

Desire, Faith, and the Darkness of God



DESIRE,  
FAITH, *and the*  
DARKNESS  
OF GOD

Essays in Honor of Denys Turner

*Edited by*

ERIC BUGYIS *and*  
DAVID NEWHEISER

*University of Notre Dame Press*  
*Notre Dame, Indiana*

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Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
undpress.nd.edu

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Manufactured in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Desire, faith, and the darkness of God :  
essays in honor of Denys Turner /  
edited by Eric Bugyis and David Newheiser.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-268-02242-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-268-02242-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Christian theology. I. Turner, Denys, 1942–

II. Bugyis, Eric, 1980– editor.

BR118.D47 2015

230—dc23

2015031816

∞ *The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence  
and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines  
for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.*

*to*  
**DENYS**  
*the*  
*Teacher*



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## Acknowledgments

This volume took shape at a conference hosted at Yale University in March 2012 that was generously supported by the Yale Divinity School, the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago, the Yale Department of Religious Studies, the Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale, and the Yale Graduate School Dean's Fund. For providing practical support for the conference, the editors wish to thank Neil Arner, Fr. Robert Beloin, Anthony Domestico, T. J. Dumansky, Megan Ecklerle, Rebecca Menning, Evan Morse, and Hannah Roh. We are grateful for the support of our editors at the University of Notre Dame Press and above all to the contributors for their extraordinary work.



## Preface

To succeed in saying something about God is the most elementary task of the theologian, as the word “theologian” implies.

—Herbert McCabe, O.P., *God and Evil in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*

What is the theologian’s task? In his *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait*, Denys Turner suggests that Thomas’s ability to utterly disappear behind his texts, making the details of his own life and person irrelevant to the truth that he is attempting to communicate, can serve as an appropriate point of departure for reflecting on the theological calling. What Turner’s Thomas shows us is that it belongs to the peculiar vocation of the theologian to approximate, to the extent he or she is able, the kind of egoless communication that makes real communion possible. The theologian, then, is called on to perform a kind of linguistic martyrdom, whereby the greatest meaning is communicated through a self-silencing that makes it possible for others to speak. And, given the voluminous literature that the Angelic Doctor has inspired, it would seem that Thomas was such a martyr, writing more in death than he wrote in life, which, as Turner points out, was quite a lot.

The present volume, and the conference held in Turner’s honor at Yale University on March 22–24, 2012, whence it began to take shape, is a testament to his ability to articulate a theological space that is primarily concerned with creating the conditions that might

allow others to speak. To be sure, no one who has spent even a few minutes with Turner would describe him, as he describes Thomas, as laconic. And there is little to suggest that “the dumb ox,” as Thomas’s friends dubbed him, relished chance meetings with students and colleagues leading to lingering conversations and lively debates over lunch or while loitering on the quad of the University of Paris, as Turner still does on college lawns and in cafés across the United States and the United Kingdom. But, insofar as every caricature, which is what Turner freely calls his *Portrait*, is as much a product of the artist as it is of its subject, there are a few features that Turner as teacher and theologian does share with his Thomas.

The first of these is a desire to avoid the kind of hyperreflexive energy that tends to animate much academic discourse, especially in recent years. This manifests itself in the constant need to position oneself both within one’s own work and vis-à-vis the work of other academics with the intention of ensuring one’s proprietary claim to one’s contributions to the field while shielding them from criticism under the cover of idiosyncrasy. Both in the classroom and in print, Turner is not interested in deploying such strategies of ownership. Unlike Augustine or Paul, whom he irreverently and playfully contrasts with Thomas, Turner would be somewhat embarrassed to offer his own life as proof of the existential relevance of the questions that most concern him. Much more interesting, rather, are the questions of his students and of the community of his fellow seekers, also known as the Church. This is why his books are often populated with insights and suggestions gleaned from direct conversations with students and colleagues. It is also probably why he enjoys trying out his ideas especially with master’s degree candidates at Yale Divinity School, many of whom are planning to enter professional ministry and, like Thomas, are more concerned with whether some bit of theology “will preach” than whether it “will publish.”

This brings us to a second trait that Turner shares with his Thomas, which perhaps belongs more properly to the theologian than it does to other intellectuals. Every good theologian knows that at some point his or her finite utterances will be inadequate to the

infinite mystery of God, which is their proper object. But, in contrast to the preacher, who fervently hopes that he or she will not be so afflicted until the *end* of his or her remarks, some academic theologians *begin* speaking as if exploding like magicians from a flamboyant cloud of enigmatic apophasis. Of course, this can be intriguing and even entertaining on the page or from the lectern, but in everyday life it often functions to refuse conversation rather than to invite it. Turner writes in *A Portrait* that Thomas's fellow Dominican, Meister Eckhart, was just such a "fizzing show-off, just a bit too self-indulgently enjoying his own talent for paradox to be an entirely convincing preacher" (4). As a student of analytic philosophy, trained under R. M. Hare at Oxford, Turner understands that clarity is to the intellectual life as humility is to the moral life. This is not to say, as some analytically minded philosophers might, that one never trails off in silent *aporia* or prattles on in search of the right word. It does mean, however, that these forms of God-talk are neither to be offered for their own sake nor to be constructed to hide the insecurity of their author in the cloak of cleverness. They are simply to be endured as the necessary consequence of being confronted by an object that exceeds the capacities of our frail, human instrument.

This linguistic humility corresponds to the third and final quality that Turner shares with his Thomas. In joining the Dominican order, Thomas chose to give up a life of stability and self-sufficiency in the prestigious Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, for which his parents had prepared him since he was five, and threw in his lot with a relatively new group of wandering preachers, who lived by mooching off of the charity of others. It would most likely be saying too much to suggest that someone who has occupied academic chairs at Cambridge and Yale has experienced the same kind of material dependency. However, the conviction that our lives are not for ourselves alone and that the theologian serves at the pleasure of his or her audience is one that suffuses every line that Turner writes and every class that he teaches. He is acutely aware that the theological task is not necessary to modern society in the way that, say, industrial farming or investment banking might be. And because of this, theology

has no instrumental value. Rather, like love and friendship, it is about finding people to waste precious time with you and, in the process, learning that time is most precious when it is so wasted.

This was the spirit when we gathered to honor our teacher, fellow seeker, and friend Denys Turner in 2012. Unfortunately, such things are difficult to translate into a volume like this, but it is our hope that there remains in these pages a glimmer of the gratuitous spirit that produced it.

*Eric Bugyis*  
*Lent 2015*