forces God into a rigid, ontotheological system in which God becomes the ultimate ‘transcendental signified’ – a stabilising referent outside the metaphors of language (in other words, ‘the biggest thing around’). I could not agree with Jantzen more on this point, about which I shall have more points to make when I come to discuss Swinburne’s treatment of analogy. At the same time, however, it is one of my central aims to challenge the correctness of Jantzen’s assumption that analogy is *necessarily* concomitant with the idolatries of a totalising univocity. I shall have a great deal more to say about this below.

## **The way of analogy**

The classic example of analogy in the context of religious language is Aquinas’s (so-called) ‘theory’, which states that words are used of God and creatures neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically. An example given by Aquinas (following Aristotle) is that we speak of a person as healthy, medicine as

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<sup>1</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> As Michael Rea concedes, ‘Those who are theologising with analytic ambitions typically...share the supposition that we can arrive at *clear* knowledge of God... Thus, analytic theology shares affinities with ontotheology’ (Rea, “Introduction”, in Crisp & Rea (eds.), *Analytic Theology*, p. 9; his emphasis).

healthy, and urine as healthy, but not in the same way. Here, a person, medicine, and urine are said to be healthy, but according to a meaning partly the same and partly different. The ‘conceptual content’ of health differs in each of these three cases. Such terms have a certain ‘stretch’ quality, which makes them *hard to pin down*. They are ‘elastic’ and ‘systematically vague’.<sup>1</sup>

Given these linguistic and logical dimensions, one might be tempted to consider analogy as dealing solely with issues of conceptual grammar. Its concerns, however, are not merely semantic, but ontological. In what is regarded as the classic, if somewhat controversial,<sup>2</sup> understanding of the ontological analogy between God and the world, human names may be predicated of both creator and creature on the basis of a fundamental *analogia entis*, or analogy of being. In this participatory ontology, God does not in any sense ‘have’ being as creatures do, least of all does he participate (together with creatures) in some category called ‘being’. Rather, God *is* being; he is being itself, or self-subsistent being (*ipsum esse subsistens*). In the case of God, as Aquinas puts it, there is a ‘real identity’ of essence and existence, whereas in creatures there is a ‘real distinction’ between them. However, creaturely being is positively related to divine being, and all its transcendental perfections have their supereminent source in God. Thus, one may quite properly speak of God, through names derived from God’s effects, even though the full significance of those names lies infinitely beyond our conceptual capacities. As Dionysius says, one may name God from creatures because God pre-possesses from eternity any real excellences they display.<sup>3</sup> As Aquinas argues, an analogical perfection term applies properly to God, and only secondarily to creatures.<sup>4</sup>

The classical distinction between analogy and metaphor is a distinction between literal and non-literal ways of naming God. Aquinas argues that not all divine names can be symbolic or metaphorical,<sup>5</sup> just as they cannot all be predicated merely negatively or causally.<sup>6</sup> Whereas metaphors predicated of God are, indeed, *literally* false, analogical expressions like ‘wise’, ‘good’, and ‘living’ are not. Perfection terms apply literally even to God, not because they circumscribe the divine reality, but because what they signify befits God properly (which is manifestly not the case with God’s metaphorical predicates).<sup>7</sup> By expressing

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<sup>1</sup> W. N. Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A Neo-Thomist Perspective* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University, 1979), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion, see the essays in J. White (ed.), *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Dionysius, *The Divine Names* 569C–597A, in C. Luibheid (ed.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a3.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a3.

<sup>6</sup> See G. P. Rocca, ‘Aquinas on God-Talk: Hovering Over the Abyss’, in *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), p. 649.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a6. See J. Muis, ‘Can Christian Talk about God be Literal?’, in *Modern Theology* 27 (2011), pp. 582–607,

more than an extrinsic analogy of attribution (note the principle *omne agens agit sibi simile*),<sup>1</sup> Aquinas's analogy has the benefit of allowing theology to assert some degree of *intrinsic* commonality between the desirable properties of creation, on the one hand, and the perfections of God, on the other, while *at the same time* upholding the 'distinction' of creatures from their transcendent source. One must maintain both God's intimacy to the creature *and* preserve God's transcendence of the creation. If one makes either 'God in us' or 'God beyond us' absolute, one inevitably turns God into a creature. In the case of naming God, the distinction between metaphor and analogy is as follows: analogical terms apply primarily to God and secondarily to creatures, for what the words mean (the perfections they signify) flows from God to creatures; metaphorical terms, on the other hand, apply primarily to creatures and only secondarily to God.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Modus significandi and res significata***

The crucial element underlying this point is what David Burrell likes to call 'the distinction' of creator from creature.<sup>3</sup> As Burrell comments, 'Since any warrant we have for using human language at all – even perfection terms – turns on the grounding fact of creation, such terms cannot be univocal, since they must be able to span "the distinction" of creatures from creator without collapsing it'.<sup>4</sup> A term is predicated analogically of creatures and of God when we know that it must properly refer to God as the term's true subject, but also know that how it is true of the reality to which it is applied must be utterly beyond our conception. Thus, the doctrine of creation is included as an explicit premise of the argument. For Aquinas, there is always a difference between the *way* in which we speak about a perfection according to a creaturely mode, on the one hand, and the perfection itself about which we speak, on the other: between the *modus significandi* and the *res significata*.<sup>5</sup> Certain contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion have attempted to employ the 'theory' of analogy in defence of 'a hidden univocity now secretly admitted into divine predication'.<sup>6</sup> However, as Burrell and other thinkers rightly argue, such a view derives from

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<sup>1</sup> See H. Lyttkens, *The Analogy between God and the World An Investigation of its Background and Interpretation of its Use by Thomas of Aquino* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1952), 207–208, 246ff.

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a6.

<sup>3</sup> D. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom, An Interfaith Perspective* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 123, 132–133, 135, 139, 204–206, 218–219, 222, 228, 229–230, 233. He borrows the term from Robert Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> D. Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', in R. Van Nieuwenhove & J. Wawrykow (eds.), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 78.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a6.

<sup>6</sup> G. P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p. 349.

ignoring the distinction between the *res significata* and *modus significandi*. More precisely, it permits in Scotistic fashion a latent core of univocity – a ‘*residual* core of meaning’<sup>1</sup> – to subsist in the *res significata*.<sup>2</sup>

Burrell resolutely rejects the idea that divine transcendence can be attained merely by *extending* the meanings of our attributions to the maximal possible degree. Rather, God’s perfections must be understood as qualitatively different and not merely quantitative maximisations of our own. Burrell regards the distinction between *res* and *modus* as part-and-parcel of Aquinas’s apophatic theology, which continually denies that any concept can adequately traverse the insuperable ontological difference between creatures and creator. Aquinas is clear: there could be no such set of analogical terms were the universe itself not derived from a transcendent source from which all things flow. We *can* accordingly speak literally and substantially of God, using names drawn from creatures, for creatures participate in the One from whom all-that-is, and most notably all-that-is-perfect, derives. However, since we have no adequate mode of signifying, we cannot know the *ratio* of our perfection terms when we apply them to God.

### Perfection expressions

Following Aquinas, Burrell argues that only terms denoting perfections are capable of the peculiar polysemy needed to speak appropriately of God. Not all analogous terms are perfection terms, though these turn out to be the least misleading terms for God. Expressions used analogously exhibit, first, ‘a resistance to definition and to an account that will not vary from one context to another’; yet, second, ‘a propensity to employment in diverse contexts in spite of acknowledged differences of meaning’.<sup>3</sup> The shared ambiguity or ‘open texture’ of transcendental and evaluative terms undermines the quest for any mere formal scheme.

For Burrell, there is a shift away from tightly woven *theories* of analogy precisely because the expressions we call ‘analogous’ are those which we *need* to use – and do so use – in situations and unusual contexts so diverse that no single formula could embrace all their uses. Perfection expressions are *hard to pin down*. Analogous terms, as Burrell likes to say, are ‘systematically ambiguous’.<sup>4</sup> The best of such terms can be understood ‘only *in our pursuit* of them’.<sup>5</sup> ‘Wise’, ‘good’, and the like are concepts whose range of meaning transcends any particular conception of ‘wisdom’ or ‘goodness’ we can know. Our ordinary use

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<sup>1</sup> D. Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 138; my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Burrell distinguishes Scotus’s (ultimately univocal) use of the *modus/res* distinction from Aquinas’s (Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, pp. 117, 178–180).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66; my emphasis.

of these terms enables us to lead ourselves beyond current use. While analogy is not subsumed into metaphor, Burrell wants to argue that there is an ‘irreducibly metaphorical dimension in analogical expressions’.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is precisely this polysymous dimension which provides Aquinas with the purchase he needs to use such expressions literally or properly of God.<sup>2</sup>

## Analogy and metaphor

Let me take up Sallie McFague’s point that part of the reason metaphor works is that metaphors say both that ‘it is’ and ‘it is not’.<sup>3</sup> It should be observed of any metaphor that we can – indeed, we must – deny its literal truth if we are to apprehend the truth which it expresses. In the case of certain privileged terms, however, it is not necessary for us to make such a denial, because we are quite unable to circumscribe the limits of their literal applicability. It is just as literal a predication to say of a donkey’s expression that it is *wise* as it is to say of Socrates that he is *wise*. Likewise, how could one compare the *good* of hearing a Rachmaninoff piano concerto with the *good* of a cold glass of lemonade on a hot summer’s day? Terms like ‘*wise*, *good*, and *living* are used...in contexts so widely divergent that they defy comparison. How are such expressions related? That we cannot say’.<sup>4</sup> We speak of an influenza virus being alive, and apply the same term to a performance of Rach 3. When we say that God is living, we must fail to understand the proper sense of what we mean, since God’s manner of being alive is beyond our conceiving. Yet we are satisfied that ‘living’ can be applied to God, once we have become aware that we can use the term to articulate many ways of being alive without thereby exhausting the reach of this expression.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of the frequently discussed Barth-Feuerbach confrontation, I suggest that Burrell’s reading of analogy can be seen as a radical ‘decentring’ of theology (to borrow Denys Turner’s phrase)<sup>6</sup> – a distinctly *pre-modern* rejection of any account of human language and the naming of God which ‘centres’ either God or the human as part of some larger structure of being (the root of any ‘ontotheology’). In Burrell’s language, the way of analogy is a strategy designed ‘to avoid any semblance of a “zero-sum”

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<sup>1</sup> D. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 13; emphasis hers.

<sup>4</sup> Burrell, *Aquinas*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 64.

<sup>6</sup> D. Turner, ‘De-Centring Theology’, in *Modern Theology* 2:2 (1986), pp. 125–143.

game between creatures and creator'.<sup>1</sup> Analogical language is a 'decentred' language. Any attempt – feminist or otherwise – to block the way of analogy must also block any suggestion that we can speak properly about God. For were 'God is living', say, a metaphorical statement, it would follow that it was literally false of God, being literally true only of his creation. The grammar of analogy ensures that our human language is free from competitive relation with God. Our *human* names are, literally, names *of God*.

It is important to make clear that I am not against metaphor as such. The point at issue is whether *all* our thinking and talking about the divine is to be understood metaphorically. Metaphors, for all their expressive, poetic, and imaginative power, need to be seen in continuity with the theological ontology of the divine names. Only this balance between metaphor and analogy will arrest the slide of theology into idolatry.

### **From analogy to *docta ignorantia***

According to Burrell, Aquinas's treatise on divinity in no way offers a clear picture of 'what God is'; instead, it provides us with a grammar (*docta ignorantia*) to 'go on' in the face of God's radical transcendence. This grammar, as Burrell well explicates, is that of analogy, whose role is not to reduce the unknowing, but rather to offer a way of living with it. The 'critical philosopher', it is claimed, cannot show us *how* to use perfection terms properly of God. That is an acquired skill, which is developed by the actual *living* of a religious way: by doing, or engaging in, 'spiritual exercises'.<sup>2</sup> The possibility of analogical usage presupposes its formation in the context of praise and prayer – the *praxis* of a faith community.<sup>3</sup>

One could say that Burrell recognises the truth in Feuerbach's projectionism and, at the same time (against philosophers like McFague), *refuses to limit language to its socio-historical situation*. We cannot know the full meaning of our concepts at the Godward end, because every mode is a creaturely reality, produced by human beings. However, against all attempts to reduce God to the level of mere human construction, analogy, on Burrell's reading, is an activity that, beginning with creatures, moves beyond them. Our language is natural and anthropomorphic: it is *human* language. But it is also revelatory: it accomplishes more than its socio-historical situation would suggest.

Precisely because it is rooted in ontological participation, the way of analogy goes beyond a merely extrinsic equivocation in positive affirmations about God. In order to attribute perfection terms to God as

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<sup>1</sup> D. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Burrell, 'Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language', p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Burrell, *Aquinas*, pp. 59–60, p. 94.

*divine names*, the perfections we find in creatures must pre-exist in God in a ‘higher manner’.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this does not imply any common feature between divinity and humanity.<sup>2</sup> The creature is *similar* to God by virtue of its participation in God as creator; however, to the extent that its existence is something always already ‘handed over’, as it were, it remains fundamentally *more dissimilar*. This being so, it follows that whereas God ‘Is’ who God is, creatures are forever *becoming* who are they ‘are’.<sup>3</sup> Human beings are always ‘in becoming’ in relation to God’s infinity. Analogy, as applied to the divine names, does not override the infinite ontological difference between creator and creature. For Aquinas, the non-competitive relation that is creation *distinguishes* creator from creature in a way that assures their *connection* as well.

### **On the domestication of analogical notions**

Analytic philosophers of religion remain ambiguous regarding the use of non-univocal discourse in speech about God. The dominant trend has been for philosophers to elide the ontological difference in the service of an ontotheological discourse which accommodates the divine transcendence to their established categories. I see this penchant for univocity as arising from an overpowering concern to fix meaning determinately. If theology is committed to the utmost possible clarity regarding its claims about the divine, there must, it seems, be a univocal core to our God-talk. Consequently, the goal is to nail things down as firmly as possible.

In his treatment of analogy, Richard Swinburne argues that most theological language ‘uses words in the same sense as they are used outside theology’.<sup>4</sup> On Swinburne’s account, the difference between God’s properties and those of his creatures is no more than a *quantitative* distinction, a ‘distinction of degree’.<sup>5</sup> We can stretch, that is, as Scotus puts it, the meaning of words like ‘wise’ when applied to God, even as they remain in full contact with their mundane senses.

Sarah Coakley, in common with those theologians who continue to engage with the analytic tradition, has lamented the failure of Anglo-American philosophers of religion to struggle with questions

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<sup>1</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a q4 a2. See Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, pp. xii–xxi, 64–75, 116–120; ‘Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language’, pp. 78, 79, 83, 87. As Klubertanz reminds us, in classical Thomistic analogy, ‘an analogy is called “proper” if the perfection is intrinsic to each of the analogates in question, and “improper” or “extrinsic” if the perfection is present only in one of the analogates’ (G. P. Klubertanz, *St Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960), p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, pp. 117–119.

<sup>3</sup> J. Betz, ‘Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part II)’, *Modern Theology* 22:1 (2006), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> R. Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 37.

of Dionysian apophaticism and the Thomistic *via negativa*.<sup>1</sup> As with the case of analytic philosophy of religion in general, Swinburne's work displays a striking confidence in the ability of theological assertions to furnish us with clear knowledge about God. The frequent allusions to Augustine and Dionysius, which run through Aquinas's reflections in the *Summa*, are entirely lost from view. Swinburne's God is not a 'known unknown', but rather like us in the possession of certain distinct attributes.

Basically, following Duns Scotus, Swinburne suggests that Aquinas's analogy necessarily involves partial identity – the possession by the creature of a property that indicates some sameness between God and finite beings – otherwise it would be equivocation. 'Wise', as applied to God and Socrates, denotes the same single property – a property which is common to the creator and the creature, the infinite and the finite. For Swinburne, analogy is ultimately reducible to univocity. This in itself makes it perfectly understandable that Jantzen should reject the 'doctrine of analogy' as an attempt to tie down meaning. If theology is to be a true 'descriptive science',<sup>2</sup> so to speak, and if truth is defined in terms of propositional reference, then there must, it seems, be a hard univocal core to our talk about God. If this mooring goes, if we start 'loosening up' the meaning of our words too far, then words are cut loose from determinate description to say whatever we want them to say.

The pertinence of the objection raised by Jantzen now appears fully evident. In commenting on Swinburne, she puts it succinctly: 'The point of discussing analogy...has little to do with openness to a divine horizon... The aim is to tie things down as securely as possible'.<sup>3</sup> Despite some reservations, Jantzen is, it seems to me, correct in her arguments about the 'domination of the phallus' in analytic philosophy of religion. In this article, I am arguing that a proper understanding of the way of analogy is of too great consequence to be ignored. The issue is not merely one of eschewing all gender-specificity in regard to the imagery we use to refer to God. Rather, it is a matter of 'finding whole new ways of speaking about God, humankind, and nature from the perspective of the other side of humanity made in the image of God – the side that has until now been a silent and shadowy figure in the story of salvation'.<sup>4</sup> What these 'new ways' of speaking about the divine might be, it is not my place to speculate. Suffice it to say that speaking of God analogically entails speaking of God imaginatively and indirectly, with names and images that open (rather than close down) horizons to the divine.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Coakley, 'Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila', in Crisp and Rea (eds.), *Analytic Theology*, pp. 280–312.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is Humphrey Palmer's (H. Palmer, *Analogy: A Study of Qualification and Argument in Theology* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973), pp. 17, 109, 141).

<sup>3</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> T. Beattie, *Woman* (London & New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 67.



## Interlocutory Remarks

When it comes to God or ‘transcendence itself’, we all run the risk of being presumptuous. Knowing the ‘limits’ of human knowing when it comes to knowing God absolutely, one does know that one’s speech about the divine must necessarily fall short. We can only name God very inadequately, ‘as if by stammering’ (*quasi balbutiando*), and thus, to some extent, every theologian must acknowledge that language of God finally ‘fails’ (‘misses the mark’, as McFague says).<sup>1</sup> At this point, however, as D. Stephen Long has well shown, the question that must be raised is: How does language ‘fail’? According to one answer to this question, our theological language fails us because we claim to know the *limits* of what language can achieve (the socio-historical limits of the *modus*). As such, any failure as to the *how* of our language (the way in which we speak about a perfection) will also entail the failure of *what* the perfection signifies (the *res significata*). Thus, it reduces theology to a thoroughgoing immanence. According to a second answer, the failure of the *how* is not a failure of ‘intending’ (in the sense of tending toward something), or even of ‘understanding’ God, but rather of ‘comprehending’.<sup>2</sup>

Here, it is unfortunate, as I have already said, that feminists have leaned towards the neo-Kantian view that any talk of God is just as good as any other. *All* speech of God is, in fact, metaphorical, and thus subject to endless revision simply according to the feminist theologian’s imaginative projection. Because we know *a priori* that our speech is always restricted by its finite mode of signifying, we also know it can never be capable of the infinite. Having bracketed off metaphysical truth-questions, we are thereby free to engage in theological construction for the sake of ourselves.

The task of so-called ‘metaphorical theology’ (as defined by McFague) involves a commitment to the claim that talk of God is merely, and without remainder, humanly created. The divine names are *all* metaphorical utterances, because God-as-God-is-in-Godself is wholly *absent* or *unavailable*. The result is a kind of Kantian or neo-Kantian nescience, where the *distance* between infinite and finite leaves all God’s names in a hypothetical mode: it is ‘as if’ God is like this, but God is *not*. This is an unreasonable position. It uses a critical philosophical method against those who say, ‘Thanks be to God’. For Sallie McFague, the distinction between *how* a predicate signifies and *what* it signifies *denies the possibility* of predicating terms properly or ‘literally’ of God.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, in the case of Aquinas, the reminder of our mode of signifying does not mean that we cannot speak affirmatively or substantially about God. Whereas McFague

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<sup>1</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> D. S. Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, pp. xi, xii, 23, 35.

refuses to detach the *modus significandi* from the perfection itself (*res significata*), Aquinas affirms that our *human* names are – literally – names of *God*.

McFague's 'metaphorical theology' derives largely from Feuerbach's atheology. Feuerbach's atheology, in turn, derives largely from the metaphysical tradition of ontotheology.<sup>1</sup> The Scotistic thesis regarding the univocity of being leads to Feuerbach's projectionist account of God-language. The God who is passed down to Feuerbach is Nominalism's idolatrous competitor-God. It seems to me that this God is also the God of Swinburne and the modern analytic tradition in philosophy of religion that Jantzen so strongly rejects. Insofar as God is conceived within 'Modern Christianity'<sup>2</sup> as merely one factor at the 'lower level', God and the world, or God and humanity, stand in competition.<sup>3</sup> When the great Hamann spoke of the 'heresy of theism', he arguably had ontotheology, or something very like it, in mind.<sup>4</sup> Ontotheology ultimately comes down to the theological disjunction: either God or the human but not both.

Here, we see the necessity of analogical language in theology. A 'systematic ambiguity' and 'dissimilar similarity', the way of analogy at once upholds divine unknownness, while avoiding the confinement of theology to pure negativity. Such a confinement, McFague's metaphorical theology seems on the whole unable to overcome, leading to a certain cleavage between theology and religious practice. To be sure, there can be no immediate, direct access to God. Even our best predications are radically inadequate when it comes to speaking of God's transcendent essence. There is always a difference between the way we speak about God (*modus significandi*) and that about which we speak – God (*res significata*). However, the distinction between *modus* and *res* does not offer us a purely 'negative theology' (in the opprobrious sense of the term). That the actual speaking about God can be rightly understood as a speaking about *God's* very nature and being (and not simply about the nature and being of creatures) is taken for granted by those who speak *to* God in the practice of religious worship.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas's reason for rejecting any tendency in the tradition towards 'agnosticism' is that, in some instances, we *do* speak of God positively, and we apparently mean what we say. In speaking *to* God, we *do* speak truly and positively of God, even when we find it difficult to explain precisely how our language accomplishes its purpose of truthful speech

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<sup>1</sup> On this dual claim, see D. S. Long, 'Fetishizing Feuerbach's God: Contextual Theologies as the End of Modernity', in *Pro Ecclesia* xii:4 (2003), pp. 447–472.

<sup>2</sup> J. Milbank, 'Truth and Identity: The Thomistic Telescope', in K. Pritzl (ed.), *Truth: Studies of a Robust Presence* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1990), p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: Hamann as Post-Secular Visionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> D. S. Long, 'Making Sense of Christian Worship: Language, Truth, and Metaphysics', in *Liturgy* 25:2 (2010), pp. 62–71

about the divine. As Burrell puts it, ‘Beyond discourse lies silence, yet the communal mode of silence is praise’.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen, it is especially important for Jantzen not to become fixated upon certain semantic concentrations. The emphasis of her discussions of religious language is on ever-shifting metaphors, rather than rigidified attempts to capture and domesticate the divine. The way of analogy is, thus, on Jantzen’s view, to be strongly distinguished from the way of metaphor. In attempting to fix truth determinatively, analogy reflects the rule of the divine phallus. All of which concerns an understanding of analogy and of religious language with which Burrell has had no dealings. Analogous expressions are not only resistant to definition, but also exhibit a ‘propensity to employment in diverse contexts’.<sup>2</sup> Our experience of the range of meaning for these terms we call analogous, and what Burrell describes as the ratcheting-effect of their grammar, gives us an intimation of their literal sense, even though it would prove hopeless look to analogy to provide a ‘superior insight’ or ‘intuition of being’.<sup>3</sup> In short, analogous terms – unlike the metaphorical! – reveal their meaning by way of their illimitably fecund resistance to definition, and herein lies the linguistic possibility of their literal reference to the divine.

Metaphysics, in *this* sense, is found in the ‘happening of the between’; it is, as William Desmond puts it, ‘metaxological’. Our speech of God, Gott, Deus, Dieu, Theos, Dios, Dio, and so on is only ever conveyed from within immanent contexts of signification that provide us with a distinctive set of (‘male’ and ‘female’) images and ideas that we associate with one another, with ourselves, and with God, the One and only, the origin of the ‘coming to be’ of being. Metaphysics is a science that meditates on the ‘beyond’ of being, but one that is also found ‘in the midst’ of being in the recognition that the meaning of the sign always exceeds the sign itself. A metaxological metaphysics always thinks ‘in the midst’. Nevertheless, ‘it is open to the possibility that in its exploration of immanence, it may come across what exceeds immanence’.<sup>4</sup>

Words used analogously are, precisely, *hard to pin down*; perfection terms defy rigid delineation, which makes them apt for use in the case of God. As Burrell puts it, ‘What sets these expressions apart is their resistance to any single formula to convey their meaning’.<sup>5</sup> Such words can be understood ‘*only in our pursuit* of them’.<sup>6</sup> For Burrell, an analogy is a way to articulate what is beyond univocal determination.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Burrell, ‘Religious Life and Understanding’, in J. Stout & R. MacSwain (eds.), *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Burrell, *Aquinas*, pp. 47, 51.

<sup>4</sup> W. Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66; my emphasis.

Indeed, Jantzen's metaphorical theology is certainly not incompatible with what Burrell is advocating. The way of analogy does not provide a neat alternative between univocity and equivocity that determines the enigma of God's transcendence directly. It is a 'way', a 'grammar', that cannot be understood outside of living practice. The analogical leads us to participation in God's divine life.

Burrell understands the analogical in dynamic rather than static terms, thus answering Jantzen's critique of analogy as an attempt to tie down meaning. In addition, I have attempted to show how the way of analogy overcomes what William Desmond calls a system of 'postulatory finitism', which 'has the effect of closing thought off from thinking the signs of transcendence as other than immanence'.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the day, what is absent from Jantzen's notion of the divine is that principle that many theologians call the *analogia entis*. The analogy of being is a succinct way of stating that the being of God is both immanent and transcendent. For the God who is *in* all things – revealing himself as *interior intimo meo* – is at the same time *utterly* unlike the creation (*superior summo meo*), beyond all things. Transcendence is the 'unfolding' of God, an event in which women participate. However, God does not thereby cease to be radically *distinct* from creaturely becoming. On the contrary, it is the manifest differentiation of being from beings – God's very distinction *from* creatures – which permits the possibility of their *own* 'spiritualisation'.

The emphasis on God's otherness 'transcendence itself' is a necessary way of preserving the uncontrollable mystery of the divine, preventing us from thinking that we can possess God as another commodity to be used. This has 'liberating' implications. God's dynamic transcendence sets limits to human ambition. As Tina Beattie rightly argues, it is God who 'safeguards the space in which human beings can meet each other on common ground that neither side controls or owns'.<sup>2</sup> God is the 'actual infinitude' beyond knowing, who always already invites us to experience our endless striving (*epektasis*) as a way of discovering new ways of speaking about the divine and about ourselves.

As an alternative to the 'post-lapsarian' univocity of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, the Dionysian apophatic tradition offers a strategy of 'unsaying' that rigorously denies *all* statements about God, negative no less than affirmative, but also 'points to a transformative contemplative *encounter* with God that transcends even this playful language-game of negations'.<sup>3</sup> Feminist thinkers have yet fully to exploit this radical 'theo-logic' that positions God beyond the 'masculinist imaginary' of analytic philosophy of religion. The resistance of Anglo-American philosophers to the writings of 'negative' or

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<sup>1</sup> W. Desmond, 'Neither Servility nor Sovereignty: Between Metaphysics and Politics', in C. Davis, J. Milbank, & S. Žižek (eds.), *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Beattie, *Woman*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> Coakley, 'Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion', p. 519; her emphasis.

apophatic theologians seems, among other things, to be evidence of its lack of concern for the ways in which the sexism and idolatries of religion wound and destroy lives.

Aquinas's final position on this matter clarifies Dionysius's own view by granting a crucial distinction between metaphorical and analogical modes of discourse: the latter being 'literal', telling us something true about God's very nature, yet, at the divine level, *beyond similitude* in its complete inability to grasp or encompass. Reflecting on the ways creatures use analogous terms (such as 'just') can remind us of that to which we strive as finite, erotic beings.<sup>1</sup> For how could one ever aspire to create a more just society if 'just', in its normal use, functioned as a merely descriptive predicate? Being human, which is not just a matter of being but also of becoming, is to be orientated beyond the boundaries of what we now know. This natural desire for the Good is, one might say, a desire for divinity. Or, as Jantzen puts it, 'The attributes valorized as divine are those humans consider the best of themselves, which they partly have and partly long to become'.<sup>2</sup> Since our language, in this domain, will always fail to determine its object univocally, that language will be more fitting as a vehicle for *seeking* a truth which it cannot exhaustively grasp. Yet what saves such a stance of 'humility' from the spectre of nihilism which haunts much current philosophical discourse, is the belief that the universe occurs in and through God, and that those enquiring have their origins in eternity, able to seek vestiges of the Wisdom of God. Theological language, I am arguing, is essentially a *playful* response to the Word that God speaks. 'Playful theology' (to borrow Tina Beattie's phrase) moves beyond 'God' as the name for 'the biggest thing around', and instead uses this term to refer to a *shared* experience of lifelong learning – an experience that is best expressed through human creativity.<sup>3</sup>

All truthful speech about God – all theology, in other words – is only possible because the human spirit participates from all eternity in God's creative utterance of Godself. Theology, therefore, is always antecedent to anthropology. Whereas much feminist thinking about the divine can be seen as (solely) a project of 'invention', my approach would stress the importance not only of projection, but also of 'discovery' – our creative longing for the divine *and* God's unchanging 'journey' towards us. It is God's infinite to-be which gives being to all things. It is the same act of being which makes it possible for us to 'become divine'. Cut off from the uncreated God who is *in* all things, the world is just so much shadow and darkness – a playground for dangerous and destructive ideologies, as the twentieth-century all too sadly demonstrated.

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<sup>1</sup> Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> T. Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2008), p. 175.

It is not possible to be united to the infinite unless the infinite graciously joins the finite to itself. And, while God has made us to become divine, it is nonetheless the self-excess of grace that takes us there. We cannot *on our own* ‘become divine’. Transformation requires grace, and grace the originating act of creation, where everything distinct from God is related to God as the source and goal of its being. Expressed otherwise: God is not simply the *end* of our desire, but *is* our desire. The goal for which one strives is already present. For such a theological account of desire, the human desire for God is grounded in God’s desire for the human. God always already precedes us, and makes possible our seeking itself.

A proper view of God will neither divorce the infinite from the finite, nor collapse the infinite into the mutable, as has been the case in patriarchal theology and feminist philosophy of religion, respectively. Instead, it will show that God is both transcendent and immanent: at once infinitely ‘beyond us’, and yet intimately and authentically ‘within us’. Under the ‘rule’ of analogy, it is by no means true to say that theology is simply anthropology. One can affirm that something deeper is at work here than merely an Irigarayan projection of femaleness onto God. Rather, *new* perfection terms come into being precisely (and only) through *human cooperation*. This opens up a space for women to re-cognise their own (hidden) qualities, attributes, and perfections (which have been restricted by cultural conditioning) in order to ‘become’, or, as Jantzen would say, ‘achieve subjectivity’. The way of analogy holds tremendous significance for feminist theology today. It permits us to reach for ‘being beyond’ without abandoning ‘being in the midst’.<sup>1</sup> In fact, creation itself, the goodness of given being, is called to be transfigured – humanised! – by God’s deep immanence.

Analogous terms are always in motion, always subject to a constant energy of addition and deferral, as inexhaustible indetermination. Like the objects of the created order, they are constantly unstable, excessive to final fixation. Every analogy is polysemic and, more to the point, it is impossible to stabilise theological meaning within neat conceptual boundaries. Analogy is not so much a dominating, ‘masculinist’ discourse as one always calling out for a creative energy of enrichment and excess. The point is not to pin down the meaning of words, but rather to develop transformative alternatives, ways of ‘thinking otherwise’ of the divine horizon of becoming. Insofar as its endless sequence of utterances is governed by worship, prayer, and agapeic festivity, analogy is an *epektasis* of language toward and in the One, to which the entire universe is striving. Here, we have a movement that, in the very beauty of becoming, attests to the Holy One speaking his Glory in creation. And this ‘way of analogy’, which then ‘corresponds’ to its source by way of its own motion of differential excess, is thanksgiving for a gift, worship, praise of the Most-High.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. xiii.

