

Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit¹

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Abstract: This article argues Aquinas’s doctrine of the beatific vision suffers from a twofold christological deficit: (1) Aquinas rarely alludes to an eternally continuing link (whether as cause or as means) between Christ’s beatific vision and ours; and (2) for Aquinas the beatific vision is not theophanic, that is to say, for Aquinas, Christ is not the object of the beatific vision; instead, he maintains the divine essence constitutes the object. Even if Aquinas were to have followed his “principle of the maximum” in the unfinished third part of the *Summa* and so had discussed Christ’s own beatific vision as the *cause* of the saints’ beatific vision, he would still have ended up with a christological deficit, inasmuch as Christ would still not be the *means* and the *object* of the saints’ beatific vision. For a more christologically robust way forward, I draw on John Owen and several other Puritan theologians, who treat the beatific vision as the climactic theophany.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, John Owen, Beatific vision, Theophany, Eschatology

Introduction: A Twofold Deficit

The question before us is whether or not Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of the beatific vision suffers from a christological deficit. I maintain that it does; Fr. Simon Gaine argues it does not.² Gaine describes Aquinas’s understanding of Christ’s role in the beatific vision by suggesting, “The saints’ beatific vision is causally dependent on his. From his fullness of glory there will be an overflow, such that in his humanity he is the

¹ I am grateful to Cory Hayes and Austin Stevenson for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² The current discussion between Fr. Simon Gaine and myself in some ways continues the earlier exchange between Suzanne McDonald and Simon Gaine on Aquinas and Owen on the beatific vision. See McDonald (2012, 141–58); Gaine (2016, 432–46).

instrumental efficient cause of the glory of the saints, the principal efficient cause being the divine glory and beatitude" (Gaine 2018, 124). Gaine argues that for Aquinas, "the saints must 'participate in some part of the fullness of Christ's glory,' meaning the fullness of his vision. In other words, the saints' varying degrees of vision all participate in Christ's pre-eminent vision. Thus it is by sharing in the fullness of his glory that the saints participate ultimately in the divine beatitude, their measured glory being ever dependent on that of Christ" (Gaine 2018, 124). On Gaine's reading of Aquinas, therefore, he does *not* suffer from a christological deficit, because of the eternally ongoing character of the causal link between Christ's own beatific vision and ours.

It is important to be clear on the question under discussion. The question is *not only* whether or not Aquinas teaches an ongoing causal link between Christ's glorified humanity and ours. That's only part of the issue—the part discussed in Gaine's article. The broader question is whether or not Thomas Aquinas's understanding of the beatific vision as a whole suffers from a christological deficit. Gaine seems to assume that if only we can ascertain an eternal dependence of the saints' beatific vision on that of Christ, it will become evident that there is no christological deficit. I don't think this is the case. Gaine responds to only one page of my book *Seeing God*; there I make clear, however, that I think the issue of a possible christological deficit in Aquinas's theology of the beatific vision is broader than just the question of the link between Christ's beatific vision and ours. After commenting that Aquinas does not articulate such a link—though acknowledging that it may be consonant with his overall position—I write: "But let's suppose that Aquinas *did* actually believe that it is by participating in Christ's beatific vision that the saints will have theirs too. While such a view would indeed be quite christological, it is still not quite the same as that of Gregory Palamas. For Palamas, it is by seeing Christ's humanity, body and soul, in a suprasensible and supraintellectual manner, that we also see his divinity" (Boersma 2018, 160).

After looking at the various issues involved once again, I feel compelled slightly to revise my understanding of Thomas's views. I remain convinced, however, that Aquinas's understanding of the beatific vision does have a christological deficit, and that it comes to the fore in two ways: (1) Aquinas rarely alludes to an eternally continuing link (whether as cause or as means) between Christ's beatific vision and ours; and (2) for Aquinas the beatific vision is not theophanic, that is to say, he does not regard Christ as the object of the beatific vision; instead, he maintains it is the divine essence that constitutes the object. My book *Seeing God* discusses the first objection as a subordinate matter, in only one or two paragraphs; while throughout the book I deal with the second issue, arguing for my understanding of the beatific vision as a vision of Christ, and in a number of places I express my reservations about the Thomist tradition in this regard. My reply to Gaine, therefore, is in part an attempt to broaden the discussion to *both* factors that make up Aquinas's christological deficit.

Deficit 1: The Beatific Vision of Christ and of the Saints in Heaven

I would like to begin with the first point, Gagne's depiction of Saint Thomas's doctrine of the beatific vision as participation in the fullness of Christ's beatific vision. It may be helpful if I briefly recapitulate Gagne's argument. I take it to run as follows:

Whether Thomas Aquinas maintains that the beatific vision of the saints is causally dependent on the glorified humanity of Christ?

- *Objection 1.* For Aquinas, the saints' beatific vision is *not* causally dependent on that of Christ because he never says it is.
- *Objection 2.* Only once, in his early *Commentary on the Sentences*, does Thomas Aquinas suggest that, until judgment day, Christ mediates some knowledge to the saints by infusing a created species (*Sent. IV, d. 49, q. 2, a. 5*). Aquinas never repeats this claim, and the claim itself does not even concern the beatific vision. Hence, there is no reason to think Aquinas believed that in the eschaton Christ's humanity mediates the beatific vision.

Sed Contra

- Aquinas says: "Men are brought to this end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ And hence it was necessary that the beatific knowledge, which consists in the vision of God, should belong to Christ pre-eminently, since the cause ought always to be more efficacious than the effect" (*ST III, q. 9, a. 2*). This passage refers not only to our earthly pilgrimage but also to our vision in heaven.
- Aquinas says: "The Saints who will be in heaven will not need any further expiation by the priesthood of Christ, but having expiated, they will need consummation through Christ Himself, on Whom their glory depends ..." (*ST III, q. 22, a. 5*). Since the context of the article is in defence of the *eternal* priesthood of Christ and since Aquinas adds that our glory depends on Christ's (*Rev. 21:23*), Aquinas appears to argue here that our light of glory will eternally depend on Christ's light of glory.

Respondeo

According to Aquinas's "principle of the maximum," members of the genus derive their varying degrees of perfection derivatively from the first member of the genus. This implies that from the Head's (Christ's) fullness of grace, there is an overflow to the members (the saints).

Reply Obj. 1

- The reason Aquinas does not mention Christ's heavenly mediation of his beatific vision to the saints is that the contents of the various articles and questions (*ST I, q. 12; I-II, q. 3; and III, qq. 9–12*) did not require this.

- According to *ST*, I, q. 2, proem, Aquinas planned to discuss Christ's eternal mediation of the beatific vision in the later eschatological section of *ST* III on Christology, which he was unable to finish.

Reply Obj. 2

- The reason Aquinas fails to repeat in *ST* I, q. 12, a. 8 his early claim that until judgment day Christ mediates some additional knowledge to the saints is that no relevant question was raised that would have required it.
- In *ST* I, q. 106, a. 4 and in *ST* II-II, q. 52, a. 3 Aquinas continues to allow for the view that the saints will continue to acquire new knowledge until the day of judgment. The reason he does not mention Christ here is that he had planned to do so later in *ST* III.

It may simplify matters if I deal with Objection 2 first. It seems to me a distraction that unnecessarily complicates the discussion. My book does not raise this objection, and it appears that the main reason for Gaine to bring up *Sent.* IV, d. 49, q. 2, a. 5 is that it speaks of Christ communicating new knowledge (not beatific knowledge) to the heavenly saints prior to judgment day. From all I can see, since Aquinas does not even speak here about the beatific vision, we don't need to ask the follow-up question of why he never repeats his early claim. The discussion about Objection 2 is a red herring, not relevant to the question at hand.

Let me turn to the main *responsio* next. Here Gaine outlines Aquinas's "principle of the maximum" by drawing on a recent dissertation by John Emery. This discussion provides helpful insight into Aquinas's broader mode of argumentation, and it helps us understand, for example, why it is that he maintains that Christ had the beatific vision from the time of his conception. I agree with the logic of Gaine's argument, which is that consistency would require Aquinas to apply the principle of the maximum also to the relationship between Christ's beatific vision and ours in heaven. It may be true that he *should* do so—which is why I have stated that "such a view may be consonant with Aquinas's overall position" (Boersma 2018, 160). But the question is not what Aquinas should have held (according to his own principles) but what he actually held. Gaine and I do not differ on what Aquinas *should* have said by his logic, but on what he *did* or *did not* say (and think).

The real issue, then, is this: does Aquinas maintain that in heaven the saints participate in Christ's beatific vision? Aquinas is remarkably taciturn on the question. Gaine is aware of this. In response to Objection 1, he writes, "We still need to ask why Aquinas did not actually speak of this heavenly mediation" (Gaine 2018, 125). Gaine here admits that "Aquinas did not actually speak of this heavenly mediation."³ In light

³ As I will make clear below, I have become convinced that in two places Aquinas *does* seem to allude to or mention Christ's heavenly mediation of the saints' beatific vision.

of this admission, what, if any, is the remaining disagreement? I suspect that (1) despite our agreement that Aquinas did not actually speak (or, at best, rarely speaks) of Christ's heavenly mediation of the beatific vision and (2) despite our agreement that eternal heavenly mediation would fit with Aquinas's overall thought, Gaine still feels I misrepresent Aquinas. After all, I commented that the (virtual) absence of this viewpoint regarding Christ's heavenly mediation from Aquinas's actual writings suggests he "likely" did not hold to it (Boersma 2018, 160). Whether Aquinas did or did not hold this position matters little in my opinion; what matters is that his writings are—so Gaine appears to agree—almost entirely nonchristological on this point. So, while the reader of Gaine's critique may get the impression of a major disagreement on how to read Aquinas, we are actually agreed on the key part: Aquinas (almost entirely) fails to mention that Christ mediates the beatific vision to the saints in eternity. Whatever the reasons for this—and I think on this we cannot do much more than speculate—the key point is that Aquinas's doctrine of the beatific vision as we have it is marked by a christological deficit.

Now, I do think the deficit is not absolute. Gaine's *sed contra* adduces two passages that he believes suggest Aquinas was of the opinion that in eternity Christ's beatific vision will continue to mediate ours: *ST III*, q. 9, a. 2 and *ST III*, q. 22, a. 5.⁴ The first does not deal with the issue at hand. Aquinas simply writes, "Men are brought to this end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ." Gaine comments, "I take this text to indicate Christ's beatific vision as having responsibility for *both* our being on pilgrimage *and* then our being at our destination" (Gaine 2018, 120; emphasis added). It is of course true that for Aquinas, Christ's beatific vision leads the saints to theirs. Aquinas maintains that we will reach our destination of the beatific vision by participating, during our life here on earth, in Christ's beatific vision. But the issue under discussion concerns the future, eternal role of Christ's humanity for the saints in heaven, not his current role for us here on earth. It is the "both ... and" in Gaine's comment that is overly suggestive. Gaine proposes that Aquinas's comment refers not only to our pilgrimage but also to our destination. Such a suggestion may be consonant with Aquinas's overall position, but Gaine gives no argument for his claim, and the point is: Aquinas does not *mention* our destination. The "principle of the maximum" may well make Gaine sympathetic to the suggestion that this article should *imply* a particular position about Christ's mediation in

⁴ In his response to Suzanne McDonald on this same topic, Gaine quotes a third passage in support of this position, namely, *ST III*, q. 1, a. 2 (2016, 439, n. 38). Here Aquinas argues that the Incarnation was the most fitting means of the restoration of humanity. One of his arguments in support of this position is "with regard to the full participation of the Divinity, which is the true bliss of man and end of human life; and this is bestowed upon us by Christ's humanity..." This quotation does not deal with the question at hand: Aquinas merely says that Christ's humanity bestows eternal happiness on us. He simply does not address the point of whether or not Christ's humanity is necessary (and if so, why) also in the hereafter.

heaven. But just because one viewpoint is *consonant* with another, that doesn't mean that by stating the one, the other is "indicated" as well.

The second passage (*ST III*, q. 22, a. 5) has given me pause for thought and is one reason why I have slightly revised my view. I agree with Gaine that Aquinas was very likely thinking here of Christ eternally mediating the beatific vision to the saints. Aquinas argues in this article that Christ's priesthood endures forever, and in that context he states that although the saints have no further need for expiation, they do need "consummation through Christ Himself, on Whom their glory depends." To be sure, for the most part, Aquinas ties Christ's eternal priesthood in this article to his *past* actions rather than his *ongoing* actions.⁵ Still, I do agree with Gaine that Aquinas's reference to Rev. 21:23 makes it likely that he also had in mind that Christ is an eternal priest in part because of his ongoing heavenly mediation of the beatific vision. At the same time, Aquinas's articulation is vague and indirect. One has to tease out what he meant with his reference to Rev. 21:23 by analyzing its use elsewhere (in *ST I*, q. 12, a. 5). It seems remarkable that when he specifically mentions the eschaton, Aquinas still does not explicitly state that Christ's beatific vision eternally causes that of the saints.

Perhaps the most explicit comment Aquinas makes about an eternal mediation of Christ's beatific vision of the saints occurs in *De divinis nominibus*, in a passage that has not yet been part of the discussion so far. After quoting 1 Thessalonians 4:18—"We will always be with the Lord"—Aquinas writes here the following:

We, I say, filled with a visible apparition, i.e., by a sensible and corporeal one, of Godself as far as the humanity of Christ, and this in the most chaste contemplations since we will not be affected by the body of Christ carnally, but spiritually and divinely, according to the Apostle in II Cor. 5 "and if we knew Christ according to the flesh, but now we know him thus no longer": by Christ himself, I say, pouring out around us through his own body brightness by most manifest splendors just as he had done around the disciples in that most divine transformation, i.e., transfiguration, when, as it is recorded in Matt. 17 "his face shone as the sun", and not only will we be filled with his sensible apparition,

⁵ When Aquinas explains *why* Christ's priesthood is eternal, instead of talking about Christ *acting* eternally as priest (e.g., mediating the beatific vision), he mentions an eternal *effect* of Christ's *past* work: the purpose of his sacrifice was not a temporal but an eternal good (Heb. 9:11), and Aquinas then says this is the reason Christ's priesthood "is said to be eternal." Matthew Levering, in his commentary on this article, writes that Christ's sacrifice "endures in the 'end' or goal. Given Aquinas's understanding of causality, the goal of the action inheres in the action itself; likewise, when the goal is achieved, the action that brought about the goal is not lost, but instead shares in its completion or consummation. The consummation of Christ's priestly action is eternal life" (Levering 2010, 98). Levering's interpretation links the eternity of Christ's priestly action to its eternal goal. The action of Christ that Aquinas has in mind, according to Levering, is his *past* act of offering himself up. It is the virtue or benefit of the passion that continues forever, and so—speaking somewhat improperly perhaps—we may also say that Christ's priesthood endures forever.

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but also *we will be intelligible participants by the gift of the light of Christ himself* which he will pour out in us according to the virtue of his own divinity. (*Div. Nom.*, cap. 1, lect. 2)⁶

Aquinas here mentions a twofold vision of Christ in the hereafter: a sensible vision (analogous to the disciples' vision of Christ in the transfiguration) *and* an intelligible vision. Of the latter he explicitly states that in the eschaton we will have it "by the gift of the light of Christ himself." Thus, it is by participating in Christ's light of glory that the saints will have theirs. Especially this quotation from *De divinis nominibus* makes me revise my judgment that Aquinas doesn't actually spell out the notion that in heaven we will participate in Christ's beatific vision and that it is unlikely he held to it.⁷

So, Aquinas maintains in two places that Christ's light of glory is eternally the cause of ours (*ST* III, q. 22, a. 5; *Div. Nom.*, cap. 1, lect. 2), and only in the second of the two does he articulate this explicitly. Both the paucity of such references and the exegetical work that is needed to arrive at Aquinas's meaning make clear that in practice, Aquinas does precious little to link Christ's eternal beatific vision with ours. Though we can indeed show that Aquinas held to such a link, he rarely refers to it. As such, it remains fair to suggest that on this score his theology suffers from a christological deficit.

Gaine's argument hinges in good part on his suggestion that Aquinas would have given the christological goods in a yet to be written section of *Pars* III. The only evidence for this is *ST* I, q. 2, proem. Gaine doesn't quote it, but it is clear he has in mind the following quotation: "In our endeavor to expound this science, we shall treat: (1) Of God; (2) Of the rational creature's advance towards God; (3) Of Christ, Who as man, is our way to God." This quotation has to do a lot of heavy lifting here.⁸ Aquinas simply mentions that Christ is "our way to God," and whatever he may have planned to write by way of a doctrine of the last things, this passage gives no evidence that in the unfinished segment of *Pars* III he would have written what he mostly failed to write elsewhere. It is possible, and it would be consonant with his overall position. But there is no necessary logic requiring it in the passage Gaine mentions.

The suggestive references to the unfinished character of *Pars* III serve for Gaine as the explanation for the marked christological deficit of the actual *Summa Theologiae* (and other writings) with regard to the beatific vision. I would suggest, however, that his appeal does not work. Gaine maintains it is unreasonable to expect the three sections of the *Summa* on the beatific vision (*ST* I, q. 12; I-II, q. 3; and III, qq. 9–12) to be christological: "Our expectations of what points Aquinas is going to make in any question or article should be determined by what he is asking in any particular question or article within his wider scheme, rather than according to our own assumptions about

⁶ Cited in Marsh (1994, 287). Cf. Hayes (2015, 195).

⁷ Again, however, note that also Gaine asks in his article "why Aquinas did not actually speak of this heavenly mediation" (2018, 9).

⁸ Gaine presents the same argument in (2016, 434–35).

what he ought to be talking about” (Gaine 2018, 125). Gaine argues that when Aquinas discusses the possibility of seeing the divine essence (*ST I*, q. 12) or the question of what constitutes the content of our happiness (*ST I-II*, q. 3), we should not expect him to talk about Christ’s mediation of happiness in heaven: “What Aquinas does tell us depends on what he is asking at that particular point, not on our own assumptions about what he should be doing” (Gaine 2018, 125). Now, it is certainly true that what Aquinas tells us depends on the question he asks. But that does not mean that we should not have any assumptions of our own with regard to the questions he *should* ask.

For example, if the eternal role of Christ in the beatific vision is barely mentioned in the three main sections on the topic in the *Summa*, then is there no reason at all to second-guess Aquinas’s setup and the questions he asks? Aquinas’s discussion of the vision of the divine essence in *ST I*, q. 12 raises a historically much-controverted issue, and it would not have been out place for Aquinas to explain that the saints will see the divine essence precisely because Christ himself eternally sees the divine essence. But, as per his usual approach, Aquinas doesn’t go there. Similarly, it would not be unreasonable to expect at least some discussion of Christ’s role in mediating the beatific vision when Aquinas discusses the nature of happiness. If our happiness is a participation in Christ’s happiness, would that not be one of the first things to mention in discussing the nature of happiness? Furthermore, it is not as though Saint Thomas strictly reserves eschatology for the never-finished section of *Pars III*. The entire discussion of what constitutes happiness (*I-II*, qq. 1–4) is eschatological. In fact, the first 49 questions of *ST I-II* form together a treatise entitled “Of man’s Last End.” One cannot—or at least should not—discuss this topic without consideration of how Christ relates to the saints in their final state of happiness. Aquinas would have had every reason to turn his attention to Christ’s eternal role in his prolific writings on the beatific vision.

Deficit 2: The Object of the Beatific Vision—Divine Essence or Christ

So far, I have argued that Aquinas almost entirely fails to link the saints’ beatific vision in heaven to Christ’s glorified humanity, and in that sense his writings suffer from a christological deficit. However, my concerns about a christological deficit are caused only in small part by the issues that Gaine raises in his critique and that I have just discussed. My problems with Aquinas’s views on the beatific vision run deeper. They have to do with the fact that he does not treat Christ as the object of the beatific vision, in the sense that we will see God eternally as manifested in and through Christ. The most worrying part of Aquinas’s christological deficit is his focus on the divine essence as opposed to Jesus Christ as the object of our eternal worship and vision.

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To explain what I mean, I will draw mainly on John Owen (though I will also briefly touch on Isaac Ambrose and on Jonathan Edwards).⁹ Instead of turning to seventeenth-century Puritan authors such as Owen, I could have looked to others in the tradition. I turn to John Owen, however, because Gaine mentions him (as well as Edwards) in his reaction to my book and also because Owen was key to the earlier discussion between McDonald and Gaine. But it is important to keep in mind that much of what I write with regard to Owen, we could, *mutatis mutandis*, also say about many others in the tradition. Thomas Aquinas's viewpoint—that one day we will see the divine essence—is out of sync with much of the earlier, especially Eastern tradition and continues to be a point of controversy between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Indeed, the christologically rich views of Puritans such as Owen, Ambrose, and Edwards have much more in common with Eastern views than does Aquinas's position.

What stands out almost immediately when we read John Owen on the beatific vision is the marked quantity of references to Christ as the object of our beatific vision. The difference between Aquinas and Owen on this score is almost impossible to exaggerate. It would be very difficult to minimize or ignore the differences, and this in particular makes Gaine's response to McDonald unconvincing. Since for Aquinas the beatific vision centers on the essence of God while Owen instead treats Christ as the object of our final vision, McDonald rightly maintains that in this regard, Owen "demonstrates a radical and decisive departure" from the tradition of Aquinas (2012, 150). Gaine, however, critiques McDonald for suggesting that "Christ himself is not presented [by Aquinas] as the specific content and mediator of the beatific vision" (McDonald 2012, 150). Gaine appeals to an incidental reference in Aquinas's *Compendium theologiae*, where the Angelic Doctor notes that beatific knowledge "has to do with two truths: namely, the divinity of the Trinity and the humanity of Christ." Aquinas suggests here that in heaven we will only be able to give thanks to God if we know the way by which we were saved. Gaine uses this quotation to reduce the difference between Aquinas and Owen regarding the object of the vision to a matter of order: "Where Owen does differ from Aquinas in terms of the content of vision is in its order: for Aquinas, divinity is thus the primary object and Christ's humanity secondary, such that the humanity is seen in the divinity, while for Owen the humanity is first in order, such that the divinity is seen in the humanity" (Gaine 2016, 436). Presumably the order matters, but Gaine doesn't dwell on it.¹⁰

⁹ For the material on Owen below, I draw on Boersma (2018, 311–27).

¹⁰ If there were no difference between Aquinas and Owen on the question of the object of the beatific vision—apart from the ordering of divinity and humanity—then it should make little difference whether we interpret passages such as 1 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 John 3:2 with reference to God (the Father) or Christ. But Gaine recognizes something important is at stake here, witness his lengthy exegetical discussion of 1 John 3:2 (2015, 26–29).

In my estimation, we do well to recognize a major disjunction at this point between Aquinas and Owen. McDonald is surely correct when she highlights the pervasive emphasis on Christ as the object of the beatific vision, in comparison with which the one reference in Aquinas's *Compendium theologiae* simply fades in significance. When in his *Christologia* (1679) Owen describes what he means by the beatific vision, he twice gives a markedly christological "definition." It is, he writes, "such an intellectual present view, apprehension and sight of God and his Glory, especially as manifested in Christ, as will make us *blessed* unto eternity" (Owen 1679, 320). In heaven we will have "*full clear apprehensions* which all the Blessed Ones have of the Glory of God in Christ, of the work and effects of his Wisdom and Grace towards Mankind" (Owen 1679, 347). Christ is at the center of these descriptions; Owen does not mention anything at all about seeing the essence of God.

In the last three chapters of his *Meditations and discourses on the glory of Christ* (published posthumously in 1684), Owen discusses Saint Paul's distinction between faith and sight (2 Cor. 5:7). Owen reiterates that both faith today and the beatific vision after the resurrection have Christ's glory as their object. He then points to four differences between faith and sight:

- Faith sees Christ "*through or by a glass* in a Riddle, a parable, a dark saying" (1684, 174); the vision "*we shall have of the glory of Christ in Heaven, is immediate, direct, intuitive, and therefore steady, eaven and constant*" (1684, 179).
- Faith "*is frequently hindered and interrupted in its operations*" (1684, 199); our sight of "*the Glory of Christ in Heaven*" will be "*equal, stable, always the same, without interruption or diversion*" (1684, 228).
- Faith gathers the elements of Christ's glory one by one, lest our minds be "*overwhelmed*" (1684, 234–35); in the post-resurrection vision, "*the whole Glory of Christ will be at once and always represented unto us; and we shall be enabled in one act of the Light of Glory to comprehend it*" (1684, 237).
- Faith transforms us gradually and partially (1684, 242–44); our vision in heaven will be "*perfectly and absolutely transforming. It doth change us wholly into the Image of Christ. When we shall see him, we shall be as he is, we shall be like him, because we shall see him, 1 Joh. 3.2*" (1684, 238).

Owen's descriptions of the differences between faith and sight are remarkable for two reasons. First, the entire discussion focuses on Christ as the object both of faith and of sight. Owen centres squarely on Christ as the object of the beatific vision. This kind of emphatic, prolonged insistence that it is Christ himself we will see in heaven is simply absent from Aquinas. Aquinas typically focuses on the essence of God as the object of

our vision—the one comment in his *Compendium theologiae* notwithstanding.¹¹ To reduce the difference between Aquinas and Owen to a matter of order ignores the vast difference in theological approach between the two theologians—Owen’s being thoroughly christological, and Aquinas’s suffering from a near-neglect of Christology.

We also do well to pay attention to the language Owen uses in the quotations above to describe the beatific vision of Christ. He uses adjectives such as “immediate,” “direct,” and “intuitive.” He claims that the light of glory will enable this vision of Christ. And he interprets the famous text of 1 John 3:2 as speaking of a vision of Christ (rather than of the Father).¹² These three points make clear that Owen deliberately moves away from a Thomist interpretation of the beatific vision. Descriptions of the beatific vision as “immediate,” “direct,” and “intuitive” were common within the Western tradition in describing the vision of the divine essence. The “light of glory” (*lumen gloriae*) was a scholastic concept denoting God’s created gift elevating the intellect so it could see the divine essence. And 1 John 3:2 was one of Aquinas’s proof texts for the claim that we will see the divine essence in the beatific vision (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 1; *ST* Suppl. q. 92, a. 1). Owen had been schooled in Thomist theology under Thomas Barlow and was intimately familiar with Aquinas’s theology.¹³ He undoubtedly was aware he was using traditional Thomist language, and deliberately gave it a christological twist. This was a profoundly christological revision of traditional Thomist theology.

When Owen deals with the much-controverted passage of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28—which states that Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” and that in the end “the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all”—he acknowledges that at the second coming Christ’s mediatorial work will come to end (1679, 315–16, 368). It is fair to say that Owen is struggling here.¹⁴ On the one hand, he feels he must acknowledge an end to Christ’s mediatorial work in light of the biblical text, while on the other hand, he wishes in no way to let go of the christological articulation of the beatific vision. Therefore, immediately after admitting that Christ’s mediatory office will come to an end, Owen continues by highlighting in detail three ways in which Christ’s role will nonetheless endure in the resurrection:

¹¹ To be sure, as I have already noted in the above discussion of *Div. Nom.* cap. 1, lect. 2, Aquinas not only holds to an eschatological intellectual beatific vision of the divine essence, but also to an eschatological corporeal vision of Christ. The latter occurs by way of overflow of the *lumen gloriae* from the soul to the body. See also *Super Ioan.* 17, lect. 6, n. 2260; and the discussion in Hayes (2015, 193–94).

¹² Owen also adopts a christological reading of this text in (1684, 177).

¹³ See Rehnman (2002, 31–39); Trueman (2016, 9–12).

¹⁴ Cf. McDonald (2012, 150n27).

- 1) Christ in his human nature will always be the immediate head of the glorified creation;
- 2) Christ will always be the means and way of communication between God and the saints;
- 3) Christ in his human nature will be the eternal object of divine glory, praise and worship. (1679, 368–69)

While Owen feels constrained by 1 Corinthians 15:24–27 to acknowledge that Christ’s mediatory office will one day come to an end, he immediately adds three important caveats—the second of which is a key distinction between Christ as mediator (an office he will give up at the second coming) and as means of seeing God (which continues forever). Owen does not want his interpretation of the biblical text to get in the way of his christological understanding of the beatific vision.

It is true that in two passages Owen briefly mentions the possibility of a vision of the divine essence (1679, 367; 1684, 192). But we should not be too quick in treating this as evidence that Owen simply agrees with Aquinas that our ultimate goal is to see the essence of God.¹⁵ Such an interpretation fails on several counts. First, and most importantly, it fails duly to take account of the extraordinary preponderance of references to Christ as the object of the beatific vision. We cannot take one or two isolated passages, which are in obvious tension with the overall drift of Owen’s teaching, as representative of his theology. Second, it fails to recognize that Owen acknowledged he was struggling to make sense of the teaching of Saint Paul in a difficult passage, even commenting that we are not in a position to arrive at a good understanding of it today (Owen 1679, 316–17). Third, as I have already made clear, with regard to one of the two passages, after mentioning an end to Christ’s work of mediation, Owen immediately sets out to argue for the continued significance of Christ as the means of the beatific vision. Is Owen entirely consistent? No—his unrelenting focus on Christ the object of our beatific vision does not jive with the two comments he makes about seeing the divine essence. The bottom line, however, is hardly in doubt: even in eternity, God’s blessings “shall be made in and through the Person of the Son and the humane Nature therein. That *Tabernacle* shall never be folded up, never be laid aside as useless” (Owen 1679, 368). Owen was convinced that also in eternity we will see God only in and through Christ. We may safely conclude that Owen was troubled by the christological deficit that resulted from Aquinas taking the divine essence as the object of the beatific vision.

I suspect we may even go further. It is likely that Owen designed his writings on the beatific vision in part by way of conscious correction of the Angelic Doctor’s approach. Gainé suggests that Owen set out to correct Calvin rather than Aquinas: “It seems to me

¹⁵ Pace Gainé (2016, 436).

that it is Calvin's curtailment of Christ's mediating work at the beatific vision rather than any teaching of Aquinas that forms the proper theological background to the kind of christological accounts of heaven offered by Calvinist theologians such as Owen and Edwards" (Gaine 2018, 127). I suspect it is true that Owen and Edwards would have been as unhappy with Calvin's understanding of the beatific vision as with Aquinas's. However, it is unlikely that Owen reacted against the former rather than the latter.¹⁶ As I just pointed out, Owen takes the very "tools" of Aquinas and shifts from a vision of God *per essentiam* to a vision of God *in Christo*. Owen may have been familiar with Calvin's views on the beatific vision, but as I point out in my chapter on Calvin in *Seeing God*, Calvin's views are not easy to ascertain, since they are scattered throughout in his writings. He doesn't deal with the beatific vision in any detail in his *Institutes*, and so Owen would have had to piece together Calvin's views on the topic from the various places where he touches on it in his commentaries.¹⁷ It is possible to do this, and my discussion of Calvin in *Seeing God* is largely based on exactly such an analysis. However, I don't know of any evidence that such an endeavor forms the background to Owen's discussion on the beatific vision. His intimate familiarity with Aquinas, along with his traditional Thomist discourse, make clear that he articulated his christological approach to the beatific vision in part by way of an implicit polemic against Thomas Aquinas.

Towards a Theophanic View of the Beatific Vision

The two issues discussed in this paper—the eternal role of Christ's humanity in our beatific vision and the object of the beatific vision—are closely related. So far, I have argued that Saint Thomas's understanding was christologically deficient on both counts. First, his numerous writings on the beatific vision hardly mention the role of Christ's humanity in eternally enabling our beatific vision. Second, Aquinas and Owen sharply differ on the question of whether the divine essence or Jesus Christ will be the object of the beatific vision, with Aquinas taking a markedly nonchristological approach. In one sense, it doesn't matter too much how we interpret Aquinas's understanding of the

¹⁶ I will not discuss here whom (if anyone) Edwards set out to correct in his writing on the beatific vision. To my knowledge, he mentions neither Aquinas nor Calvin in this regard. Gaine's suggestion that Edwards attempted to correct Calvin rather than Aquinas remains speculation. I also should point out that Gaine wrongly suggests that "it is Aquinas rather than Calvin whom Boersma takes Edwards to be modifying." The subtitle of my chapter on Edwards (2018, 354–84) does not speak of "*Edwards's Modification of Thomas Aquinas*" but of "*An Edwardsean Modification of Thomas Aquinas*." By comparing the views of Edwards and Aquinas—and suggesting a number of areas where I think Edwards's views are superior to those of Aquinas—I did not in any way intend to suggest that Edwards consciously reacted against Aquinas. Perhaps he did, but I am not sure.

¹⁷ This explains why some contemporary scholars mistakenly suggest that Calvin did not discuss the beatific vision. Cf. Muller (2003, 1; 260); McDonald (2012, 141n1).

eternal role of Christ's humanity with regard to the saints' beatific vision. This is primarily a historical question. Gaine and I would both be thrilled had Aquinas had the time to finish the third *Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, and if he had done so with an unabashed affirmation that Christ's deified humanity is the *sine qua non* of our deification. How we understand this "sine qua non" makes a difference, however, not only for the link between Christ's beatific vision and ours, but also for how we understand the *object* of the beatific vision.

We should return for a moment, therefore, the first issue, that of the role of Christ's humanity in the eschaton. We could regard this role either as the *cause* (as in Gaine's reading of Aquinas) or as the *means* (as in Owen and other Puritans) of our deification. As we will see, the former approach yields a doctrine of the beatific vision *per essentiam*, while the latter approach leads to a theophanic and Christological understanding of the object of our eternal vision. This, I think, is where the main dogmatic disagreement appears: is it the divine essence (Aquinas and Gaine) or is it Jesus Christ (Owen and I) that constitutes the object of the beatific vision?¹⁸ On my understanding, Aquinas's choice for the divine essence as the object of the beatific vision constitutes his most serious christological deficit.

It will be recalled that Gaine reduces the disagreement between Aquinas and Owen about the object of the beatific vision to a matter of order: "Where Owen does differ from Aquinas in terms of the content of vision is in its order: for Aquinas, divinity is thus the primary object and Christ's humanity secondary, such that the humanity is seen in the divinity, while for Owen the humanity is first in order, such that the divinity is seen in the humanity" (Gaine 2016, 436). Let's tease out the implications of the difference in order. For Aquinas, the object of the vision is the divine essence (which, according to at least one comment in the *Compendium theologiae* includes knowledge of the humanity of Christ). For Owen, this does not do justice to the finality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. He writes, "Our *adherence* unto God by Love and Delight shall alwaies be through Christ. For God will be conceived of unto Eternity, according to the manifestation that he hath made of himself, in him and no otherwise" (1679, 369). While Owen may have struggled to articulate how the vision of Christ in his humanity is actually a vision of God, here he intimates that the incarnate Christ is a manifestation—the climactic divine theophany, we might say—in which the glory of his divinity shines through. What this means is that for Owen, God gives us Christ's

¹⁸ This articulation accurately differentiates Aquinas and Owen. However, in terms of my own views, I would like to affirm a vision of the divine essence—both today and in the hereafter—by equating the vision of Jesus Christ with the vision of the divine essence. This would mean that whenever we see God in Christ, we see the divine essence. Inasmuch as we see Christ, we see the very character of God and so participate in who he is, that is to say, in his being or essence. On my understanding, then, the vision *per essentiam* comes in gradations, both in this life and in the eternal progression (*epektasis*) of the eschaton. See Boersma (2018, 12, 391–92, 415–18).

humanity as the (eternal, theophanic) *means* of seeing him. Once we have arrived at God's theophanic manifestation in Christ's humanity, we have arrived at God himself. For Owen, we could say, means and object are one and the same. The reason for this lies in the Chalcedonian confession of the unity of the person of Christ. Just as in the transfiguration, so in the resurrection, Christ's divinity is seen in and through his humanity.

The Puritan theologian Isaac Ambrose, whose views of the beatific vision were similar to those of Owen, highlights this significance of the unity between the two natures of Christ when in the fifth and final book of *Looking unto Jesus* (1658) he describes Christ (!) as the saints' "all in all" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28). He explains that after the resurrection we will see Christ in his humanity and adds that the "lustre of his Deity" will shine through in his humanity" (1658, 5.1.10 [p. 1091]). For Ambrose, Christ's humanity thus serves as means and object at one and the same time.¹⁹ The eighteenth-century theologian and pastor Jonathan Edwards had a similar theophanic, christological understanding of the beatific vision. Since only Christ knows God "immediately," Edwards maintains that human beings can only ever see him *by means of* "manifestations or signs"—with Jesus Christ being the ultimate theophany or manifestation—the "grand medium," as Edwards loved to call him (1977–2009, 18:428).²⁰ According to Edwards, in heaven we see the "signs" of God's presence in Christ as the visible image of God, in the effects of his work of redemption, and in Christ's conversation with us about this work. So the beatific vision is God's manifestation of himself in Christ-signs—images, effects, and words (Edwards 1977–2009, 18:431; cf. 25:230). Again, Christ is the theophanic "grand medium" or means, in and through whom we see God himself.²¹

The theophanic approach to the beatific vision that we see in theologians such as Owen, Ambrose, and Edwards seems to me the right one. (It is also, incidentally, in line with Eastern approaches to the topic). The reason we need a theophanic understanding of the beatific vision has to do with Chalcedonian Christology. The hypostatic union implies that when we see Christ's humanity with spiritual eyes, we recognize his divinity at the same time. Christ's humanity is a sacramental theophany that reveals—to those who have been transfigured—his divinity. The Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe puts it this way: "The story of Jesus is nothing other than the triune life of God projected onto our history, or enacted sacramentally in our history, so that it becomes

¹⁹ Cf. the more detailed discussion on Ambrose in Boersma (2018, 317–21, 332–34).

²⁰ Edwards uses the expression "grand medium" at least fifteen times in his writings to refer to Christ as the bond between God and the believer.

²¹ I discuss Edwards's views in detail in Boersma (2018, 354–84).

story" (McCabe 1987, 48).²² It is in and through his humanity that Christ shows his divinity.

One of the implications of a theophanic approach is that the beatific vision includes a (transfigured) bodily vision of God. The same theologians who regard the beatific vision as the ultimate theophany also typically maintain that we will see God with transformed physical eyes. We saw earlier that in his *Meditations and discourses on the glory of Christ*, Owen discusses four differences between faith and sight (2 Cor. 5:7). The fourth difference concerns the degree to which we will be transformed. In contrast to faith, the beatific vision will be "perfectly and absolutely *transforming*. It doth change us wholly into the Image of Christ. *When we shall see him, we shall be as he is, we shall be like him, because we shall see him*, 1 Joh. 3.2" (1684, 238). Owen insists that this transformation affects not only the soul, but also the body, for we will see Christ with bodily eyes: "Our eyes were made *to see our redeemer* and our other Sences to receive impressions from him, according unto their capacity" (1684, 241). Ambrose, likewise, maintains that when in the hereafter we will see Christ's divinity shine through in his humanity, "our very bodily eyes may come to see God, as much as is possible for any creature to see him" (1658, 320). And Edwards too was convinced that the beatific vision (with spiritual eyes) will be mediated through our bodily vision of Christ as the ultimate theophany of God.²³ The reason for the insistence on the beatific vision as bodily in character is, in each case, the recognition that God reveals himself always and only in the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Aquinas does not have such a theophanic approach to the beatific vision. He treats the beatific vision itself as strictly intellectual.²⁴ As I have tried to argue, he rarely even speaks of Christ's humanity as the eternal *cause* of the saints' beatific vision. Certainly, he would have taken exception to treating Christ's humanity as God's theophanic means in and through which he eternally manifests himself. A theophanic approach does not fit with Aquinas's unrelenting emphasis on seeing the divine essence.²⁵ But this shift away from a theophanic beatific vision comes with christological consequences. We already saw that Owen and others grounded their theophanic

²² McCabe goes on to write, "Watching, so to say, the story of Jesus, we are watching the processions of the Trinity.... They are not just reflection but sacrament—they contain the reality they signify. The mission of Jesus is nothing other than the eternal generation of the Son" (1987, 48–49).

²³ See Boersma (2018, 368–75).

²⁴ Cf. the critique of Aquinas on this point in Blond (2009, 185–212).

²⁵ Cf. Aquinas's comment: "But still some say that in heaven the divine essence will be seen through a created likeness. This, however, is entirely false and impossible, because something can never be known through its essence by a likeness, which does not agree with that thing in species" (*Super 1 Cor.*, cap. 13, lect. 4, n. 803).

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approach in Chalcedonian Christology: the close link between the two natures makes possible the claim that Christ's divinity is manifested in his humanity.²⁶

Aquinas's understanding of the beatific vision as a vision *per essentiam* renders such a close link more difficult. Gaine articulates his view as follows:

As an analogy for a Thomist account of Christ's role as mediator in heaven, I would propose someone looking out over a landscape from a panoramic viewpoint. The view can be seen without any instrument acting as a medium, that is, without binoculars or a telescope or any such thing.... However, it is impossible for any sightseer to take in a panoramic view without being in the right spot, in the right place. *The heavenly Body of Christ is then the 'place' from which the divine essence is viewed.* One cannot see God without being 'in Christ' What Christ does not do is exercise his mediatorship by way of acting as the medium, that is, the means by which God is known in this very act – that 'how' is reserved to the self-gifted divine being itself, towards which the christological light of glory elevates the intellect. *Christ is thus the 'place' from which God is seen,* without him intervening as a lens through which that vision is mediated. (Gaine 2016, 439–40; emphasis added)

The analogy of Christ's humanity as the "place" from which to view the divine essence implies a "distance" between Christ's humanity and his divinity. According to Gaine, it is from Christ's glorified humanity that we see his divinity. This raises the question, however, of how such a Thomist position can avoid separating the two natures. It is hard to escape the idea that the divine essence must be separate from and behind the incarnate Lord.

I realize that the notion of a place *from* which to see the divine essence is merely an analogy, and I do not want to press the point unduly. The analogy does reveal, however, that the order that Gaine mentions (that for Aquinas, the divinity or the divine essence is the primary object of the beatific vision, while Christ's humanity is secondary as part of the content of the vision) has major implications. It is an order that yields a theophanic understanding of the beatific vision impossible and that as a result ends up separating the divinity of Christ (which is identical to the divine essence) from the humanity of Christ. By treating Christ not as the means *in and through* which God is seen, but instead as the place *from* which he is seen, it becomes impossible to treat Christ any longer as the primary object of the beatific vision. Therefore, if Aquinas were to have followed his "principle of the maximum" in the unfinished third part of the *Summa*, and had discussed it along the lines Gaine suggests, we would still end up with a christological deficit: if Christ's beatific vision is merely the *cause* of the saints' beatific

²⁶ The Eastern theologian Gregory Palamas too had a theophanic understanding of the beatific vision, and for him too this theophanic approach went hand in hand with a (transfigured) bodily vision in the eschaton. See Boersma (2018, 155–61, 423–24).

vision, then we will likely end up with spatial metaphors that separate Christ's humanity from his divinity. Only if Christ's humanity is the eternal *means*—Edwards's "grand medium"—of our beatific vision, will Christ also be its final object and the theophanic manifestation of God himself.

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