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STUDY IN AQUINAS: ANALOGY AS THEOPHANY AND THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

ATHERTON C. LOWRY

No one has ever seen God ...” (John L18)



THOMAS AQUINAS IN HIS *COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN* REFLECTS ON the above passage by stating that “. . . God is his ‘to be’ ... therefore the knowledge by which God is seen through creatures is not of his essence itself but obscure and in a mirror and from afar off.”¹ Indeed, Thomas follows up this by referring to a favorite focus of his, the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.² In this regard Thomas says we do not know what God is. Rather, as taught in the above-mentioned commentary as well as in the *Summa theologiae*,³ we can know that God is (*Deum esse*) and what He is not. Thus, we can know God through His effects because He is their cause, but His essence remains hidden. We can only know creatures because their essence is not their “to be” (*esse*). Instead, each creature has its “to be,” possesses it by participation. As participating in God as causal ground of all finite “to be,” creatures are thereby mirrors of God, an obscurity or darkness of God, which as the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* declares, is nonetheless a light (*lux*) or manifestation (*manifestatio*) of God.⁴

The stage is thereby set. Our paper endeavors to highlight the “theophanic” character of Thomas’ notion of analogy and its integral relation with the “incomprehensibility” of God. Now what emerges in this study is the presence and absence of God, a process of presencing rooted in God as creator yet because God’s creative act is infinite and immutable, God remains an absence of hiddenness. Further, such manifestation and elusiveness of God is, for Thomas, first of all, in the Biblical rather than the Neoplatonic spirit. This is not to say that the Neoplatonic “transcendence” of the One and the manifesting character of the One’s emanations has not had some influence. However, as David B. Burrell points out, Thomas’ stress on God’s oneness in terms of His essence as “to be” drives home a clear distancing of creation from emanation.⁵ Intermediaries will be of no use in the direct act of creation itself because God’s act as creator is identified with His undivided being or pure “to be.” Oneness is not superadded to God anymore than the creative act. Further, as Thomas states in *De potentia*:

God ... is totally act ... pure act ... whence by his action he produces the whole subsistent being, with nothing previously existing, inasmuch as he is the origin of all “to be,” and in accordance with his total self.⁶

As regards the Biblical spirit in relation to God’s hiddenness or elusiveness within His manifestations, we are perhaps familiar with the constant tradition in Holy Scripture on this point.⁷ The Burning Bush incident in which Moses “... hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Ex. 3:6) and Elijah’s response to the tiny whispering sound in the cave, namely that he “. . . hid his face in his cloak and went to stand at the entrance of the cave” (I Kings 20:13) both exemplify this tradition. Thomas, in the light of this tradition, refers in his *Commentary on Blessed Dionysius’ Book*

*On the Divine Names*⁸ to the passage in Isaiah which says: “To whom can you liken God?” (Isa. 40:18) or again to two passages in the Psalms which declare: “O God, who is like you?” (Ps. 71:19) and “There is none like unto you among the gods, O Lord” (Ps. 86:8). In conjunction with these passages, Thomas is led to contrast God with His creature by describing Him as infinite and incomparable (*infinite et incomparabiliter*).⁹ At the same time, Thomas recognizes that creatures are similitudes (*similitudo*) of God but with the paradoxical qualification that they are also unlike (*dissimilia*) Him.¹⁰ This focus on likeness and unlikeness is also expressed in a statement from the *Summa contra gentiles* where Thomas is also reflecting on the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius:

The creature has what belongs to God and, consequently, is rightly said to be like God. But we cannot in the same way say that God has what belongs to the creature. Neither, then, can we appropriately say that God is like a creature.¹¹

It is fitting, at this juncture, given the reference to creatures as like and unlike God, to characterize precisely Thomas’ use of analogy as theophany. For Thomas, there are a variety of ways in which he applies analogy. However, commentators have often argued that proper proportionality is the only analogy to give a truly metaphysical description of the relation between God and creatures. Such a claim, nonetheless, appears to fall short under a careful and broad study of Thomas’ works, a position confirmed by George P. Klubertanz in his *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy*.¹² Granted, one might argue that around 1256, for a brief period, this doctrine of intrinsic analogy was stressed by Thomas. But, as Klubertanz further recounts, Thomas seems to leave this teaching behind after 1256.¹³ This should not be surprising because proper proportionality is unable to bridge the gap between infinite and finite creatures. When one says that the infinite is to the infinite as the finite is to the finite,¹⁴ e.g. God’s mode of knowing is proportionate to His being as man’s mode of knowing is to man’s being, the “infinite” distance still remains. Nothing more has really been said here other than, following our example, that God knows as God and man knows as man. No metaphysical con-

nection has been made showing that man in his knowing and being is truly like God in His knowing and being. In short, proper proportionality cannot meet the challenge of God’s “incomprehensibility.”

However, Thomas’ analogy of likeness through participation provides an avenue for connecting creatures to God and thereby knowing something “positive” about God. Indeed, Thomas makes use of this analogical approach to the end of his life, and it is this approach which is at the heart of his “theophanic” description of creation. Let us recall our earlier reference to each creature’s participation in God as the causal act of the creature’s “to be.” God as creator grounds each finite “to be” in His pure or infinite “to be” by way of likeness. This is to say that in knowing God through knowing His effects, we know the effects as related to their cause and so metaphysically *like* God Who is their cause. Further, the creature’s participation in God by way of likeness is a sharing in God’s exemplarity or perfection. So it is, to give an example, that finite things are good by participation and thus resemble the infinitely perfect goodness (*bonitas*) which is in God.¹⁵ The theme of participation in the perfection or being of God is a recurring one in Thomas’ writings and is remarkably expressed in the following passage from the *Commentary on the Gospel of John*:

Since therefore all things which are participate in “to be” and are beings through participation, it is necessary for something to be at the summit of all things, which is its very “to be” through its essence, that is, wherein its essence is its “to be.” And this is God who is the most sufficient and most worthy and most perfect cause of the whole of “to be,” by whom all things which are participate in “to be”...¹⁶

To highlight additionally Thomas’ analogical approach through participation and so its characterization

as theophanic, let us take up the two following disclosures of God in creation: power (potentia) and light. God’s likeness as power is, as we might expect, especially present in *De potentia*. In elaboration of God’s power, for Thomas, as theophanic, we must always keep in



mind that "... active power is the same in God as his essence..."¹⁷ In short, as God's essence is His "to be," so His power which is active power (*potentia activa*) is His "to be." Thus it is that what we can call, for Thomas the act or "to be" or spiritual energy of a thing, hearkening back to Aristotle's notion of act as the life or energy (*energeia*) of a thing," manifests divine power. Wherever then finite "to be" is present, God's power is revealed since the act or power or "to be" of the creature participates in the infinite "to be" of God. To avoid any confusion, however, let us be clear that only God creates.¹⁹ For creation is out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and requires infinite power to make being from non-being. In Thomas' words: "... creation requires infinite energy in the power by which it comes forth ..." ²⁰ Hence, only infinite act or "to be" can meet the challenge. The power or act of finite beings then is a likeness communicated (*diffundere*) to them²¹ but not the active creative power itself. For the latter power is the divine "to be" itself and is predicated of God essentially but of creatures by participation.²² The finite power of a creature is the act of energy and life which makes the finite thing to be. It is the created "to be" which moves and lives as grounded in the infinite creative power or "to be" of God.

Let us look next at the theophanic or analogous character of light. In this regard, we have already made some reference to Thomas' *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. To further examine the commentary, we find Thomas speaking of the power or energy (*virtus*) of light which belongs to sensible things but even more fundamentally to spiritual things.²³ Yet, no thing created is the light (*lux*), not any man, not even John the Baptist who was sent to bear witness to the light of God's Word.²⁴ For:

John was not "the light," taken with the article, because this is more accurately God's alone; but if "light" is expressed without the article, then John and all saints were made light. Now this is the reason for speaking thus: the Son of God is light through his essence, but John and all saints through participation.²⁵

This is therefore why, in Thomas' interpretation, John is characterized further on as a lamp (*lucerna*) burning (*ardere*) and shining forth (*lucere*).²⁶ Thomas depicts a lamp as not giving light through itself, but by participating in light.²⁷ Unlike a lamp, light shines forth light through itself. Indeed, because John is a spiritual lamp (*lucerna spiritualis*), he is burning, i.e. inflamed with the fire of love (*ignis caritatis*).²⁸ Concerning this shining forth of

love, one could in fact pursue Thomas' use of love as another rich exemplification of likeness or analogy to God.

Let us, however, continue our focus on light by turning to Thomas' *Commentary on the First Letter to Timothy*. In this letter there is the passage where God is said to dwell in "unapproachable light, whom no human being has ever seen or can see" (I Tim. 6:16). Thomas, reflecting here, speaks of a thing being known by its light but also by its form or act.²⁹ Further, he identifies the amount of light with the amount of act.³⁰ Nevertheless, "Things ... which are indeed acts, but not pure, are things shining forth, yet not light. But the divine essence, which is pure act, is light itself."³¹ Sensible and spiritual being then manifests God's light as things shining forth (*lucetia*). The light itself, nonetheless, remains unapproachable (*inaccessibile*) since no created intellect can "comprehend" God. So it is, Thomas points out, that Moses approached God in the darkness (Ex. 20:21) and, as Pseudo-Dionysius indicates, "All darkness is unapproachable light."³² Understood another way, God's light is so transcendent or full of surpassingness (*excedentia*) as to be darkness to spiritual vision, just as, in an example of Thomas', the sun is invisible to the eye of the owl.³³



This theme of God's darkness returns us now to what the earlier part of the paper developed as the elusiveness or hiddenness of God. What Josef Pieper calls the negative element in Thomas' thought³⁴ might be summed up in the following statement from *De potentia*:

Since our intellect is not equal to the divine substance, this very substance of God remains, transcending our intellect, and thus is unknown to us. On account of this, that is ultimate in human knowledge of God wherein man knows he does not know God ...³⁵

Knowing that we do not know God: this then is the peak of human knowledge. Such a bold assertion drives home our human limits in the face of God's infinite and therefore incomprehensible being. What light we have about God remains analogous light, a light in the darkness, but nonetheless light. Indeed, as described in *De veritate*: "Creatures are darkness in so far as they are from noth-

ing, but in so far as they are from God, they participate in some likeness of Him and thus lead to His likeness.³⁶ It is therefore this darkness (*tenebra*) of creatures which lies at the heart of God's hiddenness. For as coming from nothing, creatures are, in the truest sense of the word, an infinite distance from God, and can only shine forth as created light of finite "to be" through participation in the infinite light of pure "to be." As one might expect, the crowning written achievement of Thomas' life, the *Summa theologiae*, also embraces this theme of creaturely participation in the hiddenness of God.³⁷ We give the following passage from this work, which aptly describes the hidden God as the source of every creature's perfection and so of the aforementioned creaturely participation:

From divine effects we do not come to understand what the divine nature is in itself, so we do not know of God what he is. We know of him only as transcending all creatures, as the cause of their perfections, and as lacking in anything that is merely creaturely ... It is in this way that the word "God" signifies the divine nature: it is used to mean something that is above all that is, and that is the source of all things, and is distinct from them all.³⁸

In closing, let us keep in mind Thomas' continuity with the medieval affirmation of God's presence as theophany and yet as an elusive presence which in its infinite nature stays hidden and incomprehensible. Whether it is the Neoplatonic participation in super-essential unity of Pseudo-Dionysius,³⁹ God's manifestation of the hidden (*occulti manifestatio*) in John Scotus Eriugena,⁴⁰ created resemblances of the ineffable essence of God in Anselm,⁴¹ Bonaventure's teaching of created traces and images rooted in the mystical darkness of God⁴² or even

the principle of translucency in Gothic architecture whereby the stained-glass windows are in their luminosity signs of an unseen source which is the divine light⁴³ - all reveal with powerful and vital expression the paradoxical convergence of God's presence and hiddenness. Nevertheless, Thomas, more clearly and decisively, in our view, than any other medieval thinker, bridges the gap between positive and negative theology. This he does, as we have emphasized, through his analogy of "to be," which in its theophanic character links the created effects or likenesses of God, and so knowledge about God, with their source who is God as hidden, i.e. as unknown in His infinite essence. In an age like our own which has lost the sense of God's mystery or hiddenness, Thomas' thought is a reminder that without theophany there is no connection to divine mystery. The preoccupation with an empirical and mechanistic description of nature has profoundly contributed to the West's forgetfulness of this deeper vision of nature as theophany.

However, for those of us who have forgotten, there can also be recollection. We can thus indeed recapture the spirit of Thomas, that spirit which is trans-empirical, i.e. metaphysical, and, even more fundamentally, Biblical in character. In so doing, we can take to heart that analogy as theophany is nothing less than the disclosure of the psalmist's proclamation:

"The heavens declare the glory of God ..." (Ps. 19:2)

and the paradoxical complement from Isaiah:

"Truly, you are a God that hides yourself." (Isa. 45:15)



NOTES

1 “... *Deus est suum esse ... ergo cognitio qua Deus per creaturas videtur, non est ipsius essentia, sed aenigmatica et specularis, et a remotis.*” St. Thomas Aquinas, *In evangelium Joannis. Expositio* (Edition: Parma, v. 10 1860), ch. 1, lect. 11; hereafter Joan.

2Joan., ch. 1, lect. 11.

3St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (Edition: Blackfriars, 1964 and on) (Latin text and English translation), Ia., q. 2, a. 2 (v. 2 - trans. T. McDermott, O.P.); hereafter ST.

4Joan., ch. lect 3.

5David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 15, 49-50.

6 “*Deus ... est totaliter actus ... actus purus ... unde per suam actionem producit totum ens subsistens, nullo praesupposito, utpote qui est totius esse principium, et secundum se totum.*” St. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* (Edition: Parma, v. 8, 1856), q. 3, a. 1; hereafter Depot.

7See, concerning this, Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

8St. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus. Commentaria* (Edition: Parma, v. 15, 1864), ch. 9, lect. 3; hereafter Diony.

9Diony., ch. 9, lect. 3.

10Diony., ch. 9, lect. 3.

11 “*Creatura habet quod Dei est: unde et Deo recte similis dicitur. Non autem sic potest dici Deum habere quod creaturae est. Unde nec convenienter dicitur Deum creaturae similem esse ...*” St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate catholicae fidei contra gentiles* (Edition: Parma, v. 5, 1855) - *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, trans. A. C. Pegis (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1955), I, ch. 29.

12See especially ch. 3 of George P. Klubertanz, S.J., *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960).

13Klubertanz, p. 94.

14St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* (Edition: Parma, v. 9, 1859) - *The Disputed Questions on Truth* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952-54), q. 23, a. 7, ad 9 (v. 3 - trans. R. W. Schmidt, S.J.) hereafter *De ver.*

15ST, Ia, q. 6, a. 4 (v. 2 - trans. McDermott)

16 “*Cum ergo omnia quae sunt, participant esse, et sint per participationem entia, necesse est esse aliquid in cacumine omnium rerum, quod sit ipsum esse per suam essentiam, idest quod sua essentia sit suum esse; et hoc est Deus, qui est sufficientissima et dignissima et perfectissima causa totius esse; a quo omnia quae sunt, participant esse...*” Joan., prologue of St. Thomas.

17 “...*potentia activa est idem in Deo quod ejus essentia...*” *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 6.

18See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Loeb Classical Library - (Greek text and English translation), trans. H. Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), *Ek. Theta* (IX): 1046a1-5, sect. 6, sect. 8.

19*De pot.*, q. 3, a. 1 and a. 4.

20 “...*creatio infinitam virtutem requirit in potentia a que egreditur...*” *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 4.

21*De Pot.*, q. 1, a. 1.

22*De pot.*, q. 7, a. 7, ad 2.

23Joan., ch. 1, lect. 3.

24For Thomas the greatest theophany of all, the culmination of theophany, is, of course, the Word made flesh. This is what we can call the theophany of glory (*gloria*). In this regard, Thomas speaks of the glory of the Word, which is revealed, yet still hiding the divine light or essence of God (Joan., ch. 1, lect. 8). That is to say, the incarnation of the Word is covered with “the cloud of our flesh” (*nube nostrae carnis*) (Joan., ch. 1, lect. 8). The “cloud” here connects with the hidden character of God as disclosed to the Israelites in the cloud in the desert (Joan., ch. 1, lect. 8).

25 “... *Joannes non erat lux cum articulo, quia hoc est solius Dei proprium; sed si lux ponatur sine articulo, erant Joannes, et omnes sancti, facti lux: quod est dictum: Filius Dei est lux per essentiam; Joannes vero et omnes sancti, per participationem.*” Joan., ch. 1, lect. 4.

26Joan., ch. 5, lect. 6.

27Ibid.

28Ibid.

29St. Thomas Aquinas, *Epistola I ad Timotheum. Expositio* (Edition: Parma, v. 13, 1862), ch. 6, lect. 3; hereafter I Tim.

30I Tim., ch. 6, lect. 3.

31 “Res...quae sunt actus quidem, sed non purus, lucentia sunt, sed non lux. Sed divina essentia, quae est actus purus, est ipsa lux.” I Tim., ch. 6, lect. 3.

32 “Omnis caligo est inaccessible lumen.” I tim., ch. 6, lect. 3.

33I Tim., ch. 6, lect. 3.

34See ch. 2 of Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1957).

35 “... quod ex quo intellectus noster divinam substantiam non adaequat, hoc ipsum quod est Dei substantia remanet, nostrum intellectum excedens, et ita a nobis ignoratur: et propter hoc illud est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo quod sciat se Deum nescire...” Depot., q. 7, a. 5, ad 14.

36 “... quod creatura est tenebra inquantum est ex nihilo; inquantum vero est a Deo, similitudinem aliquam ejus participat, et sic in ejus similitudinem ducit.” *De ver.*, q. 18, a. 2, ad 5 (v. 2 - trans. J. V. McGlynn, S.J.)

37See especially in ST, Ia: questions 3, 4, 6 (v. 2 - trans. McDermott); questions 12, 13 (v. 3 - trans. H. McCabe, O.P.); question 14 (v. 4 - trans. T. Gornall, S.J.)

38 “... ex effectibus divinis divinam naturam non possumus cognoscere secundum quod in se est, ut sciamus de ea quid est, sed per modum eminentiae, et causalitatis, et negationis ... Et sic hoc nomen, Deus, significat naturam divinam: impositum est enim nomen hoc ad aliquid significandum supra omnia existens, quod est principium omnium, et remotum ab omnibus.” ST, Ia., q. 13, a. 8, ad 2 (v. 3 - trans. McCabe).

39See *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: S.P.C.K., 1940).

40See John Scotus Eriugena, *De divisione naturae (Patrologia latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, CXXII - Paris, 1865), especially 3.4.

41See the *Monologium of St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962).

42See *Saint Bonaventure: The Mind's Road to God*, trans. G. Boas (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1953).

43See Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1956), especially his focus on the architectural vision of Abbot Suger of St.-Denis.