

SILENCE  
AND THE WORD

*Negative Theology and Incarnation*

EDITED BY  
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*Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason*

*Denys Turner*

The revival of interest in our times, not alone within theology, but pursued with equal intensity within literary and cultural theory, in the ancient topic of the ‘apophatic’, no doubt has its explanations within the intellectual history of Western culture. But it is no purpose of this essay to explore them. My starting point is rather in one of the principal issues with which a number of those engaged in this rediscovery are explicitly preoccupied, whether or not they themselves avow consciously theological interests: and that issue is the question of what it is exactly that is being denied when it is said by the atheist that there is no God.

It is some time now since it could be supposed without challenge by the intellectual and cultural elites of Western society that there *is* no question of God, that nothing hangs on whether there is or is not a God, for nothing follows either way, though it is a fair guess that for very large sectors of the populations of Western countries, life is lived broadly in a mental condition of indifference to the matter. And it is true that, even among the intellectual elites, for many of whom it is fashionable to *permit* theism as an option within a generalised relativism of thought (for which there can be no grounds for ruling out any beliefs anyway) the licence granted to theism can seem to amount to no more than a higher indifference. Yet, such attitudes are not any longer unchallenged: nor does the challenge emerge only from the predictable sources of avowedly religious traditions, but immanently from within the most contemporary analyses of the predicaments of late twentieth-century Western culture. In much continental philosophy, from Heidegger to Levinas and Derrida, it is acknowledged, with varying degrees of unease at having to concede the point, that the predicaments of our culture have an ineradicably *theological* character. And I suggest that if that cultural diagnosis has identified any one indicator revealing the irreducibility of the theological more clearly than most, it will be the recognition that it is by no means as easy as it was once thought to deny the existence of God.

If once – perhaps at some point in the late nineteenth century – it was clear, and agreed, what it was to think the existence of God, then what was to count as atheism was relatively unproblematical. In those good old days atheists knew what they were denying. For, as Thomas Aquinas used to say, following Aristotle, *eadem est scientia oppositorum*<sup>1</sup> – affirmations and their corresponding negations are one and the same knowledge: clarity about the affirmation permitted clear-minded denials. But now that theologians once again make claims for an *apophatic* negativity, which in pre-atheistic cultures provoked no possibility of confusion with atheism, today there is an issue: what is it that the atheist denies which the apophatic theologian does not also deny? Just how are we to distinguish between the theologian who affirms that it is better to say that God does not exist than to say that God exists, and the atheist who simply says: ‘There is no God’? Moreover, it is asked by some who had thought their position to be safely atheistical: What differentiates negative theology and deconstruction?<sup>2</sup> For sure a question is provoked concerning what exactly it is that the atheist denies that is not already denied in these powerfully deconstructive words of Meister Eckhart, who tells us:

God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about him. Therefore a pagan teacher says: ‘Whatever we understand or say about the First Cause, that is far more ourselves than it is the First Cause, for it is beyond all saying and understanding.’<sup>3</sup> So if I say, ‘God is good’, that is not true. I am good, but God is not good. I can even say: ‘I am better than God’, for whatever is good can become better, and whatever can become better can become best of all. But since God is not good, he cannot become better. And since he cannot become better, he cannot be best of all. For these three degrees are alien to God: ‘good’, ‘better’ and ‘best’, for he is superior to them all . . . If I say ‘God is a being’, it is not true; he is a being transcending being and [he is] a transcending nothingness . . . [So] do not try to understand God, for God is beyond all understanding. One authority says: ‘If I had a God whom I could understand, I should never consider him God.’<sup>4</sup> If you can understand anything about him, it in no way belongs to him, and insofar as you understand anything about him that brings you into incomprehension, and from incomprehension

<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle, *Peri Hermeneias*, 17a 31–3.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Jacques Derrida in ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable – The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 1–50; *On the Name*, Thomas Dutoit, ed., trans. David Wood, Thomas Leavey and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> *Liber de Causis*, prop. 6.

<sup>4</sup> A rough paraphrase of a saying often attributed to Augustine, though he nowhere says anything exactly as Eckhart quotes him here.

you arrive at a brute's stupidity . . . So if you do not wish to be brutish, do not understand God who is beyond words.<sup>5</sup>

Of course the obvious response of a determined atheist to so radical a theological negativity, this denial of all nameable divine essentiality, used to be that it can be no more than a strategy of theological evasion, a death of God by endless qualification, and that you might just as well be an atheist as maintain so extreme an apophaticism.<sup>6</sup> But it is a matter of some interest that this is not the response found in some of our radical deconstructionists, who less complacently – indeed, with some considerable anxiety – have been caused by the encounter with a Meister Eckhart or a pseudo-Denys to question the ultimate radicalness of their own atheistic deconstruction. For those who, since Nietzsche, had supposed their deconstruction to be as radical as is possible in consequence of its *atheism*, might indeed wonder whether they have not been outflanked in point of radicalness by the theism of a fourteenth-century Dominican friar. In any case, what degree of negativity, it may be asked, is available to be called upon whereby to negate so wholesale a denial as is already contained in Eckhart's theology?

For sure, the denials of the apophatic theologian exceed the reach of any such atheistical negation as proposes merely to excise God without consequences, that atheism which thinks it can do without God while leaving everything else in place – an inference which inevitably follows from the denial of that God whose existence had in any case had no consequences, the God we know of – stereotypically, but emblematically – as the 'deist' God of 'enlightenment rationalism', the God of 'modernity'.<sup>7</sup> But what unnerves the contemporary mind, for it problematises the *post-modern* project, is the thought that an authentically apophatic theology destabilises more radically than *any* atheistic denial can, even Nietzsche's.

Therefore, one is inclined to say what Marx had already suggested as early as 1844, that the issue between theism and atheism is as such an

<sup>5</sup> Sermon 83, *Renovamini Spiritu*, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (trans. and introd. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, New York: Paulist Press, 1981), pp. 206–7.

<sup>6</sup> As, for example, famously by Anthony Flew in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, eds, (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> The reader will have to forgive this appeal to a stereotype, which ought not to be taken seriously as anything but such, short of detailed critique of particular 'Enlightenment' theisms, e.g., those of Locke, or of Leibniz. Here, what is relevant about that stereotype lies in what today is being *rejected* by post-modern atheism, whether or not it has genuine historical instantiation, for as I shall go on to explain below, much of this atheism is so parasitical upon the theism it abandons as to be intelligible only in terms of what it imagines itself to be rejecting.

issue characteristic of *modernity*, an *issue* which it is necessary to surpass and deconstruct if modernity itself is to be surpassed and deconstructed.<sup>8</sup> Our problem, therefore, cannot, as Feuerbach thought, any longer be restated in terms of the disjunction between the existence and the non-existence of God, for it is not *atheism* which retrieves our cultures from the grip of modernity. Atheism leaves us trapped within the constraints of the modernist disjunctions, since it explores only the more nihilistic of the options it makes available. Our problem, therefore, consists in identifying that negation which is the ‘negation of the negation’ between theism and atheism, in identifying that ground which is opened up upon emancipation from that disjunction which is, if anything is, definitive of ‘modernity’ as such: theism and its negation.

I do not find it to be in the least paradoxical if, in the search for the form of negation which dissolves the theism/atheism project, pre-modern theological sources seem profitably to be explored. For, after all, a contemporary interest, whether of theological or of non-theological inspiration, in the dissolution of modernist theological disjunctions is at one level at least the same interest as was consciously intended to be served by much late medieval theological apophaticism: the dethronement of theological idolatries. What we can see – and seeing it differentiates our reception of those medieval apophaticisms from their authors’ conscious intentions – is that there is as much idolatrous potential in *merely atheist negativity* as there is in *merely theistical affirmativity*, for again *eadem est scientia oppositorum*. Hence, our problem – and I mean, it is *everyone’s* problem and not that of the ‘theologian’ alone – is to know how to negate the disjunction between atheism and theism – which you cannot claim to have done if thereby you merely fall prey to the atheist disjunct. In short, our problem is to know how to construct an apophatic theology distinguishable from the mere denial of theism.

That this might be more easily said than done may be illustrated by the following anecdote. Some years ago, and in younger, more foolhardy, days, finding myself in a tight spot in a public debate with a philosopher atheist at Bristol University, I made a wager with my audience: I would give anyone present five minutes to explain his or her reasons for atheism and if, after that, I could not guess correctly the Christian denomination

<sup>8</sup> See, K. Marx, *Early Writings* (trans. R Livingstone and George Benton, London: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 357–8, where he says, ‘... the question of an *alien* being, a being above nature and man ... has become impossible in practice. *Atheism*, which is the denial of this unreality, no longer has any meaning, for atheism is a *negation of God*, through which negation it asserts the *existence of man*. But socialism as such no longer needs such mediation ...’ (p. 358).



in which that person had been brought up, I would buy her a pint of beer. As luck would have it I was not broke at the subsequent revels, though in taking the risk I was backing the mere hunch that most philosophical, principled, not merely casual atheisms are the mirror-images of a theism; that they are recognisable from one another, because atheisms fall roughly into the same categories as the theisms they deny; that they are about as interesting as each other; and that since narrowly Catholic or Methodist or Anglican atheisms are no more absorbing than narrowly Catholic, Methodist or Anglican theisms, they do not exactly amount to an over-rich diet for the theologian.

A second proposition is capable of being related to the first and is that most atheists are but apophatic theologians *manqué*. Like the first, this proposition is in part a generalisation from experience, the sort of experience this time being represented by the rather curious phenomenon of an Anthony Flew, for example; this is the type who is a militant atheist on the one hand but on the other a stout critic of movements of change and renewal within Christianity, and so of the adoption of inclusive language, of the ordination of women, of ecumenism or of revisions to the Prayer Book. One might even suggest that atheists of this species resist any such renewal of Christian faith and practice as would require the renewal of their rejection of it. Indeed, it must be upsetting for atheists when the target of their rejections moves; for insofar as a moving Christian target does upset the atheist, it reveals, depressingly, the parasitical character of the rejection. So a static atheism can have no wish for a moving theism.

Of course the contrary proposition is, in some periods of Christian history, equally plausible. There are Christian theisms which are parasitical upon forms of atheism, for they formulate a doctrine of God primarily in response to a certain kind of grounds for atheistic denial. It is a case worth considering that much eighteenth-century theodicy has this parasitical character, being a theism designed to respond primarily to the threat to it posed by the particular formulation of the problem of evil which prevailed in that century. In our time, the ill-named 'creationists' seem to offer but a craven reaction, trapped as they are into having to deny the very possibility of an evolutionary world, simply because they mistakenly suppose an evolutionary world could only be occupied by atheists. Thereby they play the atheist's game, on the undemanding condition that they play on the losing team.

It goes without saying that such parasitical forms of theism are idolatrously reactive. They need a space for God and, since evolutionary biology, or historical evidence, or cosmology, occupy the space where

they think God ought to be, they propose to clear the space of whatever, on their account, excludes God from it. And it is enough to propose an apophatic remedy of theological dieting in face of such Christian theologies – fundamentalisms – which are fat on what they can tell you about God, as if language about God provided some kind of rival explanatory account of that which science or history explains – necessarily therefore on all epistemological fours with one another, since, again, *eadem est scientia oppositorum*.

But the connection of the phenomenon of parasitical atheism with theological apophasis is more problematical. Far from rejecting too much from the Christian point of view, most philosophical atheists reject all too little. That is why their atheisms are generally lacking in theological interest. Atheism is often limited in interest because it is limited in its rejections. It is, as it were, an arrested apophaticism: in the sense in which atheists of this sort say God ‘does not exist’, a pseudo-Denys, a Thomas Aquinas and a Meister Eckhart are happy to agree. And if that is so, and if I am right that most atheisms are mirror-images of the theisms they abandon, the converse ought to be true, namely, that most atheisms are too limited in their negativity because most Christian theisms are too limited in their affirmativeness.

That, of course, starts a lot of hares, too many to be pursued in this essay, so let me retreat with renewed resolution into further naive paraphrase. An adequately apophatic theology has to be unremitting in its denials of theological language, for all talk about God is tainted with ultimate failure.<sup>9</sup> But this is because an adequate cataphatic theology has to be unremitting in its affirmations of theological language, for everything about the world tells us something of its creator. You cannot understand the role of the apophatic, or the extent to which it is necessary to go in denying things of God, until you have understood the role of the cataphatic and the extent to which it is necessary to go in affirming things of God. And the reason for this, as I see it, logical interdependence of the negative and the affirmative ways is not the true but trivial reason that *logically* until you have something to affirm you have nothing to negate. The reason is the more dialectically interesting one that it is in and through the very excess, the proliferation, of discourse about God that we discover its failure as a whole.

<sup>9</sup> Please note – because some reviewers of my book *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) have failed to do so – that to say that all talk about God is ‘tainted with failure’ is not to say that we can make no true affirmative statements about God. We can. But ultimately they fail, not of truth, but of God.

It would be appropriate here, but impossible, to explore in detail the fourth and fifth chapters of the *Mystical Theology* of that shadowy sixth-century Syrian theologian known as ‘the pseudo-Denys’;<sup>10</sup> for these last few remarks were meant as a sort of potted summary of them. But the matter can be put briefly in this way: for the pseudo-Denys the way of negation is not a sort of po-faced, mechanical process, as it were, of serial negation, affirmation by affirmation, of each thing you can say about God, as if affirmative statements about God were all false; nor is it, as in some late medieval Dionysian theologies, the tedious pedantry of simply adding the prefix ‘super’ to already superlative Latin adjectives predicated of God – the *Deus superoptimus* of a Denys the Carthusian; nor yet is it adequately expressed in the somewhat more contemporary partiality for austere metaphors of spiritual deserts, silences or mystical ‘dark nights’. Rather, for the pseudo-Denys, the way of negation demands prolixity; it demands the maximisation, not the minimisation of talk about God; it demands that we talk about God in as many ways as possible, even in as many conflicting ways as possible, that we use up the whole stock-in-trade of imagery and discourse in our possession, so as thereby to discover ultimately the inadequacy of all of it, deserts, silences, dark nights and all.

Now all that linguistic stock-in-trade is creaturely in its reference. And this is a point worth noting. For it is a common belief among Christian theologians today that there is, as it were, a domain of human discourse which is specifically and distinctively ‘religious’, religious positively in that it is somehow especially privileged to be expressive of the divine; and ‘religious’ also by contrast with other, secular, discourses, such as those, perhaps, of politics, or science, or sex. Now the pseudo-Denys will have none of this. It is doubtful if he could have made sense of the idea of a ‘religious’ language as distinct from any other. Indeed, if anything he is rather more inclined to the opposite view that, since all language has an intrinsic creaturely reference, the more obviously inappropriate our language about God is, the less likely it is to seduce us into supposing its adequacy:<sup>11</sup> high-sounding ‘religious’ language can, he says, more easily mislead us into idolatrous anthropomorphisms than does, say, the Psalmist’s description of God’s moods as like those of a soldier with a hangover.<sup>12</sup> So for the pseudo-Denys theological language is at its best, is

<sup>10</sup> In *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 141A–B, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, pp. 152–3.

<sup>12</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1033B, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 139.

least misleading, when it is most concrete, imaginative, and even carnal.<sup>13</sup> But if that is so, it will be only when the range and density of imagery is maximised, when all the resources of human language are deployed, that it is possible to do justice to the language-defeating reality of the divine. As I say to my students, if you want to do theology well, then, for God's sake get your metaphors as thoroughly mixed as you can.

The apophatic therefore presupposes the cataphatic 'dialectically' in the sense that the silence of the negative way is the silence achieved only at the point at which talk about God has been exhausted. The theologian is, as it were, embarrassed into silence by her very prolixity, as in a seminar one can be embarrassed into silence in the shameful realisation that one had hogged the conversation and begun to babble beyond one's power of understanding. Theology, one might say, is an *excess* of babble.

The apophatic and the cataphatic are therefore not, for Denys, independent theological strategies; nor are they to be set in opposition to one another; nor do they fall into some given order of succession to one another, in *either* order of priority. So it is not that, first, we are permitted the naive and unself-critical indulgence of affirmation, subsequently to submit that affirmation to a separate critique of negation. Nor is the 'way of negation' the way of simply saying nothing about God, nor yet is it the way simply of saying that God is 'nothing'; it is the encounter with the failure of what we must say about God to represent God adequately. If talk about God is deficient, this is a discovery made within the extending of it into superfluity, into that excess in which it simply collapses under its own weight. In the anarchy of that linguistic excess theological language is discovered to be, in a phrase of Nicholas Lash's, a 'broken language';<sup>14</sup> and somewhere, within that anarchy, the silence which falls in the embarrassment of prolixity is transformed into awe; the *via negativa*, as later Thomas Aquinas might have put it, is transformed into the *via eminentiae*.

Our routine principled atheist knows none of this. She has, as it were, but tinkered with negation – perhaps, it might be said, because of a Christian experience which, or an experience of Christians who, have but tinkered with affirmation. When I said that most atheists deny too little about God it was because I was thinking of the pseudo-Denys saying

<sup>13</sup> *Divine Names*, 709B–713A, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, pp. 81–3.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), p. 144 – a Christological statement implicitly, though for Bonaventure it is so explicitly: for him the 'brokenness' of Jesus on the Cross is the brokenness of all human discourse, a *transitus* into the unknowability of the *Deus absconditus*.

that God is to be found only on the other side of *every possible* assertion and denial; and because I was thinking that Christians themselves need to be every kind of atheist possible in order to deny every kind of idolatry possible: for much atheism, as one knows it today, is but the negation of the limited features of a particular idolatry. And so we return to the question of how this, as I think we may call it, ‘apophatic critique of idolatry’ is related to our question: ‘How is apophatic theology to be distinguished from deconstruction?’.

In pursuit of an answer to this question, let us therefore return to the pseudo-Denys. In those final two chapters of his *Mystical Theology* the pseudo-Denys describes a hierarchy of denials, denials, that is, of all the names of God. Those names, he says, form a ladder, ascending from the lowest ‘perceptual’ names – ‘God is a rock, is immense, is light, is darkness . . .’ – derived as metaphors from material objects – to the very highest, ‘proper’ or ‘conceptual’ names of God – ‘God is wise and wisdom, good and goodness, beautiful and beauty, exists and existence’ – and all these names the pseudo-Denys negates one by one as he progresses up the scale of language until at the end of the work the last word is that all words are left behind in the silence of the apophatic. This ascending hierarchy of negations is, however, systematic, not just a sort of gung-ho scatter of negative shot: it is governed by a general theological principle and is regulated by a mechanism.

As to the general theological principle, the pseudo-Denys has already said earlier in *Mystical Theology*<sup>15</sup> what he had emphasised in *Divine Names*,<sup>16</sup> that all these descriptions denied are legitimate names of God, they give some positive idea of God. For being the cause of all God may be described in consequence by the names of all the things he has caused. Theological language, for the pseudo-Denys, therefore consists in a clamour of metaphor and description and if we must also deny all that speech then we must remember that those denials are themselves forms of speech; hence, if the divine reality transcends all our speech, then, as he says in the concluding words of *Mystical Theology*, ‘the cause of all . . . is both beyond every assertion and beyond every denial’.<sup>17</sup> The point of the serial negations of the last two chapters of that work, therefore, is not to demonstrate, as some have supposed, that negative language is somehow superior to affirmative in the mind’s ascent to God; rather it is to demonstrate that our language leads us to the reality of God when,

<sup>15</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1033B, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> *Divine Names*, 593C–D, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1048B, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 141.

by a process simultaneously of affirming and denying all things of God, by, as it were in one breath, both affirming what God is and denying, as he puts it, 'that there is any kind of thing that God is',<sup>18</sup> we step off the very boundary of language itself, beyond every assertion and every denial, into the 'negation of the negation' and the 'brilliant darkness'<sup>19</sup> of God.

So much for the general principle of his apophaticism. As for the mechanism which governs this stepwise ascent of affirmation and denial, we may observe how that mechanism is itself a paradoxical conjunction of opposites: the ascent is, as I have said, an ordered hierarchical progression from denials of the lower to denials of the higher names, and yet at every stage on this ascent we encounter the same phenomenon of language slipping and sliding unstably, as the signifying name first appears to get a purchase on and then loses grip of the signified it designates. We may say legitimately, because the Bible says it, that 'God is a rock' and as we say the words they appear to offer a stable hold on the signified, God: we have said, have we not, something true of God, albeit by metaphor, and something of the divine reality is thereby disclosed – for something of God's reliability and stability is affirmed which even higher metaphors of God's vigorous life fail to declare, given the fecklessness and unreliability of the living beings of our experience. But just as we have let some weight hang from the grip of this word 'rock' on the being of God, the grip slips: God is not, of course, 'lifeless', as rocks are and we also have to say, since the Bible tells us we must, that the divine power holds sway over all things and only the most vigorously alive of beings could exercise such power; or that God is love and so must be possessed of intellect and will, and so must enjoy the highest form of life that we know of. Hence, in order to retain its grip on the signified, the signifier has to shift a step up the ladder of ascent there itself to be further destabilised. For God is not 'intelligence' or 'will' either, and the signified again wriggles away from the hook of the signifier and shifts and slides away, never, as we know, to be impaled finally on any descriptive hook we can devise, even that of existence. For in affirming 'God exists', what we say of God differs infinitely more from what we affirm when we say that 'Peter exists' than does 'Peter exists' from 'Peter does not exist.' Thus, the difference between Peter's existing and Peter's not existing is a created difference, and so finite. Whereas the difference between God's existing and Peter's existing is uncreated, and

<sup>18</sup> *Divine Names*, 817D, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> *Mystical Theology* 997B, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 135.

so infinite. Hence, any understanding we have of the distinction between existence and non-existence fails of God, which is why the pseudo-Denys can say 'It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being'.<sup>20</sup> Mysteriously, the pseudo-Denys insists that we must deny of God that she is 'divinity';<sup>21</sup> more mysteriously still the signified eludes the hold even, as he puts it, of 'similarity and difference';<sup>22</sup> mysteriously, that is, until we remind ourselves that of course God cannot be different from, nor therefore similar to anything at all, at any rate in any of the ways in which we can conceive of similarity and difference: or else God would be just another, different, thing. Just so, for the pseudo-Denys: for 'there is no kind of thing', he says, 'which God is'.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, there is nothing we can say which describes what God is.

That said, might it not seem necessary to conclude, not, now, that deconstruction is necessarily atheistical but, on the contrary, that deconstruction has been so reduced to theology that theology itself has simply disappeared into deconstruction, into a sort of meta-rhetoric of the ultimacy of postponement, the divine 'defined' by the impossibility of definition, destabilising therefore *all* possibility of definition; characterised as the one, as Eckhart was to put it in the fourteenth century, which alone is not countable, thereby subverting *all* ostension; as the 'other', as Nicholas of Cusa was to put it in the fifteenth century, which alone is not and cannot be contained by our categories of otherness and difference, *so* 'other' as to be *non-Aliud* – the one and only 'not-Other' – thereafter reducing *all* alterity to indeterminacy? It is not surprising that, having read such extremes of apophaticism into the pseudo-Denys, Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, Jacques Derrida was in the end prepared to accept a certain symmetry between negative theology and his deconstruction, but only on condition that negative theology was thus reduced to a post-metaphysical rhetoric of *différance* from which is excised any residue of 'hyperessentiality', any residual appeal to an *existent* 'other', held in reserve at the back of endless 'deferral', thus, surreptitiously to effect a secret, and metaphysically theistic, 'closure'. But this Derridean wholesale deconstruction of theological metaphysics, this concession to a 'theology' which *is* the ultimate agent deconstructive of metaphysical theism, is in fact unrecognisable in the mirror of medieval apophaticism, and I turn next to the negative theologies of two thirteenth-century

<sup>20</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1048A, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1048A, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>23</sup> *Divine Names*, 817D, Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 98.

contemporaries – indeed, two friends – the Franciscan Bonaventure and the Dominican Thomas Aquinas, to see why.

Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*<sup>24</sup> provides in the middle ages one of two conceptually and theologically complex models for construing the relationships between the apophatic and cataphatic moments in theological speech, and his is a distinctly incarnational, indeed, a distinctly Christological model. For in that work we find a complex interweaving of at least three strands of theological tradition. First, his own Franciscan piety and devotion, which places centrally within Christian thought and practice the human nature of Christ, but very particularly the passion of Christ. Secondly, a rampantly affirmative theology of exemplarism, in which, in classically medieval dionysian style, he constructs a hierarchy of 'contemplations' of God, beginning from the lowest *vestigia* in material objects, upwards and inwards to our perception of them, through the *imagines* of God in the human soul, especially in its highest powers, further 'upwards' and beyond them to 'contemplations' through the highest concepts of God, 'existence' and 'goodness'. In just such an ascending hierarchy constructed in the first six chapters of the *Itinerarium* does Bonaventure construe the whole universe as the 'book of creation' in which its author is spoken and revealed; all of which theological affirmativeness is resumed in the human nature of Christ, only there no longer is it merely the passive 'book of creation' in which the Godhead can be read, but now the 'Book of Life', who actively works our redemption and salvation.

But in the transition from the first six chapters of the *Itinerarium* to the seventh Bonaventure effects, thirdly, a powerfully subversive theological *transitus*, from all the affirmativeness with which creation in one way, and Christ in another, speak God, to a thoroughgoing negative theology. For beyond the knowing of God is the unknowing of God; nor is this 'unknowing' merely 'beyond': through the increasing intensity and complexity of its internal contradictoriness this knowing *leads to* the unknowing. As one might say, the very superfluity of the affirmativeness sustained by the books of creation and of Life collapses into the silence of the apophatic: and chapter 7 consists in little but a string of quotations from the more apophatic sayings of the *Mystical Theology* of the pseudo-Denys. But the organising symbolism of that theological *transitus* from the visibility of the Godhead in Christ to the unknowability

<sup>24</sup> In Philotheus Boehner and M. Frances Loughlin, eds., *The Works of St Bonaventure*, vol. II (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1956).



of the Godhead brings Bonaventure back to his Franciscan starting point; for that *transitus* is also effected through Christ – more to the point, through the passion and death of Christ. For in that catastrophe of destruction, in which the humanity of Christ is brought low, is all the affirmative capacity of speech subverted: thus it is that through the drama of Christ's life on the one hand and death on the other, through the recapitulation of the symbolic weight and density of creation in his human nature on the one hand, and its destruction on the Cross on the other, is the complex interplay of affirmative and negative fused and concretely realised. In Christ, therefore, is there not only the visibility of the Godhead, but also the invisibility: if Christ is the Way, Christ is, in short, our access to the *unknowability* of God, not so as ultimately to know it, but so as to be brought into participation with the *Deus absconditus* precisely as *unknown*.

Thomas' theology is no less 'incarnational' than Bonaventure's, nor is this incarnational character of his theology combined with any less radical an apophaticism. Like Bonaventure, Thomas was deeply suspicious of over-zealous negativities, of theological negations unsecured in the affirmation of human, carnal, worldly experience. Moreover, like Bonaventure, Thomas was happy to anchor the negative, apophatic 'moment' of his theology in just the same secure bedrock in which is anchored the affirmative, incarnational moment: for both, what we *must* say about God and the fact that all that we say about God fails of God derive with equal force from the same necessities of thought, and converge in equal measures, in a sort of 'two-sidedness' of theological speech, speech which Michael Sells has so aptly described as a 'language of unsaying'.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, in this Bonaventure and Thomas also differ: for whereas for Bonaventure, this two-sidedness of theological speech is rooted primordially in the unity of the two natures of Christ, and achieved concretely in the paradox of the passion and death of Jesus, for Thomas, the most primitive access of the human mind to this duality of affirmative and negative theologies is already given to us, in some inchoate sort, in our very created, rational power to know and experience our world. That world, which shows God to us, at the same time shows God to be beyond our comprehension.

Here, then, we turn to a question concerning that proposition which most sets Thomas' theology apart from the anti-metaphysical and anti-rational temper of our philosophical and theological times, the question

<sup>25</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

of what those arguments for the existence of God are doing at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae*, the so-called ‘five ways’. They relate to our concerns, as I see it, because they are Thomas’ account of the most *primitive* and rudimentary, the most *indirect* starting point of the human mind’s route to God, and, at face value, the least obvious and promising of an apophatic theology. They are the least promising starting points because those proofs begin from what it would seem we are most likely to be distracted from God by, because it is what we would be most tempted to reduce God idolatrously to: the things of sense, bodily, material, worldly realities, the sphere of our human distinctiveness, which is the sphere of the *rational*. Nonetheless it is there, Thomas thinks, where all human knowledge begins anyway, so that there is, for him, a sense in which the possibility of deriving knowledge of God in any other way is dependent upon the possibility of deriving knowledge of God from this starting point.

But as everyone knows, the presence of these arguments at the outset of his massive theological construction so embarrasses contemporary theologians, even those otherwise glad to embrace Thomas’ influence, that much energy and ingenuity gets spent in seeking to show that they are not, and are not intended as, formal *proofs* of the existence of God at all, not vehicles of a rational access to God achieved independently of faith, but are rather, as John Milbank has said recently, but ‘weakly probable modes of argument and very “attenuated” showings’,<sup>26</sup> which possess such power as they have to ‘show’ God only insofar as they already *presuppose* reason’s participation by the gift of faith in the divine perfection. Contemporary friends of Thomas are embarrassed by these arguments if read as self-standing rational *proofs* because, so understood, they would indicate some sort of pre-critical commitment on Thomas’ part to the possibility of a natural theology – to a purely ‘rational’ and pre-theological knowledge of God, such as are thought to be (since Kant we are all quite sure of it) a logical and epistemological impossibility. But worse than that, placed as they are at the very outset of Thomas’ theological exposition, their presence would, it is thought, indicate a commitment by Thomas to an unacceptable form of theological ‘foundationalism’, which would place some metaphysical ‘God of being’, and therefore of ultimate ‘oneness’ – this, since Heidegger, has acquired the inelegant name of ‘ontotheology’ – in place of primacy before, and as underpinning to, the God of Jesus Christ, the Trinitarian God of Father, Son and

<sup>26</sup> John Milbank, ‘Intensities’ in *Modern Theology*, 15:4 (October, 1999), p. 455.

Holy Spirit. Thus, for example, Professor Colin Gunton<sup>27</sup> for the one part, and Professor Jean-Luc Marion<sup>28</sup> for the other. For both, Thomas' doctrine of God is ridden with monist and metaphysical infection, and the virus which carries it is natural theology.

It is possible that a Thomist camp-follower of a rather a prioristic cast of mind might offer a defence of a moderate form of rationalist foundationalism, thinking it reasonable to suppose that a Christian theology, whether properly focused on the Incarnation, or on the Trinity, or on creation, or on any other Christian doctrine, would still have to set out first *some* account of what God is, some conceptual presuppositions, some minimal regulative criteria governing what would count as talking about *God* when you are talking about the Incarnation, or the Trinity, or creation. You might particularly suppose this to be necessary if you reflect upon the naivety of the assumption which appears to underlie, for example, Gunton's polemic against Aquinas, who, Gunton supposes, *cannot* be talking about the Christian God when, in the *Summa Theologiae*, he prefaces his discussion of the Trinity and creation with a philosophically derived account of the existence and nature of God as 'one'; whereas he, Gunton, *can* be guaranteed to be talking about the Christian God *just because* he explains creation in trinitarian terms. In this theological naivety, Gunton appears not to be alone. Christians commonly tell us, rightly, that the God of Christian faith is the triune God; from which they appear to derive the complacent conclusion that *just because* they talk of the Trinity they could not be talking about anything other than God. But no such consequence follows, and if nothing else shows it, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* ought to serve as a warning against such complacent assumptions, for there he demonstrates quite plausibly that it is possible to extend your 'theology' over the whole range of Christian doctrines and practices – the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, the sacraments, even devotion to the Virgin Mary – and to preserve every manner of Christian theological jot and tittle in the exposition of them, *but entirely as translated out in terms of the human*, by the simple device of inverting, as he puts it, subject and predicate.<sup>29</sup> Thereby he demonstrates, to put it in Christian terms, the possibility of a purely idolatrous theological exposition of the

<sup>27</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 99ff.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (trans. George Eliot, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), pp. 17ff.

entire resource of Christian belief and practice, in which, in the guise of the soundest doctrinal orthodoxies, the Christian theologian but worships his own nature, in the reified form of 'God'. And if Feuerbach fails to persuade everyone of this possibility, Jesus might succeed with some: not everyone, he once said, who cries, 'Lord, Lord' is worthy of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21).

It might therefore be thought that it is in view of such considerations that Thomas, when asking what is the formal object of *sacra doctrina*, dismisses the obvious answer that it is the study of central Christian doctrines, such as the sacraments, or redemption of Christ as person and as Church, since those and other such doctrines give you the *material* object of *sacra doctrina* but not its *formal* object: that answer, he says, would be like trying to define sight in terms of the things that you can see – human beings, stones or whatever – instead of things *qua* visible, that is, *as coloured*. The *formal* object of *sacra doctrina* is rather, he says, all those things revealed to us through Jesus Christ, but specifically *sub ratione Dei*: either because they *are* about God, or because they have a relation to God as their origin and end: *unde sequitur quod Deus vere sit subiectum huius scientiae*.<sup>30</sup>

If that is so, then we need to know what would count as the consideration of the Christian revelation *sub ratione Dei* – as distinct, therefore, from a consideration of the same content of that revelation in the manner of a Feuerbach, *sub ratione hominis*; and, as I have said, a certain kind of aprioristic mentality might suppose that this is a conceptual matter which needs to be settled by a pre-theological definition, and, if pre-theological, then necessarily by a *philosophical* definition; and by a philosophical argument which establishes that the definition is instantiated – and thus proves the existence of the God so defined. This, if we could take it to be Thomas' opinion, would explain and lend credence to that account of his theological procedure which in different ways so worries the theological Guntons and Marions, and causes in them such suspicions of ontotheology, whereby after a preliminary discussion of theological method in the first question, Thomas engages in the *Summa Theologiae* in no less than twenty five questions – some 149 articles – in 'natural theology' *before* he gets round to even preliminary discussions of the Trinity. It is as if the necessity of establishing what would count as the *ratio Dei* before doing properly Christian theology, and as a regulative criterion of when we are doing it, requires proofs, as the first Vatican Council puts it, 'by the natural light of reason' of the existence of God, and then of

<sup>30</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a q1 a7 corp.

his attributes.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, once you have supposed that that is Thomas' procedure, it would come naturally to mind that it is *that* 'necessity of faith' which the first Vatican council had in mind when it decreed it to be a dogma of faith that such proofs are naturally available to us.

But any reader of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* who supposed that that was his procedure would be mightily puzzled by what she read in the course of the argument of those twenty five questions. First, because Thomas sets about demonstrating the existence of God without giving even preliminary thought – not to dignify what he omits with the denomination 'heuristic' – to the definition of God. In fact, the reader will be at a loss to find *any* 'definition' of God anywhere at all, even were he to read right through to the end of the *Summa*. All he appears to say on this matter, at any point, is immediately at the end of each of the five ways, when he says, with demotic optimism (and to the dissatisfaction of most readers today) that the prime mover, the first efficient cause and the necessary being and the rest, are 'what all people call God'<sup>32</sup> – exactly the proposition which Gunton is pleased to contest in the name of his Trinitarian priorities. Secondly, because when, immediately after his discussion of whether God exists, Thomas does appear to set about the more formal discussion of what it is that he might have proved the existence of, he tells us flatly that there is no definition to be had, for *there can be no answer to the question of what God is*, but only of what God is not. 'Once you know whether something exists', he says,

it remains to consider how it exists, so that we may know of it what it is. But since we cannot know of God what he is, but [only] what he is not, we cannot inquire into the how of God [s' existence], but only into how he is not. So, first we must consider this 'how God is not', secondly, how he is known by us, thirdly, how he is spoken of.<sup>33</sup>

That said, the reader will be further puzzled by the fact that, nonetheless, Thomas then proceeds for a further nine questions to discuss what, on

<sup>31</sup> 'If anyone says that the one, true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of reason: let him be anathema', *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, canon 2.1 *On Revelation*, in Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. 2, Trent to Vatican II* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), p. 810.

<sup>32</sup> *ST*, 1a q2 a3, *corp*. By the way: 'et hoc omnes dicunt Deum' is probably best translated as 'and this is what all people refer to by the name "God"' – which does not necessarily entail, still less does it necessarily mean, 'this is *how* all people refer to God'. So it is rather beside the point to observe that hardly anyone ever refers to God by the names 'prime mover', 'necessary being' and so forth. It is perfectly obvious that Thomas knew *that*. What he means is: 'this is what people are talking about when they talk about the Trinity, or the Incarnate Word or anything else theological'; in short, 'this is what it means to talk of these things *sub ratione Dei*'.

<sup>33</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a q3 prol.

most accounts, will be considered classical attributes of God – his simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, ubiquity, immutability and unity – as if thereby ignoring what he has just said and supplying us with what to many will appear to be a quite unproblematised account of God’s multiple ‘whatnesses’. And as if that were not bad enough, after first telling us that we can only know what God is not, he then says that, once he has shown that, he will go on to tell us how God is, after all, known and spoken of – a case, we might imagine, of knowing the unknowable, of describing the indescribable, or perhaps of throwing your cake away in order to eat it. Something is badly wrong here: either, on this way of reading what Thomas’ theological method is, he is plainly muddled and unredeemably inconsistent, or, if consistent, then some other way of reading his method will have to be found.

It is charitable at least to *try* for a consistent Thomas. Nor is it difficult. Nothing is easier, to begin with, than to see that, in his discussion of the divine simplicity in question three, what is demonstrated is not some comprehensible divine attribute, some *affirmation* which marks out God from everything else, but some marker of what constitutes the divine *incomprehensibility*, as distinct from the incomprehensibility of everything else. For what Thomas recognises to be in need of determination about the *ratio Dei* – that which in some way is criterial for speaking of God’s otherness as distinct from all secondary, created othernesses – is the precise nature of *God’s* incomprehensibility, lest it be mistaken for that more diffused and general sense of the mysteriousness with which we are in any case confronted within and by our own created universe – for there is puzzlement enough in creatures. ‘You do not know the nature of God’, he seems to say. ‘You know only the divine unknowability.’ But all the same, there is a job to be done of determining that the ‘unknowability’ you may have got to in your contemplation of the world is in truth the *divine* unknowability – as distinct, for example, from simply giving up on seeking to know at some lesser point of ultimacy. For *penultimate* unknowability is always idolatrous. ‘Giving up’ at the point of penultimate unknowability is exactly what Bertrand Russell once recommended when, confronted by Frederick Copleston with the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ he urged us to be content with no answer at all, to be satisfied that the world is ‘just there’, and to deny that the question can make sense.<sup>34</sup> For Thomas, on the contrary, we are constrained to acknowledge that, in the very form of that question, ‘Why is there something rather

<sup>34</sup> See *The Existence of God* (ed. John Hick, London: Macmillan, 1964), p. 175.

than nothing?', we are confronted not with a mere passive ignorance of an inert facticity, but with the divine creative causality which *must* be incomprehensible to us. The question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' is after all intelligible enough to us, for we can *ask* it out of our own native resources of creaturely cognitive capacity. As Geach points out, 'cause of . . . ' has an earthly sense, comprehensible to us; so does ' . . . every mutable thing'. But the question which conjoins them: 'What is the cause of every mutable thing?', must bear an answer, but one which, demonstrably, is incomprehensible to us: we know that we *could not know* the nature of what it refers to.<sup>35</sup> So what the five ways prove – I will allow that you can doubt if they succeed, but not that they are intended as anything less than proofs – is *simultaneously* the existence of and the unknowability of God. But only such demonstrated unknowability deserves the name 'God'; which is why Thomas says that what is thus shown is what all people call by that name.

Now the argument for the divine simplicity in *Prima pars*, question three, is designed to demonstrate the precise 'how' of that ultimate divine 'otherness' so that we could not confuse that divine otherness with any lesser, created form of otherness. In fact, of course, in thus demonstrating God's otherness to be ultimate he thereby demonstrates that otherness itself to be the source of that *divine* unknowability which surpasses all other unknowability: not only can we not know the how of God's existence, so other is it; so 'other' is God, that the very concept of otherness has, in respect of God, itself lost its threads of straightforward continuity with any conception of created otherness which we do know the how of. We do not know, therefore, how 'other' God is: which is why Thomas is at one with the pseudo-Denys when he says that, at the climax of ascending scales of God's differences from all else, God must be thought of as off *every* scale of sameness and difference and thus to be beyond 'every assertion . . . beyond every denial'.<sup>36</sup> So it follows: if you want to know what the *ratio Dei* is, that standpoint from which your speech about God is marked out as properly *theological*, then the answer is: you know you are talking about God when all your theological talk – whether it is *materially* about the Trinity, or the Incarnation, or the presence of Christ within Church or sacrament, or about grace, or the Spirit in history, or the manner of our redemption – is demonstrably ultimate, when, through the grace of revelation, we are led *deeper* than we otherwise might be, into

<sup>35</sup> P. T. Geach, 'Causality and Creation' in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Pseudo-Denys, *Mystical Theology* 5, 1048A.

the unknowability of the Godhead. We might not have supposed this. We might have supposed, as many late medieval opponents of Thomas clearly did, that reason's 'failure' lies not in its encounter with the divine unknowability itself, but derives rather from the impossibility in principle of unaided human reason's reaching out as far as the divine unknowability at all. The pagan philosophers, Jean Gerson thought, knew not the true apophatic unknowing of the Christian; they espoused Socratic ignorance out of the mere frustrations of an exhausted natural intellect.<sup>37</sup> Some Christians today, however, can imagine the opposite: that apophatic theology is a pagan, neoplatonic, merely philosophical thing and that they are better informed than the natural philosophers are about God, for Christians have been given the revelation of the Trinity in Jesus Christ. But not so, either way, for Thomas, his thought here converging on Bonaventure's: indeed Christians *do* know better by grace and revelation, but only so as to be inserted participatively into a darkness of God which is deeper than it could possibly be for the pagan, who can only *think* this unknowability, as it were, from outside it and cannot be drawn into a sharing in its nature as love, so as to share it in friendship with God. It is a darkness, therefore, which for the Christian is deepened, not relieved by the Trinity, intensified by the Incarnation, not dispelled. For which reason, he says:

... in this life we do not know what God is [*even*] *through the revelation of grace*, and so [by grace] we are made one with him as to something unknown.<sup>38</sup>

It is just because Thomas can see no conflict between the defence in principle of a rational demonstration of the existence of God and a through-going incarnational apophaticism – what shows God to exist is not other than what shows that existence to be unknowable – that he can resist with equanimity on the one hand any temptation to reduce his apophaticism to a mere meta-rhetoric while, on the other, eschewing any such rationalistic foundationalism as would reduce faith to the status of a mere adjunct to a rational theism. His position appears to be that, broadly, of the Fathers of the first Vatican Council, who maintained that

<sup>37</sup> 'I am much mistaken if it is not an obvious truth about the greatest philosophers, that, after all their enquiries, they declared in weariness of spirit, their labours having done nothing to refresh them, that the one thing they knew was that they did not know' [Fallor si non apparuit in maximis philosophis, qui post omnes inquisitiones suos tedio affecti, quia non refecti, dixerunt hoc unum se scire quod nichil scirent], Jean Gerson, *De mystica theologia, Tractatus Speculativus*, 1.34, 15–17.

<sup>38</sup> '... per revelationem gratiae in hac vita non cognoscamus de Deo quid est, et sic ei quasi ignoto coniungamur...' *ST*, 1a q12 a13 ad1.