

# **RB4009: Abrahamic Faiths**

**2019**

## **Assessment Cover Sheet for the Critical Review**

**Assessment Due Date: 6th December 2019**

**Please complete the following**

**I confirm that this assignment which I have submitted is all my own work and the source of any information or material I have used (including the internet) has been fully identified and properly acknowledged as required in the school guidelines I have received.**

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<b>Word Count</b>	1,094 words

# Critical Review

## Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason

Turner, D. (2004). Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason. In: Davies, O and Turner, D *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p11-34.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uclan-ebooks/reader.action?docID=202405>

*Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason* is the first chapter written by Denys Turner in the book titled *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. As the chapter title suggests, Turner explores modern-day attitudes towards the apophatic. This is conducted by pinpointing what exactly is being denied when it is said that there is no God and by formulating a new understanding of the theism-atheism dichotomy. Following my exegesis of the text, it is clear that Turner is exploring three core ideas.

Firstly, Turner claims that what to think about the existence or non-existence of God has become more problematic today than it has ever been. Turner states on page 12 that the “clarity about the affirmation [of God] permitted clear-minded denials”. Essentially, Turner is suggesting here that the lines have blurred between what it means to have belief in the existence of God and what it means to be an atheist. A shift in semantics is the likely cause for this ambiguity regarding irreligiousness. Positions such as agnosticism and the ever-vague “spiritual but not religious” designation have done little to clarify such obscurity.

As his second major postulation, Turner suggests that a person’s atheism is reflective of the theism that they were brought up to believe. This emphasises that atheism needn’t be considered a one-dimensional belief, but one with a multitude of levels that can be studied, explored, and expanded upon just as theism is. Whatever form of atheism that a person particularly associates themselves with, meaning what they particularly deny, is a mirror-image of the theism they abandoned. Essentially, Turner is suggesting that our atheism in adulthood is repugnant to the theism of our childhood.

Thirdly and climactically, Turner highlights an issue with the narrowness of atheism as a direct consequence of the unquestioning tradition and narrowness of Christian theism that most Western atheists are attempting to rebel against. However, it may be difficult to decipher which theological position is to blame for the narrowness of both, although in my opinion, we are not dealing with a chicken-and-egg scenario. It is clear that organised theism predates that of atheism with the latter being a reaction to the former; to deny God before the existence of God has been postulated isn’t exactly logical; essentially, we must begin with a positive after which the negative will then challenge. Hence, it is plausible that the dogmatic nature that theism has come to manifest is to blame for the doggedness of atheism that some individuals exhibit.

At the very least, I agree that atheism need be explored just as theism is, for to understand God better is to understand possibilities without God’s existence. I suspect that such a discipline as “atheology” would not only allow proponents of atheism to formulate more advanced alternatives to the theological worldview, but also to allow for a greater clarity on the issue of the blurred nature and semantics of irreligiosity. I believe that what Turner is alluding to in his work regarding atheism, is not only relevant in modern contexts of theology, but is an essential vehicle for a return to civility in discourses that currently pose theism against atheism. Specifically, I see no winnable battle for either worldview, but instead a symbiotic alliance between two opposites and their common goal for a greater understanding of existence.

Moving on, Turner suggests that an atheist may reject changes within, for example Christianity. This is used as a tactic to ensure theism within the religion remains static and unchanged, leaving

theism susceptible to being challenged more easily by atheists. Turner formulates a new perspective on the dichotomy between atheism and theism; one in which each are constantly pivoting around the other in an attempt to challenge one another's postulations with calculated responses. Turner concedes that theism is just as guilty of exhibiting this nature as atheism as he describes on page 15 some theisms as "parasitical upon forms of atheism", waiting to "formulate a doctrine of God" in direct reaction to a new atheistic postulation.

For the continued relevance of both, they are dependent upon the reinvention of one another for, like many dichotomies, the question is raised of whether one can survive without the other? An opponent often distinguishes themselves for the better through continued challenge and reaction to their opponent's postulations. If atheism or indeed apophatic theologians did not exist, it can be argued that the study of theism would be so static that the concepts and beliefs that have formed the expanse of theology would not have needed formulating.

Hence, we can affirmatively conclude that theism and atheism are undoubtedly symbiotic to each other's continued survival and advancement. Furthermore, I agree with Turner that our adulthood atheism is a reflection on our childhood theism, but in this regard, a discourse seems to have emerged, one in which each end of the bipolarity attacks the other; to exist reactionary to the other.

However, I think Turner's writings demonstrate not only that such a discourse is regressive, but that it is unproductive. Essentially, the goal of atheism and theism holds a commonality; to understand what isn't and what is respectively; both are dependent upon one another to achieve this arguably unachievable aim. Therefore, a new discourse should prevail, one in which advocates for either worldview understand their mutually beneficial relationship and that intending for the elimination of either is a decline in the discourse's civility rather than a reflection of the true aims of these theological positions.

Overall, Turner is successful in his demonstration of some key ideas, such as the dependence of the apophatic on the cataphatic as well as his postulation that adult manifestations of atheism are subject to the theism of our childhoods. These two powerful ideas set the tone for the entire chapter and are epitomes of current struggles felt in the relationship between theism and atheism. Also significant is Turner's inference of the semantics problem in modern-day atheism, largely due to the expansion of the terminology regarding irreligiosity. Turner highlights a much larger debate regarding the semantics of non-religiosity and the difficulties involving the distinction between newly popularised terms and how these interact with relatively traditional ones.

Finally, however, Turner himself states that at least two of the postulations he makes about atheists are from his own experience. While Turner is a distinguished academic in the field of theology, to determine two significant points he is making on the basis of his own personal experience and perception of events is not necessarily convincing.