Can we Give God a Name?

Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth’s Teaching on Analogy

“Man reaches the highest point of his knowledge about God when he knows that he knows Him not, inasmuch as he knows that which is God transcends whatever he conceives of Him.”

(St. Thomas Aquinas, De Potentia, 7, 5 ad 14)

Introduction

On and on, without ceasing, in different traditions, circumstances and within various fields of theology, the question about language reemerges. Can we describe God's reality? Does theological terminology refer to his very essence? What is the nature of theological assertions? Are they justified? Or maybe they are merely unfortunate attempts to express divinity by limited means of human articulation and communication? We know the power of human language. It can be helpful and explanatory, as well as misleading and erroneous. It seems that proper understanding of the nature of theological predication is of fundamental importance for its entire endeavor. However, when asking the question about language applied in theology one should not expect to find an easy and simple answer. An advanced study on the topic reveals not only a plurality of linguistic resources, but also a complexity of opinions on them, which often have a significant impact on whole theological systems and traditions. One of the most basic linguistic tools in theology is analogy. Although many would agree that predicating in theology is of analogous nature, it is by no means easy to bring unity among different ontological and epistemological presuppositions accepted by various theologians when they speak about analogy.

In this essay I will go back to the controversy between the most prolific and influential Calvinist theologian of the 20th century Karl Barth, and the position presented
by Thomas Aquinas and his followers. The problem of the opposition between Aquinas’ *analogia entis* and Barth’s *analogia fidei* was summoned recently in some important publications. Keith L. Johnson in *Karl Barth and Analogia Entis* elaborates on the theological background (Erich Przywara’s exposition of Aquinas) and nature of Barth’s rejection of the *analogia entis*. He shows Barth as radically opposed to any use of philosophical language in theology.¹

Bruce L. McCormack pays more attention to the historical and political background of Barth’s theology. In his essay *Karl Barth’s Version of an “Analogy of Being”: A Dialectical No and Yes to Roman Catholicism* one can also find an interesting attempt to show and prove that Barth eventually did not avoid the *analogia entis*. McCormack asks about the possible presence of the *analogia entis* in Barth’s *analogia fidei*. He criticizes Von Balthasar’s position and presents his own answer to this question.² McCormack’s essay is a part of the collection of texts edited by Thomas Joseph White, and published under the title *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* This collection is an important contribution to the Aquinas-Barth debate, especially in the context of ecumenical dialogue, which was initiated by Battista Mondin, S.X. and continued by H. Chavannes.³ It is also a continuation of Thomas J. White’s studies of this problem after his debate with Archie J. Spencer in *Nova et Vetera*, back in 2008 and 2009.⁴

Moreover, the analogy of being itself is a subject of continuous research. Multiplicity and complexity of various distinctions of analogies in Aquinas and his commentators provide ever new and fresh attempts to clarify and present his position. Classic approaches

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presented by Lyttkens, Klubertanz, McInerny, Montagnes, and Burrell, were recently enriched with publications by Roger M. White, and Steven A. Long.\(^5\)

This plurality of interpretations and the high level of complexity of the problem of the opposition between *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei* can be perplexing for somebody who is just beginning the study of these issues and is not familiar with the whole history of this theological debate. Authors who refer to detailed and precise problems concerning analogy in Aquinas and Barth seem to take it for granted that their readers know the basic exposition of analogy in the writings of both theologians, as well as the philosophical and historical context conditioning their theological concepts. I think that this is not necessarily the case.

In this essay I will try to delineate a basic framework of the Aquinas-Barth controversy. I will first provide the reader with a necessary outline of Aquinas' and Barth's respective ways of defying and understanding analogy, with an additional reference to ontological presuppositions they seem to accept. Secondly, I will analyze the philosophical and historical background of this theological controversy. Finally, I will try to present main lines of argumentation concerning possible ways of convergence and divergence between the proponents of *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei*, and express my opinion on the possibility of a reconciliation between Aquinas' and Barth's positions. However, the main point of this essay is to introduce new participants of the debate to its sources and course.

1. **Thomas Aquinas on Analogy**

   It was Greek philosophy and its major figures that adapted from mathematics and defined philosophically the concept of analogy. Although it was already present in the thought of Parmenides and Heraclitus, it was Plato and Aristotle who discovered its power

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and usefulness in philosophical and theological discourse. The former used analogy to signify relations between the four elements: being and becoming, and knowledge and opinion. Thus he avoided both immanent pantheistic monism and absolute transcendent mysticism. The latter, often called the ‘father of analogy,’ classified it as one of four kinds of unity (numerical, specific, generic and analogous) and used it in science, ethics, logic and metaphysics, in order to describe relations between things whose qualities cannot be compared directly.6

Many centuries later, following the path of his predecessors, Thomas Aquinas tried to find a proper definition and meaning of the theological language. He began with an emphasis on God being one and the first principle, ‘being’ in itself. Thus he saw creation as resembling God. He claimed that unity, simplicity and other attributes of God could be designated by a single name. But as human beings we can only try to name God referring to what we know about him from creation. That is why our predication of God develops in multiplicity of names, none of which can grasp his very essence.7

Trying to define the nature of divine names, Thomas Aquinas found useful the concept of analogy, already established and applied in Aristotle’s philosophy. However, it is not possible to point out one clear definition of analogy in Aquinas’ works. Moreover, in the *Summa Theologiae*, which is regarded as his most mature work, Aquinas mentions analogy only occasionally.8 Much more can be found in his earlier works in which he

6 Aristotle was the first who classified terms into three groups, according to the mode of signification. He talk about univocal and equivocal names, and defines the third group as terms “which do not differ by way of equivocalness”. This classification, mediated by Averroes, was rediscovered later by Alexander of Hales and introduced into scholastic theology. The terms classified between univocation and equivocation were called ‘analogous’. For more information search in Niels C. Jr Nielsen, “Analogy and the Knowledge of God: an Ecumenical Appraisal,” *Rice University Studies* 60, no. 1 (Winter 1974) 39-54. In the third chapter of this article he presents a historical survey referring not only to Plato and Aristotle, but also to Plotinus, Augustine, Alexander of Hales, Bonaventura and Aquinas. See also Lyttkens, *The Analogy*, chapter one ‘From the History of the Concept of Analogy,’ 15-163; Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, part two ‘Origins of the Question in Classical Philosophy,’ 37-91; R. McInerny, *Aquinas and Analogy*, chapter two ‘Analogy in Aristotle,’ 30-47; R. M. White, *Talking About God*, chapters: ‘The Mathematical Roots of the Concept of Analogy,’ ‘Aristotle: the Uses of Analogy,’ and ‘Aristotle: Analogy and Language,’ 11-72.


proposes various different distinctions of analogy. Each one of them can be treated separately. What is more, in his classifications Thomas often uses the same examples to describe different kinds of analogy. But we should not think it is a contradiction since analogy as a form of predication is a logical concept and can be analyzed in many ways. In what follows I present a basic classification of analogy in Aquinas.9

1.1. Divine Names and Analogy

Searching for a proper language in theological discourse, in the first part of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas says that divine names which we use when speaking about God are neither univocal nor equivocal. As their meaning is based on what we know from creation, they cannot be univocal when predicated of God who surpasses all he created. But on the other hand, if they were totally equivocal, we would understand nothing of God, as we know the meaning of divine names only in reference to creatures. He goes on to claim that divine names must be predicated of God analogously.10

The first important kind of analogy to which Aquinas refers is the analogy of proportion, described in the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* and *De Veritate*. It is generally based on defined mathematical relation of quantity (for example 4 being twice as much as 2). When referred to things and objects, proportion describes mutual and determinate relations between them. Thomas gives here the example of substance and accident with respect to being, and the example of the term “healthy” when predicated of an animal and its urine.11 According to Aquinas this kind of analogy cannot be used to predicate of divine names, as it is impossible to define exactly relation between the infinite God and finite creation. The distance between them is unlimited. Therefore, when

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9 In my description I will give references mainly to Aquinas’ works as primary sources. But in my reading of Aquinas and interpretation of his teaching on analogy I am indebted to Lyttkens, Klubertanz, Mondin, R. M. White and S. A. Long.


11 Thomas uses the example given by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*, IV, 1003a 33-1003b 18, which is based on medical knowledge (the quality of urine is an evidence of animal’s healthiness).
we say for instance that God is good we do not know what the exact relation between God’s goodness and the creatures’ is.\textsuperscript{12}

If our predication of God cannot be an example of proportion, maybe it is an example of proportionality? Unlike proportion, proportionality is not based on a determinate relationship between entities we refer to, although they are still related to each other. Thomas identifies two modes of this kind of predication when applied to God. There are certain names that we give him like “lion” or “sun”. These names in their primary meaning refer to something, respecting which no similarity between God and creatures can be found. Thomas says that these names are symbolical or metaphorical. They are approved in theology as long as we remember and acknowledge their limitations. Aquinas calls this kind of predication an analogy of improper proportionality. There are other names, however, which do not refer in their primary meaning to something respecting which no similarity between God and creatures can be found. These are names such as “good” or “being”. We predicate them of God knowing the “goodness” and “being” of creatures. We do not need to specify the exact relation between finite and infinite to use them, and their basic meaning is appropriate with reference to both God and creatures. This is an example of analogy of proper proportionality, which is acceptable in theology.\textsuperscript{13}

It seems that following Aquinas so far, we managed to define two analogies that can be applied in theology. These are: analogy of improper proportionality (metaphor) and analogy of proper proportionality. However, Thomas is not satisfied with this achievement. He tries to go deeper and specify more accurately the analogical language of theological assertions. In various places in his works he mentions another classification according to which we may distinguish between analogy of (1) two to a third, (2) many to one and (3) one to another. The first one of them consists in a fact that two analogues have their common tertium quid that is predicated of them according to priority and posteriority.


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{De Veritate}, Q. 2, a. 11; SCG, I, chapter 30; Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Questiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei}, translated by English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1952), Q. 7, a. 5.
Aquinas defines this kind of analogy in *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. He mentions it once again in *De Veritate* giving an example of substance and two substantial categories: quality and quantity. We perceive them as analogous because they both stay in relation to a third, which is substance (according to priority and posteriority as substance is first). This kind of analogy would be inappropriate if applied to God’s divine names. If we predicated of God’s ultimate perfections referring to the creatures’ names in this way, it would mean that there is a third thing that is prior and can be predicated both of God and creatures, which is impossible.14

Similar in a way to the analogy of two to a third is the analogy of many to one. Aquinas mentions it in *Summa Contra Gentiles*. But later on he pays much more attention to this way of predication in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, where de divides it into three:

- the analogy of many through different relations to one end (e.g. “healthy” predicated of diet, urine and medicine, because they all have one end which is the health of an animal),
- the analogy of many through different relations to one efficient cause (e.g. “medicative” predicated of medicine and medical instruments, because of one efficient cause in the person of a physician),
- the analogy of many through different relations to one subject (e.g. being predicated of various accidences, because of their relation to one substance).15

This analogy would be unsuitable in theological discourse for the same reasons for which we have rejected the analogy of two to a third one. But the situation is not the same with the analogy of one to another. In this case we predicate one term of two things of which one is an imperfect imitation of the other. Such names, although unqualifiedly, can designate perfections with no defect in God, referring to the same perfections realized to a

certain extent in creatures. Here we can predicate “being” or “goodness” of God and creatures, respecting the rule of priority and posteriority.  

Analogy of one to another applied in theology is also an example of the analogy of intrinsic attribution (in opposition to the analogy of extrinsic attribution). This is another of Aquinas’ distinctions that we should mention here. Thomas explains it in *De Veritate* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. In the case of extrinsic attribution, we can predicate for instance the ‘healthiness’ of urine. It is possible not because ‘healthiness’ is inherent in it. It is rather a quality of an animal that can be found in its urine only extrinsically. Intrinsic attribution, however, names perfections that belong to things intrinsically. Only this kind of analogy is proper in theology. We predicate the same names of God and creatures, because God’s perfections are realized to a certain extent in creatures, and are intrinsic in them (e.g. goodness).

Summing up, we can say that according to Thomas Aquinas, we can use in theology both the analogy of improper proportionality (metaphor) and the analogy of proper proportionality which may be put together with analogy of one to another and intrinsic attribution. However, one should be careful not to reduce Aquinas’ understanding of analogy to only one of several classifications he offers or one particular type of analogy he defines. Analogy is analogical itself in Aquinas. Although it is possible to find some common ontological base for analogical thinking in Aquinas, which I will discuss later in this essay, it will not privilege one type of analogy approved by Thomas in theology over all other kinds of analogical predication.

Before I will finish this classification I should mention one more distinction made by Aquinas. It is in fact the first and preliminary description of analogy that he proposes in his early work *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Lib. I, Dist. 19, Q. 5. I left it as the last point as it is quite sophisticated and not easy to understand. However, this first classification had a profound influence on some interpreters of Aquinas’ doctrine of analogy.

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16 *SCG*, I, chapters 30, 34.
17 *De Veritate*, Q. 21, a. 4, ad 2; *SCG*, I, chapter 31.
and I will come back to it later. At this point I will confine myself only to presenting Thomas’ position. He mentions in Dist. 19, Q. 5 three kinds of analogy:

- analogy according to intention but not to being (e.g. ‘healthy’ predicated of urine and animal – one intention refers analogously to both things but has being in only one of them, in this case it would be the animal),

- analogy according to being but not to intention (e.g. ‘body’ predicated analogously of material things and celestial bodies – they are equal in intention of corporeity which they share in common, but this element does not have a being of the same kind in all of them),

- analogy according to intention and being (e.g. ‘being’ predicated both about substance and accident is neither equal in intention nor in being when we speak about them).\(^{18}\)

1.2. Ontological Presuppositions

We went through this complex labyrinth of Aquinas' teaching on different types of analogy applied in theology in order to be able to name and specify the main ontological presuppositions of his position. These assertions serve as a ‘common denominator’ for various types of theological applications of analogy in theistic language in Aquinas. We can put them in the following order:

- **Multiplicty of objects.** Analogy is possible only if we deal with a plurality of beings. It is obvious in all of the examples described above.

- **Dissimilarity.** There must be a certain level of dissimilarity between objects that we describe using analogy. This dissimilarity consists in different degrees of perfection in beings.

- **Similarity.** There must also be a certain level of similarity between objects. Once again it consists in various degrees of perfections realized in them.

- **Proportionality.** Analogues must stay in a relation of proportionality.

\(^{18}\) *Super Libros Sententiarum, Lib. I, Dist. 19, Q. 5, a. 2, ad 1.*
- **Causal participation.** The First Cause of being – God – is being itself. All the other beings share in his being. Such is the case with all the other perfections. It is the relation of efficient causality that stands behind the concept of analogy in theology.

- **An agent produces its like.** There must be some sort of resemblance between causal agent and its effect. In other words, analogy is based on a principle of imperfect likeness, the resemblance that man bears to God.

- **Priority and posteriority.** Predicating divine names analogically of God and creatures requires following this principle as well.

- **Division of being by act and potency.** Diverse *rationes* of actuality and potentiality in analogues enable us to form and use analogical language. In the case of God, there is no potency in him, whereas in every creature act is limited by potency.\(^\text{19}\)

This classification gives us a quite clear view of Aquinas’ metaphysics concerning the concept of analogy and its use in theology. Because of the principle of efficient causality, and the principle of division of being by act and potency, the analogy proposed by Thomas was called the analogy of being (*analogia entis*). However, it should be noticed that Aquinas never uses this term himself.\(^\text{20}\) Now it is time to let his position be challenged by probably the most influential Protestant theologian of our times.

### 2. Karl Barth on Analogy

The way that led Karl Barth to approve analogy as the main methodological tool in theology was long and complicated. Battista Mondin mentions two important shifts in his career, the first one of which was leaving the school of liberal Protestantism (Hermann, Schleiermacher and Harnack) that tried to place theology and its method among many aspects of human thought. It had emphasized the immanent character of God in order to reconcile and harmonize religion with sciences and liberal arts. When he realized that this position was false because it did not give right to God’s transcendence, Barth introduced


\(^{20}\) An interesting remark on this topic may be found in McInerny, *Aquinas and Analogy*, chapter 9 ‘Analogy and Participation,’ 152-163.
the dialectical method in theology, laying stress on the infinite qualitative difference between natural and revealed religion. But he did not find it satisfactory either, as it was still defective in expressing properly the ontological difference between God and the world, falling into the trap of pantheism. His struggle with philosophy brought him to the discovery that the main task of theology is to analyze the meaning of revelation rather than searching for philosophical tools to express God's otherness. For it is only God who knows himself, and if we can possess anything of his divine knowledge, it is possible only through revelation.²¹

Finding the true nature of theology, Karl Barth was aware that its endeavor cannot escape the problem of language. He finally chose analogy as an inevitable method for his mature theological discourse. But it was not the analogy of being, which Barth regarded as an altogether wrong and dangerous philosophical category, unable to understand truly the Word of God. His analogy was the analogy of faith. I will try to show the difference between both types of analogy while analyzing Barth's position.²²

2.1. Opposing Aquinas

Like Thomas Aquinas, Barth begins with an assertion that theological language is neither univocal (equivalent) nor equivocal (non-equivalent). The first option would require either to place God among creatures or to divinize the latter. Equivocal predication on the other hand makes impossible any kind of human knowledge about God. Thus he comes to the same conclusion that only analogy is legitimate in theological discourse. At this point, unlike Aquinas, Barth proposes a general definition of analogy:

By this term both the false thesis of parity and equally false thesis of disparity were attacked and destroyed, but the elements of truth in both were revealed. In distinction to both likeness and unlikeness “analogy” means similarity, i.e., a partial correspondence and


agreement and, therefore, one which limits both parity and disparity between two or more entities.23

But giving this definition, Barth does not analyze systematically various kinds of analogy. The main and most important types of analogous predication he mentions are: (1) analogy of inequality, (2) analogy of proportionality, and (3) analogy of attribution.24 Analogy of inequality, which he rejects as unable to express adequately God’s transcendence, is in fact identical with Aquinas’ analogy according to being but not to intention, described above in 1.1. As far as the second type is considered, Barth does not distinguish between analogy of proportion and proportionality. He mentions only the latter and rejects it, as he claims that it is represented algebraically and defines quantitative relation between two objects. According to Aquinas’ distinction this would be the analogy of proportion. H. Chavannes says that it is not clear why Barth rejects proportionality and how he understands the difference between this analogy and analogy of attribution which he accepts as the only one legitimate in theology.25

Concerning attribution, Karl Barth distinguishes two kinds. He describes extrinsic attribution as similarity between two objects. What is predicated of them both is first and more properly characteristic of one of them and may refer to the other one only externally. In case of intrinsic attribution, similarity belongs propriē to both analogans and analogatum. It is inward in them both, although always primarily in one of them and per dependentiam in the other.26 Barth does not refer explicitly to Aquinas at this point, but it is clear that he uses the same terms. What he describes is the analogy of extrinsic and intrinsic attribution mentioned above in 1.1. But the major difference between the two theologians emerges when Barth, unlike Aquinas, approves in theology only extrinsic attribution. The reason is simple. Each perfection that belongs primarily to God can be

24 Barth mentions other kinds of analogy which are not modes of attribution, but rather modes of being (analogia relationis, analogia operationis, analogia revelationis, analogia gratiae and analogia naturae). He does not explain them in details. Both Chavannes (102-3) and Mondin (154) mention this and give proper references to Church Dogmatics.
26 Church Dogmatics, II/1, 238.
discovered in creatures not according to creation, but according to revelation. It means that for Barth analogy is based not on efficient causality (participation in being) but primarily and only on the faith in revelation. Thus he would reject natural theology and oppose Aquinas’ *analogia entis* to his *analogia fidei*. He would also emphasize that man is unable to extend his language to predicate of God even analogically. We need faith to be able to articulate anything about the Creator. Barth’s position is rightly summarized by Chavannes:

> God’s knowability requires in God a readiness to be known and in man a readiness to know God. But the second can never be independent of the first and does not place man on equality with God.

### 2.2. Ontological Presuppositions

It seems that ontological foundations of *analogia fidei* differ considerably from those proposed by Thomas Aquinas for the concept of *analogia entis*. The starting point is similar: creatures resemble their Creator. But for Barth man is God’s image not by nature, i.e. because of some qualities proper to him, but because he is by grace in relation of faith with God. He claims that the only pure image of God is Jesus Christ, and only because of revelation we can speak positively about God. Analogical language in theology has its foundation in three exemplary cases of *analogia relationis*:

- the analogy between God and Christ (the relationship God establishes with creation in Christ is grounded in the one that is in God himself, in the inner life of the Trinity),
- the analogy between humanity and divinity in Christ (this relationship differs from the one in God himself because of two different natures in Christ),
- the analogy between humanity in general and the humanity of Christ (as humanity of Jesus is his being for man, our humanity is a determination for being for other people).

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27 Ibid., 238-41.
According to Karl Barth God repeats in man the relation that is present in his very essence, the I-Thou relationship realized in his being. This imaging is possible through the revelation and the covenant. Barth gives man-woman relation as the image of this covenant. But at the same time emphasizes the difference between creation and God, the only one in whom the I-Thou identity is truly and entirely realized. Consequently, he claims that our ability to stay in relationship with God is not innate. It must be discovered by faith, that is with the help of grace. Thus he comes back to the basic principle which says that everything depends on grace and God’s activity. Here we find Barth in opposition to Aquinas whom he accuses of putting trust only in human nature, apart from revelation and grace. That is why he claims that analogia entis is the “invention of Antichrist” and the Catholic Church is simply wrong when searching for sources of knowledge of God beyond the revelation.

This comparative analysis of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth’s teaching on analogy revealed major differences between the two theologians. However, we should now scrutinize the context and basis for the methodology applied in their theological projects. It seems that this background, different and characteristic for each one of them, might have had considerable influence on the concepts of analogy they proposed.

3. Methodological Foundations

Theology does not emerge in a historical, philosophical and sociological vacuum. On the contrary, it is always affected by and dependent on these and many other circumstances. That is why before giving final opinions and judgments we should always scrutinize carefully the context in which certain theological propositions were given. This is certainly true in case of Aquinas and Barth and the differences between them regarding the concept of analogy. They both lived and worked in different epochs, and their theology was a response to specific problems and actual circumstances at that time. All this should be

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taken into account, especially in an attempt of a comparative study. I will now try to point out the most important facts that might have had an influence on their theology.

3.1. Thomas Aquinas: Faith and Reason

The 13th century brought major and profound changes in the intellectual life of Western Europe. Like on many occasions before, the most important shift was introduced in philosophy to affect later almost all spheres of sciences, politics and social life. This time it was a rediscovery of Aristotle, especially his logics, ethics, physics and metaphysics. Realism and the inductive method gave a foundation for a new stage in the development of natural sciences. Hylomorphism of mater and form and the doctrine of potentiality and actuality challenged philosophical and theological discourse.

For Aristotle, philosophy was really total. All human activities, his longing for knowledge and truth, dreams and aspirations were enfolded in philosophy. Nothing that was sacred and secular could be separated from it. One might think that in these circumstances the Church would be seriously challenged and theology would go into a deep crisis. But this was not the case. It happened that in that time the Church was given an excellent theologian – Thomas Aquinas – who introduced Aristotelian philosophy into theology. H. Chavannes rightly says that:

Saint Thomas Aquinas overcame this crisis aroused by the irruption of this totalitarian rationalism by doing justice to all that was well founded on it. The divine intellect is the source of the intelligibility of the world; all truth is true through the Primal Truth.31

Realizing this Thomas could argue that truth discovered by reason cannot contradict the truth of faith. His preambula fidei would be founded on a strong conviction of the unity of truth. As he writes in Summa Contra Gentiles: “Since therefore falsehood alone is contrary to truth, it is impossible for the truth of faith to be contrary to principles known by natural reason.”32

31 Chavannes, The Analogy Between God and the World, 177.
32 SCG, I, chapter 7.
Aquinas’ trust in the abilities of human reason was rejected by Barth who accuses him and the Catholic Church of teaching that God can be known by reason alone. When saying this Barth refers to the following statement of the First Vatican Council: “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 human reason: let him be anathema.” Here he commits an error, since in the same document of this Council, we can read what follows: “If anyone says that in divine revelation there are contained no true mysteries properly so-called, but that all the dogmas of the faith can be understood and demonstrated by properly trained reason from natural principles: let him be anathema.”

Thomas Aquinas and the doctrine of the Catholic Church do not teach that the whole truth of God can be grasped from creation, apart from revelation. There is no a priori knowledge of what God is. It is only the truth of God’s existence and providence that can be found by reason alone. All particular dogmas, like the one about the Trinity or the Incarnation, require revelation. What is more, Thomas Aquinas’ assertion from the very beginning of his Summa Theologiae which is regarded as an expression of his positive attitude towards capabilities of reason, is in fact a proof for the indispensability of revelation:

It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason. (...) because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.

3.2. Karl Barth: Anti-liberalism and Anti-idealism

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33 Church Dogmatics, II/1, 79.
36 ST, I, Q. 1, a. 1, resp.; Nielsen, Analogy and the Knowledge of God, 78.
As I mentioned in point 2, Karl Barth grew up and was educated in liberal 19th century Protestant tradition. I mentioned that he left it for theological reasons (he did not think it emphasized properly God’s transcendence). However, it was not the only reason. For this theological position also had its practical repercussions. Barth found some theologians who represented liberal Protestantism, like Adolf von Harnack, supporting German militarism at the beginning of the 20th century and during the World War I. Opposing Nazi ideology, Barth described it as an outcome of natural theology. In his famous Commentary to the Epistle to the Romans (1922) he criticized every attempt to identify God with any cultural or social ideology. A few years later he said:

The protest against the heresy of the Deutschen Christen cannot begin with the Aryan paragraphs, with the rejection of the Old Testament, with the Arianism of the ‘German Christian’ Christology, with the naturalism and Pelagianism of the ‘German Christian’ doctrines of justification and sanctification, with the deification of the State in ‘German Christian’ ethics. It must fundamentally turn itself against the fact (as the source of all the particular errors) that the ‘German Christians’ declare the German nationhood [Volkstum], its history and its political presence to be a second source of revelation alongside Holy Scripture as the unique source of revelation and thereby show themselves to be believers in ‘another god’.

Barth’s radical opposition against the so called “natural theology” and Aquinas’ concepts of analogy and relation of faith and reason must have been influenced by the facts mentioned above. As a theologian, he saw only one solution: returning to the orthodox Protestantism, the mystery of God, and the rule of sola fide. As he says in Church Dogmatics, referring to Martin Luther:

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37 The complexity of Barth’s intellectual background is well characterized by Nielsen who, referring to Pöhlmann, thus describes the Swedish theologian: “A doctrine of the exclusiveness of grace is taken from Anselm and Luther. Barth’s actualism draws on German idealistic philosophy as well as Luther’s nominalism. A Reformation dualism from Calvin and a distance pathos from Kierkegaard are present along with Christomonism, which has its roots in the pietism of both Zinzendorf and W. Herrmann. Barth’s position is distinguished by its actualism. He proposes a Christocentrism which is antithetical to ‘ontocentrism’” (Nielsen, Analogy and the Knowledge of God, 71).

To know God directly means righteousness by works, and righteousness by works means the fall of Lucifer and despair. We, on the contrary, must cleave to the true and actual Christ as He lies in the crib and in the Virgin’s lap.\(^{39}\)

In another passage he says:

“(...) theology today (...) must say farewell to each and every natural theology, and dare to hang, in that constriction, in that isolation, solely on the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.”\(^{40}\)

He came back to this assertion in *Church Dogmatics*:

For it is by the grace of God and only by the grace of God that it comes about that God is knowable to us.”\(^{41}\)

Although it seems that for Karl Barth there was no natural and direct relation between infinite and finite, faith and reason, theology and philosophy, he admits the indispensability of the latter when he says: “We all wear some kind of glasses. If we did not we would not be able to see.”\(^{42}\) He knew that he could not escape from the impact of philosophy of his time, that is the German idealism. And he accepted its method eventually.

Together with Rudolf Bultmann and other theologians he created “dialectical theology”. He found dialectics helpful in his efforts to rediscover the importance of God’s transcendence, and revert Protestantism to the rule of *sola fide*. But at the same time, for some reasons, he would radically oppose all theologians relying too much on Schleiermacher or Hegel. We should remember that one of the basic paradigms of idealism is that material world is somehow secondary. Only “idea” is real. In this philosophy, the existence of the known object depends on the one who knows (the subject). Barth would emphasize that Christian theology cannot accept the idea of subject dominating the object. He accused Thomas Aquinas and “natural theology” of making this mistake. H. Chavannes thus indicates it in his book:

\(^{39}\) *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 169.


\(^{41}\) *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 69.

Karl Barth moves in a post-Kantian intellectual universe. It is very difficult for him to take to pre-critical thought. He has aligned Saint Thomas’ intellectual position with that of modern idealists and attributed to the latter’s analogical being characteristics which would be more in keeping with being-in-itself of modern philosophy.43

Whether all of Barth’s accusations were right and true might be verified to a certain extent in an attempt to answer the question of keeping balance between God’s transcendence and immanence in Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth’s concepts of analogy. But before I will turn to this issue, I should point out one more fact of a great importance for the whole debate.

3.3. Schools of Thomism

When we think and discuss Barth’s polemic with Thomism, we cannot forget that he did not refer to the medieval Doctor’s theology in its pure and original version. Because of the immense complexity of Aquinas’ teaching on analogy, which I have already presented in point 1.1., many followers of his position tried to classify and organize it. The most influential over the centuries was the school of a medieval theologian Thomas de Vio, better known as Cardinal Cajetan. Referring to the first and preliminary distinction of analogy in Commentary to the Sentences of Peter Lombard, Lib. I, Dist. 19, Q. 5, he identifies three modes of analogy: inequality (Aquinas’ analogy according to being, not to intention), attribution (Aquinas’ analogy according to intention, not to being), and proportionality (Aquinas’ analogy according to intention and being).

Although Cajetan’s interpretation helps to summarize and simplify Aquinas’ understanding of analogy, it is both problematic and debatable. First of all, Cajetan reduces all of Aquinas’ classifications of analogy to the one presented in the Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. The question arises naturally as to whether such a step is justified. Moreover, inequality is not really an analogy for Cajetan. Because it is a predication according to being, it is based on a common genus, and is closer to univocity. There is nobody – says Cajetan – who would call the genus an analogous term, except abusively.

43 Chavannes, The Analogy Between God and the World, p.155. See also ibid., 147-9, 177-8.
Thus he reduces his three-fold division to the two-fold definition of analogy of attribution and proper proportionality, of which only the last one he regards as proper for theological endeavor. It is simply because attribution is always extrinsic for Cajetan, while analogical names of God must be intrinsic. However, as we have seen in point 1.1 Thomas makes room for analogy of attribution (relation) that is intrinsic and accepts it in the predication of God. That makes Cajetan’s position even more questionable.44

Cajetan was criticized by the Spanish Counter Reformation Jesuit Suarez, who argued that Aquinas did not teach analogy of proportionality between God and creatures at all. According to Suarez, Thomas approved only intrinsic attribution in reference to God and the world. Today we know that he was wrong in his assertion concerning both types of analogy, as Aquinas seems to have accepted the former for a limited period, to leave it later in favor of the latter. However, he never openly said that only one of them is right and acceptable in opposition to the other.45

When proposing his own classification of modes of analogy, Karl Barth refers to Cajetan’s well-established and generally accepted division. But it should be noticed that his general knowledge of Thomistic teaching on analogy is based on its contemporary version presented by a prominent theologian Erich Przywara. I will not analyze Przywara’s interpretation of analogy of being for it is a material for another essay. May it be enough to mention that although his understanding of Aquinas is outstanding, he was accused of overrating the role of analogy and treating it not only as a linguistic tool applied in theology but also as a general theological principle. This is problematic as it is not the position presented by Aquinas.46

44 See McInerny, Aquinas and Analogy, chapter 1 ‘Where Cajetan went wrong,’ 3-29; Montagnes, The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being, chapter 3 part II ‘The Position of Cajetan,’ 120-35; Klubertanz, St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy, 7-12; Lytkens, The Analogy Between God and the World, chapter III point 2 ‘The Cajetanian Type of Thomistic Interpretation,’ 205-25; Mondin, The Principle of Analogy, 35-51; Nielsen, Analogy and the Knowledge of God, 52-54.
45 See ibid. (Mondin, Nielsen, Klubertanz).
As one can see, the context of the polemic between Barth and Thomistic schools is very complicated. I should now try to simplify this reflection and – after studying the main doctrinal and methodological differences between Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth – come back to the very beginning, and note that after all, both theologians had the same aim in their theological endeavor: to express properly God’s transcendence and immanence. Did they succeed in their efforts?

3.4. Christian God: Near and Remote

It is by all means true that the primary concern of Barth’s theological reflection was to emphasize God’s transcendence and the role of *apophasis* in theology. It can be certainly seen in his teaching on theological knowledge and language. Everything we know about God is given in revelation. He is always first and our human nature is not able to understand by itself anything of God. Even if we use language to express the truth about him, we should not forget that:

Our words are not our property, but His. And disposing of them as His property, He places them at our disposal – at the disposal of our grateful obedience – when He allows and commands us to make use of them in relationship.⁴⁷

God is always first to invite us to start this relationship. Barth’s attitude certainly gives right to God’s transcendence. But the question should be asked whether it does the same in case of his immanence? It seems that Barth might have been at the edge of a blind faith expressed by the famous phrase ascribed to Tertullian: *credo quia absurdum*. Now, knowing the context of his theology, his struggle with liberal Protestantism and German idealism, we would not go that far in our judgment over his theology. But still, we should acknowledge that he certainly overemphasized God’s transcendence and can be accused of fideism.

⁴⁷ *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 229.
Coming back to Thomism and Barth’s accusations of Aquinas allegedly supporting naturalism and disregarding the priority of faith, the question arises: Does Thomas really neglect God’s otherness when he teaches that man can know God from the things that have been made by him by the natural light of human reason? I have already shown in 3.1. that Aquinas does not underrate the role of revelation. Moreover, there are many places in his works where Thomas takes apophatic stance. The most famous one I have already put as motto of this essay:

Man reaches the highest point of his knowledge about God when he knows that he knows Him not, inasmuch as he knows that which is God transcends whatever he conceives of Him.48

Thomas would also stress that God is always the first, even if we might have an impression that divine perfections are predicated at first of creatures. Teaching on analogy in *Summa Contra Gentiles* he explains:

(... because we come to a knowledge of God from other things, the reality in the names said of God and other things belongs by priority in God according to His mode of being, but the meaning of the name belongs to God by posteriority. And so He is said to be named from His effects.49

Knowing all this one can be sure that when proposing *analogia entis* Aquinas is as much concerned about God’s transcendence as Barth when he acknowledges only *analogia fidei*. Moreover, his theology seems to give right also to God’s immanence, and it is the analogy of being that might be given as an example. If by creation’s participation in God’s being we can discover God’s existence and providence, then we can say that truly “Grace does not destroy nature but completes it.”50 But does it bring a true reconciliation between Aquinas and Barth?

4. Addressing Aquinas-Barth Controversy

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48 *De Potentia*, Q. 7, a. 5, ad 14.
49 *SCG*, I, chapter 34.
50 *ST*, I, Q. 1, a. 8, ad 2. 
Trying to specify Barth’s general attitude toward Catholic theology one cannot begin with any other citation from his works but the one found in the preface to the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*. There he says what follows:

I can see no third alternative between that exploitation of the *analogia entis* which is legitimate only on the basis of Roman Catholicism, between the greatness and misery of a so-called natural knowledge of God in the sense of *Vaticanum*, and a Protestant theology which draws from its own source, which stands on its own feet, and which is finally liberated from this secular misery. Hence I have had no option but to say No at this point. I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial.⁵¹

One may think that it was the fact of being accused of ‘crypto-Catholicism’ that led Barth to expressing his opinion on the *analogia entis*, and that it is precisely to the Catholic Church that this opinion was directed. Many commentators indeed read Barth’s position in this way and thus understand his shift from the analogy based on creation to the one based on revelation. However, after a closer examination of the background conditions of his theology it seems more possible, according to some scholars, that Barth might have addressed his categorical “Nein!” to the liberal Protestantism in which he himself grew up, rather than to Catholicism. Mondin shares this opinion and thus says about Barth:

(... ) his criticism has weight only against those deistic philosophers of the eighteen century and those liberal theologians of the nineteenth century who, in attempting to establish the harmony of reason and faith, interpreted the divine-human relation in such a way as to destroy the supernatural, external revelation and dogmas implying mysteries, and to make reason the touchstone of religious validity.⁵²

Those who support Mondin’s position acknowledge that Barth uses in his critique comparisons and references to Catholicism, addressing especially its trust in the power of human reason and natural knowledge of God. But according to them it was precisely the

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⁵² B. Mondin, 169.
German liberal Christian tradition which Barth radically opposed as it defended the assertion that there existed a “deep religious significance in the intoxication of Nordic blood and their political Führer.” Moreover, we should probably add to this argumentation the fact which I elaborated above, namely that Catholic theology does not neglect the role of revelation and faith. The statement of the First Vatican Council to which I referred in point 3.1. is almost an exact citation from Aquinas, who in the beginning of *Summa Theologiae* says:

> Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.\(^54\)

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas adds that there are truths of God which are “beyond all the competence of human reason.”\(^55\) They are given only through faith and revelation.

But does it mean that the Aquinas-Barth controversy has been mitigated, and their common emphasis on God’s transcendence and the importance of apophatic theology brings reconciliation of their opposite stances regarding analogy? Such a statement would be too optimistic. An interesting discussion between Archie J. Spencer and Thomas J. White in *Nova et Vetera*\(^56\) shows the depth and difficulty of the controversy. For it was not only God’s transcendence and theological apophasis that Barth was preoccupied with. The five criteria of the proper use of causality in speaking analogously about God positing himself in creation and being related to it, that Barth formulates in *Church Dogmatics*, reveal his radical criticism of the classical Thomistic ontology and the use of any other philosophical concepts in theology.\(^57\) White notices that Aquinas, who bases his analogical predication of God on the philosophical notion of causality, is *inter alia* charged with:

- reification of God,

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\(^{53}\) *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, xiv.

\(^{54}\) *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 1, a. 1, resp.

\(^{55}\) *SCG*, I, chapter 3.

\(^{56}\) See footnote number 4.

\(^{57}\) *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, 94-107.
- placing God and creatures within a common system of quantification,
- thinking of God and creatures as belonging to one genus of ‘causality’ and ‘being’,
- portraying God as being necessarily related to creatures,
- promoting a merely philosophical way of thinking about God, derived from human projections more than from divine revelation.\(^{58}\)

White shows the extent to which Barth misunderstood and misread Aquinas and proves that Barth’s own concept of *analogia relationis* (I-Thou relationship in God, between God and man, woman and man) brings him even closer to the risk of diminishing God’s transcendence and understanding him in a common genus with creation.\(^{59}\) The discussion between Spencer and White shows the distance and some major obstacles on the way of possible reconciliation between Aquinas and Barth. I think that Mondin’s and Chavannes’ attempts to bring both theologians closer and to minimalize an actual disparity between them cannot be justified. The difference in Aquinas’ and Barth’s attitude toward philosophy and natural theology will always remain a decisive factor and the main point of disagreement between the two theologians and their followers.

On the other hand, however, Bruce McCormack seems to claim that despite Barth’s criticism of Aquinas and the differences between the two theologians, there is still a chance for an ecumenical dialogue. In the last part of his essay “Karl Barth’s Version of an ‘Analogy of Being’” McCormack argues that Barth has his own version of *analogia entis*. It does not emerge – as Von Balthasar once thought – from the compatibility between God and creature, that is from an insight established by Barth on the foundation of the miracle of the Incarnation. Nor does it consist in the I-Thou relation described in *analogia relationis*. Rather it is based on the unity between the obedience of the man Jesus in time and his obedience in eternity, which is actually the way of his being as Christ. The analogy between these two expressions of obedience is for McCormack an analogy of being. Moreover, according to him, we can also participate in this analogy of being, as long as our own acts of obedience conform to the obedience of the man Jesus. In conclusion, McCormack says

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., 252-60.
that “Barth’s version of an ‘analogy of being’ is an ecumenical achievement of the highest order.”

Conclusion

Analogy is one of the most important linguistic tools in theology. Along with metaphor, symbol, and model it provides a primary set of resources essential for any *kataphatic* and *apophatic* talk about God. The analysis of the problem of analogy in Aquinas and Barth presented in this essay shows that the study of the linguistic aspects of theological assertions inevitably brings us to a discussion concerning some crucial ontological questions. As we have seen, once these issues are introduced into the debate, the distance between the proponents of Aquinas and Barth grows. It is likely possible that the awareness of the fundamental differences in the Thomistic and Barthian attitudes towards philosophy and its place and role in theology will never allow for a reconciliation between these two traditions, which share the common effort of defending God’s transcendence and the importance of *apophasis* in theology.

Nevertheless, I believe that an attempt at a correct understanding of the sources and history of the Aquinas-Barth controversy is never futile. It introduces those interested in the debate into a deeper understanding of these two important ways of conducting a theological research, and helps them to specify their own understanding of the language and the method of their theology. It is my humble hope that this essay will contribute to this endeavor.

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60 Bruce L. McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Version of an ‘Analogy of Being’”, 108-17, 135-44.
61 This is the case of Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Edmund Schlink, Paul Tillich and Emil Brunner. A short analysis of their positions may be found in Nielsen, *Analogy and the Knowledge of God*, 86-93.
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