

Analogy and Apophaticism: Neglected Themes in Feminist Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

Taking the important work of Grace Jantzen as its starting-point, this article challenges the dominant pan-metaphoricism of Feminist philosophy of religion. Throughout, I defend an apophatic interpretation of analogy – analogy as a dynamic rhythm between affirmation and negation, praise and silence. I argue that Jantzen’s negative position on apophaticism is related to her negative stance on the infinite ontological difference between creatures and creator. However, Jantzen’s rejection of “traditional theology” is really, it is shown, a rejection of “dialectical theology”. Without analogy, moreover, we are ironically left with a (metaphorical) theology of dialectical opposition. By contrast, the way of analogy guarantees that there is no dichotomy between the divine and the human. The “logic” of analogy is one of no contrast.

Keywords

Analogy, apophaticism, metaphor, feminism, projection

Feminism and Analogy

Our speaking of God is, inevitably, a speaking about ourselves. As Thomas Aquinas says, “[W]e cannot speak of God at all except in the language we use of creatures”.¹ That insight in itself is not new, of course, but what has been ignored or downplayed in the past – as feminist thinkers remind us – has been the relationship between gender and religious language. Feminists argue that traditional male theology is an ideological construct. Theology is anthropology; God is the “mirror of man” (as Feuerbach says).² Thus, many thinkers argue, the aim of God-talk today is not to discover words that are

¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a q13 a5 (B. Davies & B. Leftow (eds.), *Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, Questions on God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)).

² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), p. 63.

adequate to the divine perfection, but to provide reasons why certain characteristics should be projected rather than others. “We” are to look for new “projections”, for what is in question is a notion of divinity that mirrors female desire and that empowers women in their pursuit of justice.

This article examines notions of religious language within the context of feminist projectionist theologies. In particular, we will be considering the topics of metaphor, analogy, and negative theology. Within religious feminism over recent decades, it is beyond question that metaphor has been privileged over analogy.³ Feminist theologians/philosophers of religion tend to adopt a “non-literal” understanding of theological language. Many argue that the way of analogy is closed, and that all our thinking and talking about the divine is metaphorical. In contrast to univocal, “literal” theories of language in theology, feminist thinkers tend to stress the poetic and elusive nature of God-talk, developing feminist religious languages grounded in the possibility of inventing new metaphors for God.

In this article, I intend to challenge the dominant pan-metaphoricism of feminist philosophy of religion. The work of the feminist philosopher, Grace Jantzen,⁴ provides the starting-point for my argument. The focus here will be largely, though not exclusively, on *Becoming Divine*, as it represents Jantzen’s deepest and most sustained exploration into the concept of divinity. My argument strives to engage critically with Jantzen’s explicitly “Feuerbachian” thought, particularly in the areas of the doctrine of God and God-talk. Its aim is to examine some of the ways in which a theologian may expand

³ S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). For discussion, see F. Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 221–265. Let me quote Sarah Coakley on this point: “It is unfortunate that . . . a whole generation of ‘liberal’ feminist theologians have adopted . . . the ‘pan-metaphorist’ strategy where God-talk is concerned; that is, they have declared in neo-Kantian vein that all talk of God is ‘metaphorical’ and (necessarily, for them) ‘non-literal’, and so subject to revision simply according to the imaginative ‘construction’ of the feminist theologian” (Coakley, “Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion”, in W. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 519). Feminism, of course, entails a variety of widely different approaches, and consists of many different political and ideological orientations. It is not a unified, monolithic movement. When it comes to the neglect or rejection of analogy, exceptions to this “rule”, in addition to Coakley, include E. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) and T. Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ For helpful overviews of Jantzen’s work, see E. Graham, “Redeeming the Present”, in E. L. Graham (ed.), *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), pp. 1–19, and M. Joy, “Grace Jantzen and the Work of Love: Preamble”, in *ibid.*, pp. 23–39.

or build upon (though not discredit) the insights (and, occasionally, confusions) of feminist philosophy of religion.

Without analogy, I shall argue, 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*. We are no longer talking about God but “merely” about ourselves. The way of analogy preserves both the “in” and the “beyond” of the “in-and-beyond-creation” which is God. Additionally, this article discusses the negative stance taken by Jantzen towards apophatic theology, and relates to this to her own thoughts on the relation between the human and the divine. In accordance with her appeal to the fact of our “natality”, Jantzen argues for a pantheistic conception of divinity that overrides the infinite ontological difference between the world and God. I question how useful this is for feminism. I argue that a proper view of God will neither separate God from creation, nor collapse God into creation. Instead, it will show – under the “rule” of analogy – that God’s being is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

However, the analogical mode is a highly paradoxical mode, for analogical predications name God truthfully from creatures using concepts whose meaning at the Godward end lies utterly beyond our conceptual capacities. For theology, speaking analogously implies a similarity within an ever-greater dissimilarity. *Contra* modern analytic philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, I argue for an apophatic interpretation of analogy, which involves a dynamic rhythm between affirmation and negation, praise and silence. In addition, my argument questions whether analogy is necessarily concomitant with the idolatries of a “final meaning”. I contend that analogy is in no way concomitant with static notions of theological truth. Without the analogical way, it is further argued, there is nothing to prevent theology lapsing into atheistic anthropology. I am not against metaphor as such, of course. 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, built upon the doctrine of God (shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims) as transcendent creator. Only this balance between metaphor and analogy will arrest the slide of theology into idolatry.

Metaphor, “Ontotheology”, and a Metaphysics of Presence

Broadly speaking, there are two ways of approaching the basic theological question, “Can God be named by us?” One approach takes the question to be essentially epistemological (asking “*How* do we know about God?”) and the other ontological (“*What* do we know

about God?”).⁵ Most analytic philosophers of religion take a purely epistemological approach. They ask, “If God is infinite, how can he be spoken about in finite human language?” “If the being of God is transcendent, or other than the world, how can our mundane, worldly speech be fit for describing it?” However, knowledge of God is not, at bottom, different from other kinds of knowledge. Everything that *is* – including the divine reality – *is* in the same manner. By contrast, for the classical tradition of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology, the question, “Can God be named by us?”, points to a profoundly incomprehensible mystery. For a theologian such as Aquinas who observes the infinite analogical interval – the ontological difference – between the divine and everything else, God is not an object known, but that-without-which-there-could-be-no-knowledge-at-all.

Analytic philosophers of religion remain ambiguous regarding the use of analogous discourse in theology. Philosophical theologians of a classical bent, persuaded as they are by claims regarding the impossibility of univocal speech, are often highly critical of the work of philosophers of religion operating on the basis of the privileging of the logical (or epistemological) over the metaphysical (or ontological).⁶ The dominant trend has been for Anglo-American philosophers of religion 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. After all, how can one attain comprehensive coherence without a clear and distinct understanding of the terms one is employing. If nothing is fixed, what kind of grounding or foundation do we have for distinguishing truth from falsity?

In a key chapter in *Becoming Divine*, Jantzen argues that when it comes to religious language, contemporary philosophical discussions remain within a “masculinist” dream of “self-presence”,⁷ attempting to “pin down” the precise meaning of words about God,⁸ rather than offering new horizons for divine becoming: “The preoccupation is with the question of how this language can refer to (the Christian) God, how the finite/mortal can describe the infinite/immortal, how language of space and time can speak of the incorporeal and

⁵ J. M. Soskice, “Naming God: A Study in Faith and Reason”, in P. J. Griffiths & R. Hütter (eds.), *Reason and the Reasons of Faith* (London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 254.

⁶ David Burrell notes that “philosophers have a predilection for univocity unless suitably shaken from their default mode” (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. 94).

⁷ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 173.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 175.

timeless one”.⁹ While classical Christian thinkers acknowledge, even celebrate, the inadequacy of theological predication, modern Anglo-American philosophers cannot tolerate it.

It is in connection with her discussion of Dionysian negative theology that Jantzen launches her radical critique of the “doctrine” of analogy. 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, the dominant use of male signifiers is only part of the problem. According to her, the classical claim that “the divine cannot be named” sets up the conventional problem of theological language – a problem which is standardly resolved by way of appeal to analogical speech about God, in which questions of realism, reference, and truth take centre stage.¹⁰

Among Jantzen’s “intellectual heroes” – that is, the thinkers she relies upon to develop a new feminist philosophy of religion – it is probably (excluding Luce Irigaray) Jacques Derrida, the high priest of postmodernism, with whom she resounds the most. In *Becoming Divine*, we find outlined the modern and oppressive moment in Anglo-American philosophy of religion of what might be called “identity”.¹¹ One note that sounds throughout the text warns us against the dangers of the wholly referential (univocal) discourse (language provides privileged access to the real) and of the quest for mastery (absolute knowledge grounded in the univocal grasp of concepts). The fundamental problem with a theology driven by “identity” is that it tries to button things down, seeking an absolutely stable foundation for talk about the divine. This tendency privileges the static over the dynamic, sameness over difference, the intellectual over the possibility of new divine horizons. Jantzen objects to the “hierarchical” discourses of analogy in Anglo-American philosophy of religion, which she would seem to regard as hopelessly obsessed with stabilising the flux and overcoming the restless, indefinite referral of signifier to signifier, the economy of difference or play. Analogy, in attempting to fix truth determinatively, reflects the rule of the (divine) phallus.

It is argued that analytical philosophy of religion is logocentric: absent a recognition of the differential and infinitely deferred nature of meaning, and thus of the “problematic” and “complicated” character of key philosophical terms such as “God/religion, the subject, and

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁰ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 174ff.

¹¹ I borrow the term from Rowan Williams (R. Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 77).

language”.¹² Jantzen rightly comments that Anglo-American philosophers of religion “tend to be either ignorant of or hostile to Derridean deconstruction (and often both)”.¹³ Analytic philosophy naively ignores many of the fundamental themes of Continental philosophy, not least “the continuous play of signifiers in an ever shifting constellation of meaning, and therefore the problem of reference or relation to the signified”.¹⁴ The great truth declared by Derrida, that a sign is always a *sign* of something – that a word’s meaning can never be finalised – provokes (so her argument goes) the exasperation of many philosophers, who are bent on pinning God down conceptually. Swinburne and others seek a divine guarantee for God’s names. The divine is constructed as an icon of stable presence – a transcendental signified which authorises the correctness of the masculinist imaginary and its expressions.¹⁵

Jantzen radically prefers metaphor over analogy when it comes to speaking about the divine. Metaphor, in her view, works very differently to analogy. Metaphorical theology does not attempt to fix meaning. Rather, metaphor operates by saying something that is, literally speaking, false, but which conveys a truth in a striking and creative way, a way that is more than intellectual.¹⁶ Here, according to Jantzen, lies the importance of figures of speech for religious language. What is required is a whole new way of thinking about the divine, and the use of metaphor allows us to view God differently at the level of the cultural symbolic. Theological metaphors generate an instability of reference that keeps meaning open, fluid, and groundless, by which they continue to evoke or generate newer and more “adequate” models of God, which, in turn, “disclose a different imaginary and new paths of female subjectivity”.¹⁷ Analogical predication, by contrast, with its fixation on establishing the precise sense of propositions about the divine as a “thing” to be “described”, merely serves to foreclose the divine horizon.

Many Anglo-American philosophers of religion would consider Jantzen’s understanding of God-talk as flux and fluidity – as the endless play of signs – to be somewhat unsatisfying. For them, the sense and reference of theological terms can and must be analysed more precisely than this kind of “obscure” metaphoric approach allows. Like their counterparts in analytic philosophy, analytic theologians commonly press for more exact analysis and clearer conceptual

¹² G. Jantzen, “What’s the Difference? Knowledge and Gender in (Post)modern Philosophy of Religion”, in *Religious Studies* 32:4, 1996, p. 457.

¹³ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 62.

¹⁴ Jantzen, “What’s the Difference?”, p. 457.

¹⁵ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 184–192.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 184ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

distinctions, trying to fix the meaning of the various concepts we use in ecclesiastical and theological discourse more determinately.

Jantzen's critique is a fine example of an important half-truth. The part that is true concerns the undeniable 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 *fix* the infinite transcendence of God under our gaze and make it *conceptually* manageable. Such philosophy of religion forces God into a rigid, ontotheological system in which the divine functions as the first cause, or highest being, in a chain of lower but finally similar beings. God becomes the ultimate transcendental signified – a stabilising referent outside the metaphors of language.¹⁸ I could not agree with Jantzen more on this point. At the same time, however, we might want to question the correctness of Jantzen's assumption that analogy is *necessarily* concomitant with the idolatries of a totalising univocity. For while there may at times be suggestions of another view, the overarching conception with which Jantzen works is between the way of analogy as providing *clear* knowledge of God and the way of metaphor as being in some way more playful, allusive, and indirect.¹⁹ I shall have more to say about this conception below.

Before we turn to a fuller discussion of analogy, we must first examine Jantzen's broad rejection of "apophatic theology", and relate this to her own thoughts on the relation between the human and the divine.

God in us or God Above us?

Regarding the important half-truth I find in Jantzen's critique, there obviously does exist, in the tradition of philosophy of religion she rejects, a very modern form of theological "objectivism" – variously called "objective theism", "philosophical theism", or "Christian theism". "God", according to this tradition, is the name of an "actually-existing independent individual being"²⁰ – a being amongst other beings – whose reality and nature are available to be examined and mastered. Indeed, although I would affirm the absolute need for

¹⁸ 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" (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; his emphasis).

¹⁹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, ch. 8, esp. pp. 184–185.

²⁰ D. Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 15; cited in Turner, "Cupitt, the Mystics, and the 'Objectivity' of God", p. 115.

theology to speak of the “reality of God”, it is necessary to strongly distinguish this from the realism of much contemporary analytic philosophy of religion; for any attempt to speak of the non-objective “objective” that is God requires a strategy that is quite at variance with that required to speak of the objectivity of any ostensible thing – a thing “there”, one entity among others, sharing garden-variety existence with all other existents. In metaphysical tradition, God, being God, is absolutely *unlike* anything in the world (*sui generis*). God wholly transcends the being of beings, both the “it is” and the “it is not” of the totality of individual existents, and so cannot be assimilated to one more being over-against, and thus in competition with, human beings, as though he were situated within a kind of ontic continuum with the created order.

Jantzen’s disquisitions on the absurdity of “classical theism” sometimes lapse into parody. Yet her work is marked by a salutary scorn for the Anglo-American style belief in God, with its preoccupation with crafting *determinate* propositions about God as an thing or object “out there”, to be found and picked over, as it were, with intellectual tweezers. For Richard Swinburne, for example, who adapts his approach to modern science, the existence of a God regarded as one entity amongst others, an “additional entity”,²¹ is something that can be properly inferred from particular empirical data, or from certain definite facts. Based upon that data, one can come to know who or what God *is*: the “attributes of deity”. Like other objects and facts in the universe with which we are acquainted, God, Swinburne states, is “something of which properties are true, which causally interacts with other recognisable observable objects, which can be distinguished from others as the subject of certain predicates, which he has and they do not”.²² To wax vaguely Heideggerian, Swinburne’s God is a God on this side of the ontological difference. In order to secure the “objectivity” of the divine, Swinburne first situates the creator within the structure of creation as some “other thing”, albeit a very large thing, so that he can *contrast* them. Transcendence is achieved by the negation of its “opposite”. Anglo-American philosophers of religion often give the impression of having lots of inside information about God. Here, it seems to me, they dissent radically from those philosophers (such as Aquinas) whose thought they claim to be interpreting. We do not know what God is, says Aquinas.²³ God is not this thing, not that thing, not *any* thing at all.

²¹ R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 165.

²² Cited in R. Messer, *Does God’s Existence Need Proof?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 21.

²³ Aquinas, *ST* 1a q3 *prol.*

Notable, however, is Jantzen's "complete disdain"²⁴ for the Christian tradition of apophatic theology, a tradition one might have expected her to utilise as a way of moving beyond the static, univocal, or "objective" thinking characteristic of the analytic tradition. All orthodox Jews, Christians, and Muslims would agree that God is, indeed, transcendent, neither individual nor universal, over against pantheists who think of God as the sum total of beings. According to metaphysical tradition, however, the actual infinitude or "transcendence itself" that is God qualitatively exceeds not only all finite beings, but also every knowable, finite category. Just as God differs from the world, ontologically, for God is "above" the world, "beyond" all finitude, so too God "refuses conceptual and linguistic assimilation".²⁵ Expressed otherwise, God cannot be determined univocally. Or, as Victoria Barker puts it, "the experience of God cannot be thematized, rationalised, or normalised within the 'discourses of man'".²⁶ Jantzen, however, decries the "what God is not" of the Dionysian tradition as yet another male attempt to abstract oneself from contingent lived experience and to flee from the world.

Why is the "negative way" problematic, in Jantzen's view? It seems to me that Jantzen's primary reason for distancing herself from the current so-called "apophatic rage"²⁷ is that she believes the divine should not be depicted as "Other" and "Infinite" in relation to the human ("God above us"). Continuity is central to Jantzen's notion of the divine – continuity (as distinguished from discontinuity or difference) between the subjectivity of human beings and the divine horizon towards which we strive. Jantzen is highly dismissive of abstractions such as the Unmoved Mover,²⁸ the One,²⁹ or "that than which nothing greater can be conceived".³⁰ Such philosophical notions of divinity are, from a religious perspective, both vapid and dangerous. For her, the doctrine of the Infinite, Unknown God is symptomatic of the masculinist ethos of Western religion, with its veneration and worship of "worlds of the beyond".³¹ In accordance with her emphasis on natality, Jantzen argues for an experiential and highly immanentist approach to divinity, developing a philosophy of female becoming that *de-emphasises* the difference between the

²⁴ Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion", p. 500.

²⁵ V. Barker, "God, Woman, Other", in *Feminist Theology* 18:3, 2010, p. 317.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The phrase is that of M. Laird, OSA, "'Whereof We Speak': Gregory of Nyssa, Jean-Luc Marion, and the Current Apophatic Rage", in *Heythrop Journal* XLII, 2001, pp. 1–12.

²⁸ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 65, 255.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 29, 49, 66.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 154–155.

human and the divine, between this world and some other transcendent world beyond the temporal and physical.

I want to argue that Jantzen's attempt to overcome "classical theism" – in particular, the assumption that God's being must be different from our own being – can be viewed as an attempt to overcome a very modern (and Protestant) form of dialectical theology. She criticises the type of transcendence in which God is set in dualistic opposition to the world (God "outside" the world), leaving the finite world impoverished. While I agree with her on this point, I must contest the idea that ontological difference necessarily entails competition or rivalry between infinite and finite being. Whereas Jantzen's pantheism ultimately turns God into a creature, a properly analogical understanding of being can maintain God's presence within all beings, nearer to every creature than it is to itself, and preserve God's otherness as transcendence itself, the ontological source and goal of all things.

For one thing, it seems clear that the "traditional theology" which Jantzen rejects is dependent upon an *oppositional* construction of the relationship between God and the world. Theologically speaking, she "takes leave" not of God, but of what Kathryn Tanner calls a "contrastive" or "competitive" understanding of divine transcendence.³² While I welcome her reading and rejection of dialectical theology, Jantzen fails to alert herself or her reader to the scope of her reading's applicability. Although the central target of her critique appears to be "the radical separation between God and the world"³³ one finds in much post-Reformation thought, and, crucially, in the philosophical *theism* of many Anglo-American, analytic thinkers, she standardly presents her target as classical theology. She claims that Christian theology maintains a "clean division" – a "sharp separation" – between God and the world by holding that God creates the world *outside* God's being.³⁴ As such, God is seen as a kind of "divine substance", "separate entity", or "'other' being, somewhere else", and the world is understood as something "extraneous to God"³⁵ – God's "polar opposite"³⁶ – and "at best only remotely related to God as its creator".³⁷ Now, it may be that this (admittedly rather crude) concept of God and creation has been taken for granted in much Anglo-American philosophy of religion; however, Jantzen

³² See K. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

³³ G. Jantzen, *A Place of Springs: Death and the Displacement of Beauty, Volume III* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 144.

³⁴ Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, pp. 143–144.

³⁵ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 258.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

³⁷ Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, pp. 144–145.

offers little by way of contextual analysis in terms of different forms of theology within Christianity, nor does she spend long in trying to ascertain the actual meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* in the thought of the Church Fathers.

In drawing our attention to some of the passages in which Augustine insists upon the insuperable ontological difference between God and creation, Jantzen claims that, “Such a chasm between God and the world, including utter difference between God and the (created) human person, generates huge and, I believe, intractable problems”.³⁸ She argues that the classical Christian doctrine of creation – as found in, for example, the theology of Augustine and, significantly, Karl Barth – “radically separates divine substance from material substance, God from the world”, and thus “sets the divine *over against* the physical universe”. As such, the “universe is what God is not, a place where God has no being”.³⁹ For me, this sounds too *dialectical* to be Augustine – as does the following: “This idea of God as other – perhaps even as Wholly Other – means that the beauty of this world is at best only remotely related to God as its creator”.⁴⁰ Here, the relationship between God and world is presented as *oppositional*. Unfortunately, however, Augustine was not familiar with the *Church Dogmatics*.⁴¹

One of the motivating concerns behind Jantzen’s critique of “classical theism” is an attempt to overcome that way of thinking which understands God’s otherness from human beings as an otherness in “sharp separation” from them.⁴² I agree with her wholeheartedly on this point. As Daniel Whistler rightly says, “post-Barthian theology”, with its celebration of the infinite chasm between God and the (created) human person, regularly “retraces the very logic by which women have historically been oppressed”.⁴³ Unlike Jantzen, however, I am not willing to “take leave” of God’s “vertical transcendence” (which is not the same as “dualistic transcendence”). We should think of God neither as wholly immanent (in Jantzen’s sense), nor as wholly alien and at a distance from the world. Rather, what is required is a radical third way: a principle of divine transcendence that avoids the dialectical extremes of pantheism, on the one hand, and the dualistic conception of transcendence, on the other.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 145.

³⁹ Ibid.; my emphasis.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 144–145.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 137, 150–151.

⁴² Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, p. 144.

⁴³ D. Whistler, “The Abandoned Fiancée, or Against Subjection”, in P. S. Anderson. (ed.), *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* (London & New York: Springer, 2010), p. 127.

Nevertheless, the ontological difference is notoriously difficult to articulate. A fear of pantheistic, or atheistic, monism has driven many Western thinkers to articulate the *distinction* between God and creatures as a *separation*, thus reducing God to just another very big thing in the universe. It is crucial to consider, therefore, that Jantzen's pantheism does not represent the overthrow of transcendence *per se*, but rather transcendence understood as a negation of immanence.⁴⁴ For her, the transcendent and the immanent are not to be seen as opposites. Transcendence is that which surpasses and exceeds the material, not that which "competes" with it.⁴⁵ It is, she claims, the "opposite not of immanence but of reductionism".⁴⁶ Jantzen's account commendably refuses any kind of dualistic transcendence – transcendence as wholly divorced from the physical universe. However, her work does not leave room for a sort of "superior transcendence", transcendence as other and infinite. She argues that, if God is "Other" than the universe", then "God cannot be encountered within it, either in prayer, in religious experience, or in the beauties of nature and in relationships with one another".⁴⁷ Such an assertion is extremely problematic, and would seem to suggest a misunderstanding – not only of the logic of creation out of nothing, but also of classical theology in general. For the theologians of the classical tradition, the inner closeness of God towards his creation, far from being undermined by God's superior transcendence, is in fact a function of it: *de Dieu à l'homme, l'incommensurable rend seul possible l'intimité*, as Jean-Luc Marion puts it.⁴⁸ In other words, precisely *because* God is not an additional thing located within the universe, but is, rather, "Other" than it – infinitely beyond the totality of the whole – God can be closer to me than I am to myself: at once *superior summo meo* and *interior intimo meo*.⁴⁹

Thus, the idea that God is *in competition* with the world does not in fact follow from what I am suggesting. God does not stand alongside or over-against the created order, as some other thing, for, as creator, he is transcendently present in the created being that all beings share. Therefore, it will not work to reach for a pantheistic understanding of the divine to remove the shortcomings of picturing God as distinct (in the ordinary sense) from creation. It would seem that Jantzen has not sufficiently grasped the beauty of the apophatic tradition in this regard; for this tradition can maintain

⁴⁴ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, pp. 270–272.

⁴⁵ Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, p. 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁴⁷ Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, p. 145.

⁴⁸ Cited in P. Blond, "Introduction", in P. Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 35.

⁴⁹ On this point, see H. McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 57–58.

both God's radical intimacy *to* the creature and preserve God's full transcendence *of* the creation: *both* God "in us" *and* God "beyond us". By contrast, if one makes "God in us" absolute, effectively denying "transcendence itself", one inevitably makes God into a creature. Divinity merges with *this* world, with this nature. The universe, *in itself*, is given a divine significance: the "universe *is* divine".⁵⁰

This critique will be developed further below. It is sufficient to say here that 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. God is the *non aliud*, as Nicholas of Cusa puts it, precisely "not other".⁵¹

Conclusion: Apophaticism and the Way of Analogy

So the direction of my reflections continues to emerge. The unsatisfactory nature of Jantzen's position on the ontological status of the divine is partly tied to a neglect of analogy. Without analogy, transcendence and immanence, as well as finite and infinite, are set in opposition. Our *human* names cannot be names *of God*. At the end of day, this amounts to some form of "ontotheology".⁵² We are no longer talking about God, but "merely" about ourselves.

Theology should be about *God*; it *can* and *should* speak about God and not settle for a reduction of God to the human self. However, that is no easy task, for our speaking of God is, inevitably, a speaking about ourselves. Theology is a form of anthropology, as Feuerbach reminds us. Yet this is what makes God-talk so difficult and so suspect in the eyes of very many thinkers. Theology, it is claimed, is a projection and nothing more.

Here, at the risk of overstating my point, it is deeply unfortunate – and, on this count, I am in agreement with Sarah Coakley⁵³ – that so much feminist theology is developed on the back of what William

⁵⁰ Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, p. 148.

⁵¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Li Non Aliud*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), 2:1117.

⁵² D. S. Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p. 50.

⁵³ 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.

Alston has called a “pan-metaphoricism”.⁵⁴ Feminists have waxed sanguine towards the Kantian or neo-Kantian view (much beloved of “illiberal” Kaufmanian “liberal” theology) 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) “non-literal”, and thus subject to endless revision simply according to the feminist’s imaginative construction. Our language – so the argument goes – never truly refers to God. At most, it refers to us, our desires, or “contemporary experience”. If this position were correct, as Nicholas Lash points out, then there would be no way past the problem of “projection” (in the opprobrious sense of the term), because we would be unable to discriminate between our metaphorical “models of God” and the transcendent mystery to which such constructions point.⁵⁵ Our *theology* would never rise above the level of atheistic *anthropology*. The great temptation is pragmatism. 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. In the work of Sallie McFague, this form of ethical or pragmatic agnosticism is grounded in the claim that “all language about God is a human construction and as such perforce ‘misses the mark’”.⁵⁶

McFague’s argument is quite similar to a claim made by Thomas Aquinas.⁵⁷ He said that we could never step outside of the composite and temporally situated mode of our assertions – as Kant maintained about our perceptual experiences.⁵⁸ In analogical language about God, there is always a difference between the way in which we speak about a perfection based on our situated use of the term (*modus significandi*) and the perfection itself about which we speak (*res significata*).⁵⁹ The *modus significandi* will be a moment of imaginative “projection”, or a human making, and thus ineluctably derived from creaturely understandings. We do not use some peculiar private language to speak of God; we speak in and through everyday words. With this basic point, I have no quarrel. However, there is also a fundamental difference between McFague and Aquinas on this point. For McFague, the

⁵⁴ W. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), chs. 1 & 2.

⁵⁵ N. Lash, “Ideology, Metaphor, and Analogy”, in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 106.

⁵⁶ S. McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 23.

⁵⁷ This paragraph is indebted to Stephen Long, *Speaking of God*, esp. pp. 1–20, ch. 1, and ch. 3.

⁵⁸ D. Burrell, *Friendship and Ways to Truth* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2000), p. 26.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a3.

distinction between *how* a predicate signifies and *what* it signifies, between the *modus significandi* and the *res significata*, denies the possibility of predicating terms properly or “literally” of God; for, following Kant, she claims to know what can be known/unknown about the God-world relationship with a “metaphysical dogmatism” which Aquinas would never have allowed.⁶⁰ Because the *how* of our speech about the divine – so the argument goes – cannot escape the limits of its socio-historical context, we must then stand guard against any divine discourse that would advance itself as truth: “No authority . . . can decree that some types of language or some images refer literally to God while others do not. None do”.⁶¹ McFague assumes Kant’s division between things as they appear to us (the phenomenal) and things-in-themselves (noumenal). This division acts as a police barricade that enforces a kind a silence.⁶² All speech about God fails – all affirmation is denied – even in advance of its utterance.

McFague refuses to detach the *modus significandi* – the way in which we speak about a perfection – from *what* it is we wish to signify, the perfection itself (*res significata*). For Aquinas, the reminder of our mode of signifying does not mean that we cannot speak affirmatively or substantially about God, for he is less “dogmatic” than McFague with regard to what our language can and cannot achieve.⁶³ He recognises that, when we predicate perfection terms of God, the names apply not merely to us, but also to God. Our *human* names are – literally – names *of God*. He can argue this because of the principle of non-competition.⁶⁴ Infinity and finitude, the divine and the human, do not stand in opposition to one another. When we say that “God is good”, we do not fully grasp what “good” means in that sentence. Nevertheless, the term “good” is said substantially of God (Aquinas was not a Nominalist), not merely negatively or causally, even if only imperfectly, incomprehensibly, and improperly. We are not merely using metaphorical language that we can change at will. The statement is true of *God*, as the subject to whom the predicate “is good” refers, but we do not understand it. The failure of language must be understood in a very different way from that of McFague.

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

⁶⁰ S. Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology, the Church, and Social Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), p. 56.

⁶¹ McFague, *Models of God*, p. 35.

⁶² Long, *The Goodness of God*, p. 56. See also Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, pp. 10–11.

⁶³ Long, *Speaking of God*, p. 173.

⁶⁴ D. Turner, *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 193–225.

of Thomistic negative theology and the Dionysian apophaticism of “unsaying”.⁶⁵ Repeatedly, Aquinas insists that even *after* one has thought through the genuine analogy between creation and God, God remains unknown. God and creation are ultimately *incommensurable*, and all the names we would attribute of God “fail to represent adequately what he is”.⁶⁶ However, against analytic philosophers such as William Alston, this does *not* mean that “no concepts in the human repertoire can be truly applied to God as he is in himself”.⁶⁷ Rather, it is only to deny that we can understand those concepts when we apply them. We can speak of God (the *res significata*) and “intend” the *what* that is signified, although *how* God possesses the perfections manifested by creatures, and hence what they amount to in their “supereminent” source, must always escape our limited grasp.

Not that we should expect analytic philosophers of religion to grasp this. Swinburne’s univocal ontology is directly opposed to the classical formula of a *reductio in mysterium*,⁶⁸ the mystery of the God who is always ever greater. This leads me to comment 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. For theology, speaking analogously implies a similarity within an *ever-greater* dissimilarity. The resistance of analytic philosophy of religion to the writings of negative 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. That feminist attempts to propel the discipline in a new direction could exploit the potential of the way of analogy seems a pressing priority.

Jantzen would appear to regard analogy as a subtly concealed version of univocity. Her own repudiation of strategies of apophatic “unsaying” or “saying away” tends to make her read Thomists, negatively, as honorary Scotists. There are, though, times when she 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

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ Aquinas, *ST* 1a q13 a2.

⁶⁷ Cited in Coakley, “Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation”, pp. 308–309.

⁶⁸ The phrase is Erich Przywara’s (cited in J. R. Betz, “Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part Two)”, in *Modern Theology* 22:1, January 2006, p. 10).

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.⁶⁹

There is much here with which we can agree. However, it seems probable that many Anglo-American philosophers will bristle and balk at the suggestion that the language of theology is best understood as “beyond our conceptual grasp”.

The sense of truth of which analogy speaks is one that always lies ahead of us in the future, not one that can be immediately “achieved”. Analogous terms are always in motion, always subject to a constant energy of addition and deferral, as inexhaustible indeterminateness. Like the objects of the created order, they are constantly unstable, excessive to final fixation. As such, every analogy is polysemic and, more to the point, it is impossible to stabilise theological meaning within neat conceptual boundaries. “God”, the *summum bonum*, cannot be assimilated by our categories of discourse. Analogies can be made to designate rightly what God is, not by reducing language to fixed identity and determination, but by making it richer, more abundant and unsettling. As such, analogy preserves the doxological principle of God’s otherness to every “discourse of man”. Hence, Rowan Williams writes: “we are set free for the restlessness that is our destiny as rational creatures”.⁷⁰ This restlessness is ours because “all terms and the objects they name are capable of opening out beyond themselves, coming to speak of a wider context, and so refusing to stay still under our attempts to comprehend or systematise or (for these go together) idolize”.⁷¹ For metaphysical tradition, the Supreme Being called God is “supremely *res*” and yet “paradoxically not a *res* at all in the strict sense”, not an item in any list of possible objects.⁷² God exceeds all representation; that is, no signum we possess makes it possible for us to comprehend him. The meaning of every sign, all of which

⁶⁹ G. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 285; emphasis hers.

⁷⁰ R. Williams, “Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*”, in *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3:2, July 1989, p. 141.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

have God as their so-called *res*, finally rests in the divine infinity, in which there is no “final meaning” (as Gregory of Nyssa says).

God is always “being God”, at once immanent to the created being all beings share, yet excessively, abundantly beyond beings. God’s transcendence and immanence are not “opposed” to each other. On the contrary, it is exactly as “above us” that God is “in us”. We are faced here by a mystery, and the way of analogy seems to do justice to it. A term is predicated analogically of creatures and of God when we know that it must properly refer to *God’s* beauty or life, and so to the reality God is, but also know that *how* it is true of God must exceed every conception of the human intellect. The *res significata*, the perfection designated (signified), is always above the nature of the knower; it remains, as Aquinas says, *tamquam ignotus*, beyond all comprehension. We have no adequate mode of signifying to speak worthily of God, because our theological language is inevitably a projection drawn from our experience of creatures. Again, speaking of God metaxologically entails speaking within our immanent, cultural context. This need not concern us, however, for ultimately, analogy is synonymous with participation of the human in eternal God. Most importantly, this “divine” is not an object at all; it is a non-objective “objective” of finite desire, because this God is not simply the end of our desire but *is* our desire.

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