

Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the beatific vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald

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Abstract

It has been shown that the thirteenth-century Dominican friar, St Thomas Aquinas, was an important theological influence on John Owen, the seventeenth-century English puritan theologian, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, especially in the areas of the divine being, grace and Chalcedonian Christology. Suzanne McDonald has argued that, while Aquinas is unmistakably a source for Owen's doctrine of the beatific vision, Owen surpassed Aquinas's doctrine in a manner she judges to be correct, theologically speaking, and which exposes the deficiency of Aquinas's account. Owen achieved this particular 'Reforming' or rather 're-forming' of Aquinas's doctrine, she argues, by way of a 'Christological re-orientation of the doctrine' in terms of what is seen in the beatific vision and how it is seen, that is, its content and means. This article replies to McDonald from a Catholic and Thomist perspective, in response to her suggestion that Owen's account of the beatific vision opens up possibilities for ecumenical dialogue. The article attempts to achieve this first by reassessing the Christological contrasts McDonald draws between Owen and Aquinas in terms of content and means, and then by offering several suggestions as to why one might want to prefer Aquinas's account over Owen's.

Keywords

John Owen, Thomas Aquinas, beatific vision, Christocentric, heaven

It has been shown that the thirteenth-century Dominican friar, St Thomas Aquinas, was an important theological influence on John Owen, the seventeenth-century English puritan theologian, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, especially in the areas of the divine being, grace and Chalcedonian

Christology.¹ Suzanne McDonald has argued that, while Aquinas is unmistakably a source for Owen's doctrine of the beatific vision,² Owen surpassed Aquinas's doctrine in a manner she judges to be correct, theologically speaking, and which exposes the deficiency of the older account.³ Owen achieved this particular 'Reforming' or rather 're-forming' of Aquinas's doctrine, she argues, by way of a 'Christological re-orientation of the doctrine', but 'continued Roman Catholic reflection on the beatific vision does not seem to have entered into dialog with the admittedly rather obscure Protestant development of it that Owen initiated.'⁴ This article aims to make some compensation for the latter omission from a Catholic and Thomist perspective, in response to McDonald's suggestion that Owen's account of the beatific vision opens up possibilities for ecumenical dialogue. This will be attempted by reassessing the Christological contrasts she draws between Owen and Aquinas, and by offering some suggestions as to why one might want to prefer Aquinas over Owen after all.

There is no doubt that Owen's teaching on the beatific vision brings Christ's humanity to the fore, as McDonald shows from his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ in his Person, Office and Grace: the differences between faith and sight; applied unto the use of them that believe*.⁵ However, 'this is in profound contrast to the Thomist tradition', she says, 'which struggles to accommodate Christ's glorified humanity within an account of the beatific vision.'⁶ While it is not possible to test this claim here by a survey of centuries of Thomist tradition, it is certainly true that Karl Rahner once observed that the standard scholastic eschatology of his day gave

¹ Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (London: Routledge, 2013). See also Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 32-9; and Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed, Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 9-12.

² 'Beatific vision' was not in fact a term used by Aquinas, who preferred 'blessed vision' (*visio beata*). For his part Owen spoke of the 'beatifical vision'.

³ Suzanne McDonald, 'Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the "Reforming" of the Beatific Vision' in Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 141-58, esp. 144-45, 157. For another account of Owen on the beatific vision, see Kyle C. Strobel, *Jonathan Edwards's Theology: A Reinterpretation* (London etc.: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 126-30. Though Strobel does not consider Aquinas directly, he endorses McDonald's conclusions (p. 126, n.96). For Aquinas's eschatology, see Carlo Leget, *Living with God: Thomas Aquinas on the Relation between Life on Earth and 'Life' after Death* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997); Bryan Kromholtz, *On the Last Day: The Time of the Resurrection of the Dead according to Thomas Aquinas* (Fribourg: Academic, 2010); Matthew Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death: Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, Texas: Baylor, 2012).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵ William H. Gould (ed.), *The Works of John Owen* (24 vols.; London: Johnstone and Hunter), vol. 1, pp. 275-415. See also Owen's *Christologia* in *ibid.*, pp. 1-272.

⁶ 'Beholding', p. 153.

little place to the role of Christ's humanity in heaven.⁷ For McDonald, this deficiency in later scholasticism is evidently to be explained by a deficiency in Aquinas's own eschatology, and the 'functional' and 'instrumental' character of his Christology. What this means is that, for Aquinas, Christ's humanity is instrumental for the *possibility* of us experiencing the beatific vision by mediating to us *in this life* the knowledge that constitutes a *foretaste* of the beatific vision (faith). But where the beatific vision is *actually* attained, McDonald holds, Christ's humanity no longer has any such significance for Aquinas.⁸ According to McDonald, Owen's Christological focus on the *ascended* humanity of Christ 'is foreign to Aquinas and the Thomist tradition of reflection on the beatific vision'.⁹ Though she concedes that Aquinas is not without a theology of Christ's glorified and ascended humanity, she maintains that 'there still seems to be no explicit place for the humanity of Christ in the actual reality of the beatific vision. Christ seems to fade from view when Aquinas speaks of the beatific vision itself.'¹⁰

McDonald does, however, concede that Aquinas 'never gave an account of the beatific vision as a separate locus' and that, had he done so, it 'might well' have been Christologically concentrated. However, for McDonald, 'the fact remains that he did not', and that is seemingly her last word on Aquinas.¹¹ Nevertheless, I suggest that it is not simply that Aquinas *might well* have produced a Christological account of the beatific vision had he completed the *Summa Theologiae*, but rather that this intention is definitely indicated in his structuring of the *Summa*. Aquinas divided the *Summa* into three parts, and into no more than three parts. While the First Part treats of God in himself and as the source of all else that is, and the Second Part of the return of human creatures to God as their end, the Third Part treats of the incarnate Christ as 'the way' by which this return takes place.¹² This Johannine characterisation (Jn 14.6) of the *Summa's* Christology, made by Aquinas himself, might suggest at first sight that McDonald is right that, for Aquinas, Christ as the *way* is instrumental to our return but has no significant place at our end. However, since Aquinas's intention was to include eschatology in his Third Part, and not in any Fourth Part, we must assume his planned treatment of such matters

⁷ Karl Rahner, 'The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for our Relationship with God', in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3: *The Theology of the Spiritual Life* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Baltimore: Helicon, 1967), pp. 35-46 (37-38).

⁸ 'Beholding', pp. 150-54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2.proem.

as the Last Judgement¹³ and the Resurrection¹⁴ to be as framed in terms of Christology as was his treatment of the Church's sacraments, which derive their efficacy from the incarnate Christ.¹⁵ That he writes of the beatific vision in the First and Second Parts without explicit reference to the role of Christ can hardly be surprising, since there he is concerned with other issues such as whether this kind of knowledge is in itself possible or whether it constitutes our goal as the essence of human happiness or beatitude. It is not that Christ has faded from view in these sections, but that his proper appearance on the theological stage of the *Summa* is yet to come. It would only be in the Third Part that Aquinas would treat the role of Christ in regard to the beatific vision, which he began to do when treating of Christ's own knowledge,¹⁶ but would have completed at a point in the *Summa* he was never to write. By drawing on what Aquinas has to say earlier in the *Summa* and elsewhere, I hope to say something of the role in the beatific vision Aquinas's theology grants to Christ, and so reassess the contrasts McDonald proposes between Aquinas and Owen.

McDonald contrasts Aquinas and Owen on the beatific vision on two points, with regard to the way in which each treats *what* is seen and with regard to the way they treat *how* it is seen. In other words, what is at issue is both the *content* of the vision and the *means* by which the vision takes place. In both these respects, Aquinas is wanting on McDonald's view when compared to Owen's Christological positions: 'Christ himself is not presented [by Aquinas] as the specific content and mediator of the beatific vision.'¹⁷ Taking content first, McDonald characterises Owen's position by saying that the beatific vision is the beholding of the glory of God in the person of Christ, fully divine and fully human, where the beholder acknowledges the divinity hidden in his humanity.¹⁸ Owen's answer to the question of the content of the vision is then, according to McDonald, 'primarily Jesus Christ'.¹⁹ Thus she says that 'Owen offers us an utterly and rigorously Christocentric answer to that question, beyond anything that the earlier Thomist tradition provides.'²⁰ In this, she says that Owen 'demonstrates his radical and decisive departure' from the tradition of Aquinas.²¹

¹³ See *Ibid.*, 3.59.proem.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.60.proem.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.9.2; 10. For a contemporary argument in favour of a Thomist position in Catholic theology on Christ's beatific vision, see my *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (London etc.: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

¹⁷ 'Beholding', p. 150.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

So, in contrast to Owen, for Aquinas the question of content would be answered by the divine essence.²² While Owen insists that Christ is intrinsic to the essence of the beatific vision, Aquinas does not. Though McDonald does not explicitly say so, she rather leaves the impression that, on the Thomist view, the divine essence is the content of the beatific vision to the *exclusion* of Christ's humanity.

But is the contrast between Owen and Aquinas on content to be drawn so starkly? In a footnote, McDonald quotes Owen saying that the 'beholding of the glory of Christ given by the Father is indeed subordinate unto the ultimate vision of the essence of God'.²³ Moreover, for Aquinas, the intellectual act of beatific vision takes as object not only the essence of God but the humanity of Christ also. In his *Compendium Theologiae*, Aquinas presents the content of the intellectual vision in relation to two main truths, 'the divinity of the Blessed Trinity and the humanity of Christ'.²⁴ This was his interpretation of Christ's words to the Father in John 17.3: 'This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' Concerning the latter, he explains that our heavenly gratitude would be inadequate if we had no knowledge of the way by which we had been saved. How Christ's humanity appears within the specific content of the beatific vision is explained by Aquinas's general theory of how secondary objects are known in the beatific vision. Since knowledge of God's essence must include knowledge of his power, the blessed know in God something of what he does, the scope of each one's knowledge of creatures being proportioned to what is appropriate to that particular saint.²⁵ Since the saints have been saved through Christ's incarnation, this must presumably always include knowledge of his humanity, and hence this is why Aquinas speaks in the *Compendium* of Christ's humanity being seen in addition to the divinity of the Trinity. Thus the divine essence is not the object of vision to the exclusion of Christ's humanity, as McDonald would seem to have Aquinas, but rather to its *inclusion*. 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.

The vision of Christ's humanity as affirmed by Aquinas in the *Compendium* is a purely intellectual rather than physical vision, and, unlike Owen, Aquinas holds that as such it can be enjoyed by souls

²² See *Summa*, 1.12; 1-2.3.8.

²³ 'Beholding', p. 150, n.27, citing *Meditations*, pp. 386-87.

²⁴ *Compendium Theologiae seu brevis compilatio theologiae ad fratrem Raunaldum*, 1.2.

²⁵ *Summa*, 3.10.2.

separated from their bodies before the resurrection.²⁶ With the resurrection of the body, however, there is a further knowledge of Christ's humanity mediated through the glorified senses of the resurrection body of each of the blessed.²⁷ That Aquinas holds that there are heavenly acts of physical seeing beyond the intellectual act of beatific vision should not surprise us. While Aquinas holds the essential core of ultimate human happiness to consist formally in the act of intellectual vision, that act does not exhaust his account of heavenly happiness. According to Aquinas, the vision has an impact on the will, the passions and the body, which are all part of the wider content of heavenly beatitude.²⁸ In addition to the single, ongoing beatific acts of knowing and loving, a saint is able to make a series of further acts, which are aimed not at attaining essential beatitude, since that is already attained, but rather at communicating and extending this beatitude in some way beyond the intellect.²⁹ Just as God does not create in order to gain his own happiness, on Aquinas's view, but in order to communicate his goodness to others, so the blessed now share in divine beatitude in a higher way than they did on earth by acting simply to spread their happiness abroad rather than gain it.³⁰

In the resurrection, these series of heavenly acts include acts of the bodily senses whereby beatitude is extended within these senses, acts such as beholding Christ's glorified body. A series of such acts of knowledge through the senses does not in any way interfere with the ongoing single act of beatific knowledge, for Aquinas.³¹ Rather, on account of these acts and the act of beatific vision being ordered and related to one another, 'a person's sensing of God's creatures and his contemplation of God will be mutually reinforcing', as Aquinas's position is explained by Bryan Kromholtz.³² Regarding acts of the bodily eye, Aquinas says that it 'will behold the divinity in its bodily effects, in which indications of the divine majesty will clearly appear, especially in the flesh of Christ, and then in the bodies of the blessed, and finally in all other bodies.'³³ Thus, in the eschatological bodily vision described by Aquinas, the divinity is indeed somehow seen in the humanity. In regard to the physical vision of Christ's body, then, this is not too far from what Owen has to say, where the content of vision is concerned. Of course, for Aquinas, this physical seeing is

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.4.5.

²⁷ E.g., *In Sent.*, 4.48.2.1, 49.2.2 ad 6.

²⁸ *Summa*, 1-2.3.3-4; 4.1; 4.6.

²⁹ *In Sent.*, 4.44.2.1.3-4, 49.2.2; *Summa contra Gentiles*, 4.86.4.

³⁰ *Summa*, 1.19.2-3. See my *Will There Be Free Will in Heaven? Freedom, Impeccability and Beatitude* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 132-6.

³¹ *In Sent.*, 4.44.2.1.3 ad 4.

³² *On the Last Day*, p. 463.

³³ *In Sent.*, 4.48.2.1.

not a constituent part of the beatific vision itself, as it is for Owen, yet Owen and Aquinas have in common the view that there is at the resurrection *both* a physical seeing *and* an intellectual seeing. The most important difference between Aquinas and Owen is the *manner* in which they consider these two visions, physical and intellectual, to be related.

Here we move from the ‘what’ of the vision to its ‘how’. Owen makes the seeing of Christ with physical eyes at the resurrection the ‘how’ of the intellectual vision, and thus does he relate the two. By physical vision the saints see the face of Jesus Christ, and so in him behold the glory of God by way of intellect.³⁴ McDonald is quite right in saying that Aquinas will not allow this as an explanation of beatific vision’s ‘how’. Since he takes the primary content of the beatific vision to be the invisible and infinite essence of the Blessed Trinity, nothing bodily or finite can be the means by which God is known in his essence. The means by which God is so known can be nothing other than the infinite God himself, giving himself to the saints to be their means of knowledge, as he is by nature his own means of knowledge, that is, sharing with them his very own ‘how’, making them to know in the way that they are known by him (cf. 1 Cor. 13.12).³⁵ Whereas for Owen the ‘how’ is a physical seeing, for Aquinas it is the self-gift of the very essence and being of the Triune God. Rather than give any consideration to the merits of Aquinas’s case, McDonald discounts his doctrine on the ground that it is not Christocentric. As we saw above, she holds that, for Aquinas, while Christ mediates that which leads to the beatific vision, he does not mediate the beatific vision itself. But is that really the case?

When he considers Christ’s grace in the Third Part, Aquinas treats it not only as the grace of the Holy Spirit by which Christ’s own humanity is made holy, but also as the grace he possesses as Head of his Body, the Church. The grace of the Holy Spirit bestowed on each member of the Body is a participation in the grace of Christ the Head.³⁶ In no way is this participated grace something that, once caused, no longer requires the continuing existence of the grace of Christ. Rather, should the cause be removed, the effect would be removed too, and the same is the case with the glorious consummation of grace in heaven. This consummation is effected through the gift of the light of glory. Just as the finite concepts abstracted from the senses, which are our natural means of knowledge, are inadequate for vision of the infinite God, so the natural light of human reason, to

³⁴ *Meditations*, p. 292.

³⁵ *Summa*, 1.12; 14.2; *Contra Gentiles*, 3.51-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.7-8. For a good exposition of Christ’s Headship in relation to grace, see Daria Spezzano, *The Glory of God’s Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria FL: Sapientia, 2015), pp. 152-210.

which these means are proportioned, is inadequate as an intellectual light under which God may be seen. The saints are thus proportioned to the vision of God by the gift of a new intellectual light, the light of glory.³⁷ So, as our natural knowledge in this life comes under the light of reason and by means of finite images and what Aquinas calls intelligible *species*, beatific knowledge comes under the light of glory and God's self-gift as the means of knowledge in place of any *species*. The point is that this light of glory, like grace, is mediated to the members of the Body by the Head, the light of glory of the saints being a participation in the light of glory enjoyed by the Head.³⁸ In other words, the saints' beatific vision is a participation in Christ's own beatific vision. The beatific vision is no less mediated to the saints by Christ the Head than is the grace bestowed on the faithful in this life. Thus Christ does not simply mediate the *possibility* of the beatific vision, as McDonald would have Aquinas's view, but he mediates the actual realisation of the beatific vision itself through a participation in his own light of glory. Once we recognise this, the objection that Aquinas's account of the beatific vision is just not Christological fails.

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. In that sense the view is unmediated, and it is in this sense that Pope Benedict XII in *Benedictus Deus* (1336) declared the beatific vision to be 'without the mediation of any creature'.³⁹ 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', actually related to him as member to Head, and ever in dependence on him for that light under which the Blessed Trinity is seen. It is in this sense that there is a crucial continuing role for Christ's humanity in heaven, ever graciously holding in being the gift under which God is beatifically known and granting the act by which he is known. 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

³⁷ *Summa*, 1.12.5; *Contra Gentiles*, 3.53-4. For solutions to difficulties in Aquinas's theory, see Michael Waddell, 'Aquinas on the Light of Glory', *Tópicos* 40 (2011), pp. 105-32.

³⁸ Cf. *Summa*, 3.1.2; 3.9.2.

³⁹ Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hünermann, Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationem de rebus fidei et morum, Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 43rd edn, 2012), para. 1000.

'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. There are to be distinguished then two kinds of proposed heavenly mediatorship for Christ, one of which he continually exercises according to Aquinas's teaching, and the other of which he never does. The former is not alien to Owen's teaching, as a careful reading of the *Meditations* shows.⁴⁰ Where Owen differs from Aquinas is in introducing the latter, where Christ acts as an instrumental means by which divinity is seen.⁴¹

Having reassessed the precise differences between Owen and Aquinas on the beatific vision, and concluded that Aquinas's theology of the beatific vision is Christological after all, this article will now suggest some reasons as to why a Thomist account should be preferred over Owen's. One might be that it can satisfy the authority of *Benedictus Deus*, the declaration of Benedict XII to which we have already referred, whereas Owen's account of Christ's humanity as a created medium definitely cannot. However, while this authority has weight for the Catholic theologian, it has no such weight in the Reformed tradition of Owen. Nevertheless, recalling that the theological reasoning behind this papal teaching has had some level of currency elsewhere in the Reformed tradition,⁴² I would surmise that such and further theological reasoning is worthy of the attention of Reformed theologians today. Here I shall suggest seven theological advantages which favour a Thomist position on the beatific vision over that of Owen.

The first concerns the fact that, as a result of making the physical sight of Christ's humanity the 'how' for the intellectual vision of the divinity, Owen delays the soul's essential beatitude until the resurrection, leaving the elected separated soul always in the realm of faith.⁴³ This delay departs not only from Aquinas's position, and that taken subsequently by Benedict XII in *Benedictus Deus* after a lengthy scholastic controversy on the issue,⁴⁴ but also from that of important Reformed theologians such as Francis Turretin,⁴⁵ where

⁴⁰ E.g., *Meditations*, pp. 413-4. See also *Christologia*, pp. 235-72.

⁴¹ Owen denies that there is such a 'glass' through which Christ is seen, making the vision of Christ, though not that of the divine essence, immediate. See *ibid.*, pp. 406-7. For the role of a glass in faith, see pp. 376-7.

⁴² E.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols.; Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992-7), vol. 3, p. 611, who allows an immediate vision of the divine essence as a possible, though not more probable, opinion.

⁴³ 'Beholding', pp. 411-2.

⁴⁴ On the scholastic controversies, see Christian Trottman, *La Vision Béatifique: Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 289; Rome: École Française, 1995).

⁴⁵ *Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 488.

the transition from the act of faith to the act of sight can indeed take place for the separated soul. This position has various advantages, at least for the Catholic theologian, such as offering beatific knowledge of secondary objects in the divine essence as an explanation for the knowledge that informs the prayers of the saints on our behalf, though it is hardly the only explanation that might be offered.⁴⁶ But I want to draw particular attention to the fact that Aquinas's position makes it absolutely clear that the essential core of ultimate human happiness does not consist in anything bodily but in a spiritual good, which is of course an intellectual vision of the essence of the Triune God. At the same time this does not imply that the body is not essential to our human nature, and Aquinas is quite clear that beatitude is not enjoyed by a complete human person until the resurrection of the body, as McDonald accepts.⁴⁷ But the valuing of the body as essential to our full humanity does not mean overvaluing it by mistaking it as part of the essential core of our ultimate happiness: it is not the body that makes us ultimately happy, on Aquinas's account, but rather the body that is ultimately made happy, where to our essential beatitude in the soul is added the extension of a wider beatitude throughout the body.⁴⁸ The fact that the essence of beatitude can be enjoyed by a separated soul prior to the resurrection illuminates this important truth about the nature of beatitude. Where, however, an eschatology delays the beatific vision to the resurrection in every case, as does Owen's, by making the resumption of the body a necessary condition of that vision, there is more possibility of confusion about that in which the essential core of our ultimate happiness formally consists.

Aquinas's second theological advantage is that he has in his theory the resources to account for how the saints' physical sight of the glorified Christ at the resurrection (on which he and Owen agree) can lead to their intellectual recognition of the divinity of the human being before them, whereas Owen's resources are less sure. The question is how the saint who looks with physical eyes upon the glorified humanity of Christ is enabled to acknowledge that he is God. The reality of such acknowledgement is crucial to Owen's account of the beatific vision, as McDonald shows.⁴⁹ She takes him to be speaking of it when he says: 'that is the way of seeing and knowing God, declared in the Scripture as our duty and our blessedness'.⁵⁰ But, as McDonald herself acknowledges, 'The humanity of Christ, even his glorified humanity, is not the fullness of the person of Christ, and does not of itself reveal his divinity. For that we need

⁴⁶ *Summa*, 2-2.52.3.

⁴⁷ 'Beholding', p. 155.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Summa*, 1-2.4.5 ad 4.

⁴⁹ 'Beholding', p. 152.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146, citing *Meditations*, p. 294.

the illumination of our minds beyond their present capacities.’⁵¹ The question is how Owen or Aquinas can give a theological explanation of the resources required for the saint to recognise the divinity of Christ in his humanity. For Aquinas, the resources for making such an acknowledgement would be provided for the blessed by their immediate sight of *the divine essence*. By seeing the Triune God just as he is, and thus the humanity of Christ in God, the saints will *know* that the glory before their physical eyes is the glory of a *divine* person, and thus can they acknowledge his divinity.

But how can the saint know and acknowledge this on Owen’s account? Though Owen supposes it must take place under some kind of new light, the light of glory,⁵² it is not at all clear what the means of this knowledge will be. One way out of this might be to explain that it is by *faith* that the saints recognise the divinity of the man they see, on the basis of some divine revelation. Aquinas and Owen would surely have agreed that, when Thomas the Apostle saw the risen Christ and confessed him as his Lord and God (Jn 20.29), this acknowledgement was made on the basis of faith as a response to divine revelation. For the Catholic theologian this explanation is ruled out for a heavenly case by *Benedictus Deus*, where the Pope taught that there are no acts of the theological virtue of faith in heaven.⁵³ Though Owen would not have recognised this authority, as we have already said, behind it lies an historic inheritance, shared by Catholic and Reformed alike, of interpreting Scripture with a clear distinction between faith and vision.⁵⁴ Though he interprets ‘vision’ differently from Aquinas, Owen is just as committed to maintaining a clarity of distinction here, as we can see throughout the *Meditations*, where the light of glory takes the saint to a perfection surpassing the light of faith.⁵⁵ Were Owen to introduce faith as a resource for the saint’s acknowledgement of Christ’s divinity, he would transgress his own theological principle. Without a third way between faith and vision, which I have argued in another context cannot be sustained,⁵⁶ Owen’s account of the beatific vision is left at a serious disadvantage, from which the best hope of recovery, it seems to me, would be a fresh attempt at a more basic refutation of Aquinas’s ‘how’ than asserting it is not Christological. The strategy would be to show that Aquinas’s position is even more problematic than Owen’s.

This leads us to the fact that it is in fact a third advantage for Aquinas that he has his own fuller theological reasoning in support

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7.

⁵² *Meditations*, p. 412.

⁵³ DH 1001.

⁵⁴ E.g., Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.39.43.

⁵⁵ *Meditations*, pp.374-415, esp. p. 412.

⁵⁶ Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father?*, pp. 117-23.

of his account of God's self-gift as the 'how' of the beatific vision, while there is little indication of how Owen would attempt to refute it, except for an observation on divine infinity and incomprehensibility.⁵⁷ Owen says that 'nothing can perfectly comprehend that which is infinite, but what itself is infinite',⁵⁸ a proposition with which Aquinas would perfectly agree.⁵⁹ From this Owen argues that 'God in his immense essence is . . . incomprehensible to our minds', again a proposition with which Aquinas would agree. McDonald, however, takes Owen to be here rejecting *any* immediate apprehension of the divine essence by the glorified mind.⁶⁰ For Aquinas this rejection would not follow, because he distinguished knowing the essence of something from comprehension of that essence, in the strict sense, where comprehension of something is an *exhaustive* knowledge of it, knowing something as fully as it can be known.⁶¹ Some kind of distinction between vision and comprehension goes back to patristic times.⁶² Aquinas gives his own analogy of knowledge of the essence of a triangle, namely that its angles add up to two right angles, as distinct from comprehension, which requires a mathematical understanding of *why* the angles add up in this way. In the (non-mathematical) case of the beatific vision, Aquinas makes no claim for any comprehension of the divine essence by a finite mind, but only for a non-exhaustive knowledge of it.⁶³ Owen, however, neglects Aquinas's crucial distinction between vision and comprehension. The fact that he does so, and so on the basis of an implicit conflation of the two argues by way of a non sequitur to the necessity of Christ as medium of knowledge, leaves Aquinas once more with the advantage.

A fourth way in which we might take the contrast of positions to favour Aquinas is in his theological account of heavenly happiness as involving both rest and activity, which we may suppose to be a desideratum of any eschatology with a secure basis in Scripture (Heb. 4.7-11; Rev. 5.13; 19.9). While he takes the human desire to know the essence of God as fulfilled, that is, brought to rest, by the act of beatific vision, the wider beatitude of the saints beyond this formal core involves in the dynamism of a whole set of further acts which

⁵⁷ The influence here may be more Scotist than Thomist. See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena to Theology* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 250.

⁵⁸ *Meditations*, p. 292.

⁵⁹ *Summa*, 1.12.7.

⁶⁰ 'Beholding', p. 156.

⁶¹ *Summa*, 1.12.7 ad 1. For Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 3, p. 611, the same principle of disproportion between infinite and finite does not refute immediate vision of the divine essence but merely places weight against it.

⁶² Augustine, *Ep.*, 147.20-1; Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 3.18.92-3.

⁶³ *Summa*, 1.12.7.

give diverse expression to the beatitude already attained. Owen too wants to say that the beatific vision brings ‘perfect rest’.⁶⁴ However, he does not seem to allow for the same rest and fulfilment in his version of the act of beatific vision, on account of the fact that the latter does not take the divine essence, which is the supreme good, as its immediate object. Given his conflation of intellectual vision and comprehension, it may be that Owen would have to assume that there could be no ultimate rest in *any* knowledge of the divine essence unless that essence be comprehended, which would of course be impossible. Hence the infinitude of the divinity would constantly give rise to desire to know this very object better, where desire in regard to this object will always arise as soon as any fulfilment is attained, excluding the possibility of any genuine rest. In any case Owen explicitly argues once again from the infinity of the divine essence, in this case to its being perpetually new for the saints’ finite understanding, with continual fresh communications coming from God to the saints through Christ for all eternity. In this way Owen seeks to avoid any danger that there might be ‘satiety or weariness’ in contemplating the same glory, a danger which would seem more real where the immediate object of beatitude is not per se the supreme good.⁶⁵ But it seems to me that, on Owen’s account, the vision of the divine essence as such is evacuated of any genuine fulfilled ultimate repose on the part of the blessed, so long as there can arise desire in regard to a better attaining of that same object of essential beatitude.

Owen’s account of heavenly rest brings to our attention a fifth disadvantage to his theory of the beatific vision, which comes from what McDonald calls ‘his single-minded Christological focus’.⁶⁶ Since, for him, intellectual vision of the divinity depends on physical vision of Christ’s humanity, whatever eternal repose there is in regard to the former depends on a continual fixity of gaze on the latter. In that sense the element of rest in Owen’s account of heaven is placed primarily in the saints’ physical vision of Christ. Should the gaze of a saint be turned away from the glorified body of Christ, his divinity will surely no longer be seen by the saint, who no longer sees its medium. For Owen the only reason for which the saints receive their glorified physical sight is so that they can physically behold this one object, and the implication would seem to be that is no real possibility of them beholding God’s glory in anything else.⁶⁷ In contrast, as we saw above, Aquinas allows for the gaze of the saints, enhanced by the beatific vision, to range freely over the resurrected bodies of their heavenly companions in Christ, as well as a wider

⁶⁴ *Meditations*, p. 413.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

⁶⁶ ‘Beholding’, p. 156.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Meditations*, pp. 378-80, 405-10.

creation renewed in Christ, so that God's glory can also be observed in varied ways in sun and moon and stars, or whatever else be added by theologians to Aquinas's inventory of the new heavens and earth. This all seems to me to indicate better the social reality of Christ's Body in the wider beatitude of heaven, as well as the importance of creation more generally in God's plan of manifesting his goodness. In comparison, Owen's heavenly Christomonism, so indispensable to his overall theology of the beatific vision, seems narrow, individualistic, and static.

A further disadvantage for Owen can be found once again in the Christological concentration of his eschatology, that is, in the fact that the Son and not the Father is the primary focus of the beatific vision, and here we have our sixth theological advantage for the Thomist. While McDonald is aware that Owen's account needs developing in a more Trinitarian direction,⁶⁸ she represents Owen's Christological approach as rooted primarily in the authority of Scripture.⁶⁹ However, it seems to me that Owen is at fault in not allowing key Scriptural texts on the beatific vision, namely 1 John 3.2 and 1 Corinthians 13.12, to be referred to the Father. For Owen it is *Christ* whom the saints see just as he is, *Christ* whom the saints see face to face. A Thomist exegesis, however, is able to refer these texts directly to the Father also, such that the divine essence of the whole Trinity is the direct object of vision. I have argued elsewhere that these texts should be referred to the Father: for John, it is the Father who has made us his children and in the future will appear and make us like himself, for we shall see this same Father just as he is; for Paul, it is the Father who is seen face to face, whom we shall know just as we are known.⁷⁰ It seems to me that it was because he was restricted by his referral of the object of direct vision in these texts solely to Christ, that Owen assimilated the mediating work of Christ in heaven to what he found elsewhere in Scripture of the character of his mediating work in the realm of faith (e.g. 2 Cor. 3.18; 4.6). Without that exegetical restriction, I suggest, one is free to grasp the *distinction* between faith and sight more precisely.

These exegetical points lead us finally to a seventh advantage for Aquinas, namely, that he is easily able to express the solidarity of Christ the Head and his members in a single Body by their sharing of the *same* beatifying knowledge. On a Thomist account, the primary focus of this vision in both cases is on the Father though not to the exclusion of the whole Trinity, just as Christ is portrayed throughout the Gospels as one whose mind is totally focused on his Father (e.g., Mt. 11.25-6; Lk. 10.21-2). A comparable heavenly solidarity,

⁶⁸ 'Beholding', pp. 158.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-3, 148-51.

⁷⁰ Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father?*, pp. 26-32.

however, is not possible for Owen. As McDonald points out, Owen rejects Christ's beatific vision for some unique knowledge appropriate to Christ.⁷¹ Were he to have assigned the beatific vision to Christ, even as restricted to the resurrection, that would have required the curious oddity of Christ gazing on himself. Hence, for Owen to have introduced a heavenly solidarity of Head and members in knowledge, comparable to Aquinas's, he would have had to entertain the same oddity of the Head fixedly gazing on himself. Whereas Owen gives us a picture of heaven where each saint is individually fixed on the visible object of Christ's glorified body, Aquinas has Christ, with all the blessed, focusing together as one Body on the Father in a shared intellectual vision which enables the physical vision of each one to range freely over one another and across the whole of the new creation.

These then are the theological advantages which I suggest accrue to the Thomist account. Not that I would claim that this is the last word in any theological exchange on the subject. As I have sought as a Thomist to bring out what I take to be implicit in Aquinas's account to his advantage, a Reformed theologian likewise may wish to draw on Owen, whom I know hardly at all, in reply. If this dialogue can lead to a deeper understanding of the future which God has prepared for us, it may the better enable us to respond in the present as Owen and Aquinas certainly wished their readers to, that is, to hope even now to see at the last what God has prepared for us, just at it really is.

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⁷¹ 'Beholding', p. 152, n.33.