

# Apophatic Rationalism in Anglophone Philosophical Theology: Historical Assessment and Theoretical Outcomes

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# **Apophatic Rationalism in Anglophone Philosophical Theology: Historical Assessment and Theoretical Outcomes**

## **Premises I: two Rapprochements**

In the Anglophone intellectual world since the 1990s we witness a widespread movement of the academia from analytical philosophy more and more into continental philosophy, since neither themes, nor style, nor logics are effective criteria to distinguish the two, but the two came about because of historical circumstances, mainly the Second World War.<sup>[1]</sup> What really used to distinguish them was the hostility of analytical philosophy towards history of philosophy.<sup>[2]</sup> An hostility still present but quickly vanishing,<sup>[3]</sup> so that, hopefully, less and less 'continental' philosophy will be confined to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur, Guattari, Lacan, Levinas and Deleuze, but will also include Descartes, Malebranche, Galilei, Spinoza, Grotius, Bodin, Leibniz, Wolf, Kant, Rousseau, Voltaire, Vico, Hegel, Fichte, Comte, Croce and Freud (without Freud, why Ricoeur and Lacan, after all?).

In these last names I did not put Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Epictetus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Plotinus, Porphyry, Augustine of Hippo, let alone Boethius, Anselm, Abelard, Bonaventure, Scotus, Occam and Aquinas because their status is not well defined. Are they 'continental' or not? The answer is not easy, one can see.

However, in the Anglophone world the ancient philosophers were included in the category of 'classics' together with Homer, Virgil and Thucydides. And the medieval ones were studied by the Catholic clergy in their seminaries and universities.

Here (speaking of the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages) we deal with the overlapping intellectual space between philosophy and theology, but in the Anglophone world in almost all the 20<sup>th</sup> century the study of philosophy was not esteemed as an important element in the theological syllabus.<sup>[4]</sup>

The situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has greatly changed, and now in the Anglophone departments of theology the chairs of philosophy multiplied.

What philosophy however? And, if the medieval were right saying *philosophia ancilla theologiae (est)*, what theology then?

This survey about the rapprochement between analytical philosophy and 'continental' philosophy (that is, history of philosophy) and about the rapprochement between theology and philosophy (500 years after the Reformation) must now continue focusing a particular kind of philosophy.

## **Premises II: Two Revivals**

At the end of the last century in two eminent scholarly journals of the Anglophone world, the American *The Monist* and the British *New Blackfriars*,<sup>[5]</sup> two monographic issues treated the encounter between Thomism and ‘modern philosophy’, that is analytical philosophy (“I believe it has a claim to be the prime continuant of Western philosophical rationalism”<sup>[6]</sup>). John Haldane summarised the 700- year history of Thomism showing how much neo-Thomism addressed the same philosophical issues of both ‘continental’<sup>[7]</sup> and ‘analytical’<sup>[8]</sup> philosophy.

In fact, at least as for the analytical side, considering the list of these analytical Thomists (David Braine, Brian Davies, Terry Eagleton, Peter Geach, John Haldane, Jonathan Jacobs, Anthony Kenny, Fergus Kerr, Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, Herbert McCabe, Robert Pasnau, Craig Paterson, Eleonore Stump, Stephen Theron, Denys Turner, Michael Thompson) we find some of the most gifted philosophical minds of the last 30 years in the Anglophone world.

Almost 20 years later, Alfred J. Freddoso registered a revival of Thomism on the Anglo-American philosophy<sup>[9]</sup> presenting two substantial examples books by analytical philosophers who turns into Thomist without any previous Thomistic apprenticeship, in the very same way of MacIntyre: David Oderberg’s *Real Essentialism*, “which contains a brilliant and extended defense of undiluted Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, along with a critique of a wide array of alternative positions on various metaphysical issues proposed in the current literature in analytic metaphysics”. And “Edward Feser’s *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, /.../which had Amazon numbers almost unheard of for books in philosophy and was second on the metaphysics textbook list only to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*!) /.../ In addition to the contemporary analytic literature on metaphysics, Feser engages and draws upon the very same 20th century Thomistic textbooks that the repudiators of Thomism in the 1960’s considered an embarrassment. For me it is quite exhilarating to see the likes of Henry Koren, George Klubertanz, Charles Hart, and (of course) Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange drawn into dialogue with analytic philosophers such as Anthony Kenny, David Armstrong, and David Lewis”.

This commitment of Anglophone philosophers to this particular ‘continental’ philosophy which is Thomism can be contrasted with another Anglophone commitment to another ‘continental’ philosophy, that is, the so called ‘critical theory’ or also called ‘post-structuralism’, which stems from the Marxist ‘Frankfurt school’ and can be considered a revival of it.

It enrolls Martin Heidegger, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roland Barthes, Giorgio Agamben, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Lacan, Alfred Lorenzer, Slavoj Žižek. The Anglophone champion of this was Richard Horta, the first Anglophone thinker to reconcile right-wing Heidegger with left-wing Marx.

These two different revivals are due to the encounter between Anglophone and continental philosophies and are relevant, as we will see later, for my assessment of ‘apophatic theology’ which now I focus on.

### **Premises III: A Distinction of groups**

Theology focuses on God and mostly relies on revealed dogmas of historical faiths, mainly the Christian faith. But it has an overlapping area with philosophy, the so-called philosophical theology, started by the ancient heathen Greek philosophers, continuing up till today and not relying on faith.

However, all theology, be it revealed or philosophical, is a reasoning and, therefore, needs a consistent system of reasonings, that is, it needs a philosophy.

In the last 25 years, in the Anglophone academic world a traditional distinction within theology between a kataphatic one and an apophatic one has been resumed and endowed an increasing interest. Stephen H. Webb, John Hick, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne and Eleonore Stump<sup>[10]</sup> are examples of non-apophatic theologians, the authors we are going to see are, instead, apophatic theologians.

I think that it is worth doing a further distinction within apophatic theology. Bruce Miley in his 2007 article on negative theology distinguishes four kinds of it, but eventually groups three of them into one so that there are just two main kinds left: a subjective one and an objective one.<sup>[11]</sup> I prefer say that we have a 'mystical' or 'irrationalist' apophatic theology and a 'rationalist' apophatic theology.

The former has got already a sort of assessment in the historical reconstruction by Jeffery L. Kosky in 2000<sup>[12]</sup> where the beginning of it is traced back to Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckart, Nicholas of Cusa and then Heidegger, Balthasar, Jean-Luc Marion, Maurice Blanchot, Derrida, Arthur Bradley, John Caputo, Cheryl Glenn, Leslie Hill, Stephen Katz, Kevin Hart, Levinas. We have the 2016 book of Agata Wilzek, focused on Derrida<sup>[13]</sup> and the 2009 collective book *Apophatic Bodies*<sup>[14]</sup> whose contributors are: Catherine Keller, Patricia Cox Miller, Charles M. Stang, Virginia Burrus, Karmen MacKendrick, Kathryn Tanner, David L. Miller, Elliott R. Wolsfom, Roland Faber, Philip Clayton, Graham Ward, T. Wilson Dickinson, Rose Ellen Dunn, Jon Caputo, Krista E. Hughes.

It is easy to see how much this apophatic theology relies on the critical theory / post-structuralist philosophy.

What about the latter, that is the objective or rationalist Anglophone Apophatic Theology?

Here above I have distinguished several groups of scholars: analytical and continental philosophers; analytical Thomistic philosophers and critical-theory philosophers; Anglophone philosophers and Anglophone theologians; kataphatic theologians and apophatic theologians; irrationalist apophatic theologians and rationalist apophatic theologians. Any in depth study should focus on this last sub-group.

### **A Rationalist Apophatic Theology in the Anglophone World: People**

I know that there is a radical rationalist apophatic theology in Europe, I think of Miguel Perez de Laborda. But this study I am speaking of should focus on Anglophone Rationalist Apophatic Theology (ARAT), because my extended study on Herbert McCabe brought to me to study and contact these theologians. They are Thomist, but of a kind of Thomism different from the mainstream which is exemplified by the handbooks of Cardinal Mercier, Louis Boyer, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and Richard Phillips. They are sometimes called – as we have seen already – “Analytical Thomists”.

The following is a draft historical framework.

- The forerunners were the Canadian Bernard Lonergan and the British Victor White. Both of them, despite Anglophone, had been educated before the Forties and the split between analytical and continental philosophy. Lonergan studied [theology at the Gregorian University in Rome and was drawn towards Thomism by the Jesuit Peter Hoenen](#)<sup>[15]</sup>.
- Victor White was the intellectual mentor of Herbert McCabe<sup>[16]</sup> and Bernard Lonergan was the intellectual mentor of David Burrell<sup>[17]</sup>
- McCabe and Burrell were much more successful than their mentors in spreading their rationalist apophatic theology, because the different social and cultural atmosphere allowed them to be in dialogue with the secular philosophies of their time, such as Wittgenstein's and De Saussure's linguistics, Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxism. Aquinas was their main author, but they did not consider themselves Thomists, in order to signify their openness to other philosophies.
- McCabe had kindred spirits in the 'analytical Thomists' Alastair MacIntyre and Anthony Kenny, who highly inspired him (and they were by him) but never ventured into the realms of theology, remaining stuck just to the philosophical fields.
- McCabe had also disciples: Terry Eagleton, Deny Turner and Brian Davies. The first and the third are just philosophers, but the second is a theologian too. And my hypothesis is that it was him the most effective divulger of McCabe's and Burrell's apophatic theology. Till his 1998 book *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, as it appears from the title itself, he was still hanging on the mainstream idea that 'apophaticism' was the theology of the mystics. But reading it you realise that his approach was already strongly rationalist. Turner adopts what he has learned from McCabe and so presents mysticism not as an esoteric non-rational private experience but as an exoteric theological teaching about the unknowability of God. It is what 'the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*'.
- And so Turner was understanding that there was a rationalist stream of apophatic theology starting from Aquinas himself. In his 2008 book *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* he fully presented a clear Thomistic (that is, rationalist) apophatic theology. And in his 2013 *Thomas Aquinas a Portrait* he writes: "That lucidity is truly exceptional. By comparison Duns Scotus throttles thought in an entanglement of complexity, Augustine is dense, Bonaventure imprecise, Meister Eckhart elusive. Thomas is transparent".(36)



- Together with Oliver Davies Turner edited his 2002 book <sup>8</sup> *Silence and the Word Negative Theology and Incarnation*, meant to collect contributions around the idea of rationalistic apophatic theology. Apart from Davies and Turner, the contributors were: Janet Soskice, Paul Fiddes, Rowan Williams, Mark McIntosh and an essay by late McCabe.
- Stephen Mulhall in his <sup>4</sup> 2015 *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* grouped these three apophatic theologians - Burrell, McCabe and Turner - into the label of 'grammatical Thomists'.
- Via Turner this ARAT arrived to Susannah Ticciati who applied the entire project on an interpretation of Augustine in her 2013 <sup>6</sup> *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs*, and to the apologetical critique of 'new atheism' in 2016 *God Is No Thing* by Robert Shortt and 2009 <sup>3</sup> *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* by David Bentley Hart.
- We find particular applications of this ARAT to theological disciplines in 2014 Ian McFarland book *From Nothing* about creation and his 2014 article "Spirit and Incarnation: Toward a Pneumatic Chalcedonianism" about Christology, and in Karen Kilby's 2000 article 'Perichoresis and Projection' and 2005 article 'Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding', about the doctrine of Trinity.

## <sup>10</sup> A Rationalist Apophatic Theology in the Anglophone World: Ideas

What <sup>is</sup> the function of this apophaticism? First of all, it makes us not confuse God with cosmic and historical powers and with the features of human nature. If such a confusion is avoided or at least reduced, our reason will be less and less hindered, and so will our faith too: we are not meant to blindly follow mere human traditions, because they hinder faith itself, which is something unique for each of us; faith certainly needs a community, but an 'apophatic' community, that is, respectful of the mysterious path by which God reveals himself throughout each individual life, in an unrepeatable way. Jesus' mother Mary, Peter, the Samaritan woman, the good thief, the apostle Paul and many others show us a faith that is not standardised at all. Whereas, a non-apophatic community is at risk of hindering our faith, while intrusively proposing and even imposing – in God's name - mere human traditions bound to fashions, ideologies and transient social conventions.

Another paramount idea is a *shared* theological research. As Burrell has shown in his 1986<sup>[18]</sup> and 2011<sup>[19]</sup> books, the rationalist theological apophaticism is the 'via regia' to the interreligious dialogue between the three Abrahamic religions.

A third idea is the rationalisation of theology, as McCabe used to say: theology's main purpose was 'not concerned with trying to say what God is but in trying to stop us talking nonsense'. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid mistakes, which, in this case, are not 'factual' ones but rather 'nonsense', that is affirmations which are logically inconsistent with those ideas we are able to conceive about God starting from our observation of worldly reality. So that, the religious discourse could be defended by any attack based on its irrationality.

A fourth idea is the facilitation of the dialogue with agnostics and atheists. McCabe and Turner clearly maintain that in Aquinas there is not any cataphaticism of faith as opposed to an apophaticism of reason, whereas many theologians today actually propose this very dualistic approach and, thus, cannot grasp a truth both paradoxical and profound: no one, be he a believer or not, is able to know God's nature. There is a 'democratic' equality between believers and non-believers and no 'born-again' person or group should claim of being on a higher hierarchical level in respect of the non-believers.

A fifth idea is the defence of the autonomy of sciences. An important case of today is the so-called Intelligent Design theory. In it the attribute 'intelligent' is applied to God in his literal human meaning, and, doing so, the followers of that theory seek to dismiss Darwin. However, an 'apophatic-minded' theologian can show that all the best Christian theological tradition would have considered it a nonsense; thus, the theologian can endorse the most radical scientific palaeontology which claims that life on this planet is radically contingent and disconnected from any human predictive scheme.

A sixth idea is the prevention of distorting the theological reasoning because of the attraction of sociological fashions: example of 'socialisation' in Trinity, example of 'political radicalism' in Christology, example of 'intelligent design' in Creation, example of 'evolution' in Theodicy, example of 'all-you-need-is-love' ideology in Theological Ethics, example of 'individualism' in Theological Anthropology.

### **Importance and Opportunity of this Study**

This study could be important, because, as McCabe noticed several times (for example criticising the book *The Myth of God Incarnate*) the necessary and mandatory operation of demythologisation of religion should be undertaken by keeping the deep and fundamental bond with the tradition and the magisterium, so that not to fall into iconoclasm, heresy and apostasy (unlike what happened to the great theologian Bultmann).

This study could be important, because it envisions the theological counterpart of the philosophical rapprochement between 'analytical' and 'continental' philosophy around the concepts of 'rationality' (as Haldane says) and of 'historicity' (as Strassfeld says).

This study is opportune, because, apart from the short aforementioned article by Milet, there is not any at length study about the distinction between the two apophatic theologies, and, even more so, about the historical context I have outlined above.

This study is opportune – also – because, so far, although there is the aforementioned study by Wilzek about the irrationalist apophatic theology, there is not any about the rationalist one, so that currently both the scholars and the educated public suffer from a potential conceptual confusion in their research and desire of knowledge.

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[1] Jonathan Strassfeld, "The American Divide: the Making of the 'Continental' Philosophy", *Modern Intellectual History*, CUP, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244318000513>; William Blattner, "Some Thoughts About 'Continental' and 'Analytic' ", 2014

[<https://sites.google.com/a/georgetown.edu/prof-william-blattner/continental-analytic-philosophy>]

[2] "The story is told, often with appreciation, of one prominent analytical philosopher teaching at a leading institution who would wear a tee-shirt bearing a slogan derived from the anti-drug campaign: 'Just say "no" to history of philosophy"'. (Haldane, 1999, p. 169).

[3] Tom Sorrell and G. A. J. Rogers, (eds.), *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

[4] Ernst Nicholson (ed), *A Century of Theological and Religious Studies in Britain*, 1902-2002, OUP, 2004; Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Blackwell, 2002: "Curricula determine that most students of Christian theology, in the English-speaking world, and not excluding Roman Catholic ordinands, never need read deeply in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. They will hear, in the Philosophy of Religion course, that he opened his most famous book, the *Summa Theologiae*, with five proofs from features of the world that there is a First Cause. They may read that the God whose existence he has thus demonstrated is the unmoved mover of Mediterranean antiquity, with little if anything to do with the God of Christian revelation. His works will not appear among books recommended for courses on the Trinity or Christology. In Christian ethics, on the other hand, they will hear that Thomas is the classical exponent of a system of morals based on natural law. That is, roughly, the standard conception of Thomas's thought." VI.

[5] "Analytical Thomism", *The Monist*, volume 80 Issue 4 (October 1997); "Thomism and the Future of Catholic Philosophy: 1998 Aquinas Lecture", *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 80, No. 938, (April 1999).

[6] Haldane, "Thomism and the Future", 170.

[7] Ibidem, 164-167.

[8] Ibidem, 168-170.

[9] Freddoso, "The Vindication of St. Thomas: Thomism and Contemporary Anglo-American Philosophy", *Nova et vetera*, Volume 14, Number 2, Spring 2016, pp. 565-584, 10.1353/nov.2016.0037.

[10] As for the kataphaticism of a 'Thomist without Wittgenstein' like Eleonore Stump, see Anthony Kenny's review "Stump's Aquinas", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 216 (Jul., 2004), pp. 457-462: "There is a great difference, for instance, between Aquinas as seen by Pasnau and Aquinas as seen by Stump, even though both of these authors were pupils at



Cornell of the same teacher - the much lamented Norman Kretzmann, who more than anyone else has been responsible for the revival of interest in Aquinas in Anglophone universities”.

[11] “Four Theories of Negative Theology”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 216 (Jul., 2004)., pp. 187-2014 : .”In this paper, I will discuss four theories of negative theology. The first theory, which I call the metaphysical theory, grounds negative theology in God’s role as the cause of all. The second theory interprets negative theology as an expression of desire for something unknown. The third theory justifies negative theology on the basis of an extraordinary or mystical experience. The fourth theory explains negative theology as an act of renunciation motivated by concern about self-interest in one’s devotion to God. These theories are similar in important ways. But there are also significant differences. First, while the metaphysical theory presents negative theology as the consequence of an objective, rational consideration of the natural world, the others appeal to subjective factors, such as desire”.

[12] Kosky, “Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology”, *Journal For Cultural and Religious Theory*, 1.3, Fall 2000.

[13] Wilzek, *Beyond the Limits of Language. Apophasis and Transgression in Contemporary Theoretical Discourse*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2016.

[14] Christ Boesel and Catherine Keller (editors), *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation and relationality*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2009.

[15] Richard Liddy, *Transforming Light*, Michel Glazier, 1993, chapter six [online on Lonergan Institute website

[http://www.lonergan.org/online\\_books/Liddy/chapter\\_six\\_thomistic\\_influences.htm](http://www.lonergan.org/online_books/Liddy/chapter_six_thomistic_influences.htm)]

[16] Franco Manni, “Introduction to Herbert McCabe OP”, *Angelicum*, volume 95, 4/2018, 552-554.

[17] David Burrell in his email to me on 2 September 2019.

[18] *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).

[19] *Towards a Jewish -Christian-Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell).

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