

Thomas Aquinas, the Beatific Vision and the role of Christ: A Reply to Hans Boersma

SIMON FRANCIS GAINÉ, O.P.

Blackfriars, Oxford

simon.gaine@bfriars.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: This article continues a conversation with Hans Boersma on the role of Jesus Christ in the beatific vision enjoyed by the saints. In his book *Seeing God*, Boersma maintained that there is a Christological deficit in Thomas Aquinas's account of the beatific vision. In response I suggested that Aquinas held that Christ's beatific vision is forever the cause of that of the saints. In his reply to me, Boersma more or less accepted my conclusion, but claimed there was still a Christological deficit because Aquinas mentions the thesis only rarely. He then drew attention to a second, more important factor in the alleged deficit, namely, Aquinas's identification of the divine essence rather than Christ as the vision's object. The present article responds to both elements of the alleged deficit, arguing against Boersma on the basis of the *Summa Theologiae*'s structure that there is no such deficit in Aquinas. While Boersma, after finding against Aquinas, moves in conclusion "towards a theophanic view of the beatific vision," in my own conclusion I sketch out an alternative, Thomist account of the relationship between the beatific vision and heavenly theophany.

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

This article continues a conversation with Hans Boersma on the role of Jesus Christ in the beatific vision enjoyed by the saints. In his book *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* and elsewhere, Boersma (2018a; 2017) has maintained that there is a Christological deficit in Thomas Aquinas's account of the beatific vision, because Aquinas recognised no real role for Christ in this vision. In a response to him I suggested that Aquinas held a Christological eschatology in which Christ the Head's beatific vision is forever the cause of

that of the heavenly members of his Body (Gaine 2018). In his reply to my article, Boersma (2018b, 6-7) more or less accepted my conclusion and even added in its favour further textual evidence from Aquinas's corpus, while remaining sceptical of some that I had presented. This change in his position, however, Boersma represents as only slight within the context of his overall assessment of Aquinas on the beatific vision (Boersma 2018b, 7). He now asserts that there remains a Christological deficit in respect of Christ's causal role in the vision, on account of the fact that Aquinas only "rarely alludes" to it. That, however, is only one of two "factors that make up Aquinas's christological deficit" (Boersma 2018b, 2). More important than the first, he says, is that, for Aquinas, the object of the beatific vision is not Christ but the divine essence. Boersma correctly points out that I did not address this second charge in my article, but since he has now drawn attention to that omission, I shall take the opportunity here to address both elements of the Christological deficit he alleges. Having addressed each in turn, I shall end by sketching out an alternative to Boersma's "theophanic view of the beatific vision," which he presents as his own conclusion.

The first of the two parts of Boersma's alleged deficit is a shortfall in references to the causal link between Christ's glory and that of the saints. Boersma (2018b, 7) says, "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." As already noted, Boersma and I are now agreed on the fact that Aquinas held that the saints' beatific vision depends on Christ. Moreover, we are also agreed that there is an absence from Aquinas's writings of anything but a few references to the thesis. What we disagree on is whether or not this absence constitutes a deficit. A deficit, it seems to me, is more than an absence of something. An absence becomes a deficit when what is absent *should* be there, such that there is a shortfall in the "requisite amount", and for this something or someone can be held responsible. The power to fly is absent from among the powers of my humanity, but I

do not think that anyone would regard this absence as constituting a deficit in my powers, thereby apportioning blame for it, since it is not natural to human physiology that people can flap their forelimbs and fly. Were I instead to lack knowledge of basic moral principles, someone would be in a better position to judge there to be a deficit in my knowledge, and ask who was culpable for it, given that such knowledge *should* be there. In the case of Aquinas's doctrine of the causal dependence of the saints' vision on Christ, which he mentions only rarely, Boersma holds Aquinas guilty of some deficit, and I do not. Boersma (2018, 5) says that, despite our agreements, I still feel that he misrepresents Aquinas. While that is indeed so, it may be more to the point to say that I think Boersma *misjudges* Aquinas.

Aquinas, like anyone else, must be judged on the evidence, as Boersma would surely agree. Part of what lies behind our divergence is what counts as evidence in assessing Aquinas's eschatology. Boersma seems willing to admit as true evidence only what Aquinas has actually said, together with what he does *not* say where Boersma supposes that he *should* have said it (Boersma 2018b, 4-5). I, however, have appealed not simply to what Aquinas does and does not say, but to the wider context of what he does and does not say, namely, the placing of eschatology as part of his mature thought in an explicitly Christological setting, as evidenced in the plan he announces for the *Summa Theologiae*, together with the place of Christology itself within the *Summa's* wider structure, and the implications of intellectual commitments that run throughout his thought (Gaine 2018, 7-11; Gaine 2016, 434-35). Only in light of such wider considerations can we see where in the *Summa* Aquinas was planning to speak of the issue in question, what he had been committing himself to say, and why he did not treat it explicitly in other places. Only so, it seems to me, can we come to a proper appreciation of what Aquinas actually did or did not say about Christ and the beatific vision, to a fair judgement from the point of view of historical theology as to whether or not he is guilty of a Christological deficit, and beyond that to a fair and fruitful comparison by

systematic theology of his approach with those of other theologians, including Boersma himself. In contrast, Boersma wants to interpret the texts not by including such a full exploration of them on their own terms, but according to his own dogmatic judgement of what should be said in any one place in the *Summa* (Boersma 2018b, 7-8). It seems to me that there is a difference between the two of us on how historical theology should approach theologians of the past in order to make an assessment of their work and so bring them into dialogue with other theological positions in systematic theology. While my approach leads me to conclude that there is no Christological deficit, Boersma's leads him to say that there is.

Boersma locates the first factor in the *paucity* of Aquinas's actual references to the link between Christ's vision and that of the saints, and holds Aquinas culpable for it. His current criticism of Aquinas is not that he does not hold the thesis in question, but that he does not mention it very often, and not at all in places where he should have done. In his assessment of the evidence he is prepared to admit, Boersma quite rightly holds that, if a theologian mentions something a lot, it must be important to that theologian. For example, Boersma is much taken by how often John Owen spoke of Christ in connection with the beatific vision: "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." (Boersma 2018b, 9) Now we can agree that this quantity surely manifests that it is an important part of Owen's eschatology that the beatific vision is directed to Christ. But, more controversially, Boersma seems also inclined to hold that, if a theologian mentions something only rarely, then it is somehow lacking real importance to that theologian. For example, I have argued elsewhere that vision of the divine essence is also part of Owen's understanding of the beatific vision (Gaine 2016, 436; see also McDonald 2012, 150). Boersma, however, makes much of the fact that this is mentioned in only two passages, where in each case Owen

goes on to mention Christ. Boersma refuses to conclude from these passages that Owen agreed with Aquinas that the beatific vision is directed to the divine essence. He says that such a view “fails duly to take account of the extraordinary preponderance of references to Christ as the object of the beatific vision.” (Boersma 2018b, 12) Boersma is impressed by many references and unimpressed by few, and so he says that Owen’s “unrelenting focus on Christ the object of our beatific vision does not jive with the two comments he makes about seeing the divine essence.” Boersma sees Owen as “inconsistent” for accepting both, but interprets “the bottom line” of Owen’s theology of the beatific vision as lying in Christ’s person and human nature. He writes, “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.” For Boersma, the many references triumph over the few.

When it comes to interpreting Aquinas on the first part of the “deficit”, Boersma is likewise impressed by many references and unimpressed by few. Since Aquinas mentions the link between Christ’s vision and that of the saints only rarely, Boersma seems to suppose it was not important to him. While I agree that many mentions of a thesis by a theologian demonstrate its importance to that theologian, I would be more wary of assuming that few mentions betray a corresponding unimportance. It seems to me there can be many reasons why theologians mention something important to them only rarely or not at all, and it is the task of the historical theologian, in seeking a deeper understanding of a predecessor’s doctrine, to investigate such possibilities. It may be, for example, that the matter in question is so universally accepted that the predecessor felt no need to make it explicit. In the case of Owen, it may be that he did not mention the divine essence so much because it was widely accepted that the beatific vision was directed to it, while his particular theory of Christ’s epistemological mediation of the vision was more novel and required more attention. It is for such reasons that I do *not* judge his mere two mentions indicative of a theological deficit. In

the case of Aquinas, I suggested in my previous article, first, that he does not mention his own understanding of Christ's mediation of the heavenly vision very often for the reason that the appropriate question that required its treatment was never raised (Gaine, 2018, 9-10), although, secondly, there is reason to think that he would have so treated it, had he completed the *Summa* (Gaine 2018, 10-11; see also Gaine 2016, 434-35). In his response to me, Boersma rejects both points (Boersma 2018b, 7-8). In what follows, I shall clarify each point, while taking account of Boersma's criticisms.

My suggestion that Aquinas was intending to treat the question of the dependence of the saints' beatific vision on Christ's humanity later in the unfinished section of the *Summa* is based, from a historical viewpoint, on the theological structure of the whole work. The *Summa* is divided into three parts, and the Third Part is devoted to Christology. While Aquinas treats the vision from other points of view in the First and Second Parts, as we shall see, it is only in the Third Part that he treats it in explicit connection with his doctrine of Christ. This he does in his section on Christ's knowledge (*ST*, III, q. 9, a. 2; q. 10, see Gaine 2015), and I have contended that there is reason to suppose that he would have done so again when treating eschatology within the Christological Third Part, had he not left the Third Part uncompleted (Gaine 2018, 10-11).

Boersma (2018b, 4-5) responds with a certain measure of scepticism to my suggestion that Aquinas would have treated the Christological aspects of the beatific vision in this way, and is hesitant to introduce such "speculation" into his assessment of Aquinas's theology. He says that the "only evidence" for my suggestion "is *ST* I, q. 2, proem." (Boersma 2018b, 7) This is the passage near the beginning of the *Summa* where Aquinas sets out his tripartite structure, saying of the Third Part simply that it was to treat of "Christ, who as man, is the way to God". Boersma's complaint is that, as the only piece of evidence in favour of my thesis, it "has to do a lot of heavy lifting." I take him not to mean that the passage does not

show that the Third Part treats Christology, since that is evident from the quotation. What he says is that “whatever [Aquinas] 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.” It is for this reason that Boersma does not admit my historical appeal to the wider context and structure of the *Summa* as evidence for determining whether or not Aquinas is guilty of a Christological deficit: the appeal “does not work,” Boersma says.

While I agree that the content of this passage can hardly provide a “necessary logic” by which a treatment of Christ’s role in the beatific vision under the heading of eschatology is absolutely entailed, I do think it marks the beginning of an historical-theological case that it is highly implausible that Aquinas would not have expressed in that treatise what Boersma and I are agreed was his opinion. While I agree that this does not follow by strict logical necessity, there is a case to say that it is more than one simple possibility among others. Besides the passage Boersma cites from near the beginning of the *Summa*, there are in fact other passages relevant to my case. So while *ST*, I, q. 2, proem. does not explicitly herald a treatment of eschatology in the Third Part, that *is* what we find in the introduction to the Part itself. Aquinas says: “Because our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ ... showed forth to us in himself the way of truth by which we are able to attain the beatitude of immortal life by rising again, it is necessary for the completion of the entire business of theology that, after our consideration of the final end of human life and the virtues and vices [the Second Part], there should follow a consideration of the Saviour of all and the benefits bestowed by him on the human race. Concerning this we must consider: first, the Saviour himself; secondly, his sacraments, through which we obtain salvation; thirdly, immortal life, which we attain through him by rising again.”

From this I take it to be clear that the *Summa's* Christological Part was to include material about the life of heaven. Indeed Aquinas manifests the same intention from time to time within the Third Part by noting that he is reserving certain eschatological questions for such a section (e.g., *ST* 3, q. 54, a. 1; q. 59, proem.). Not that we can suppose from this that these occasional references will give an exhaustive list of every question Aquinas was to raise there. It might be tempting to suppose that his explicit references to the resurrection mean that he was to treat nothing other than the resurrection in that section. There were, however, other areas of eschatology not yet properly addressed in the *Summa*, and which would surely not have been omitted from a treatise on eschatology. One example is the purgatorial state for separated souls, which had been but alluded to elsewhere in the *Summa*, with the promise of fuller treatment to come (*ST* III, q. 52, a. 8, obj. 2). While Aquinas had admittedly treated beatific knowledge more extensively than mere allusion in various places in the *Summa*, these passages hardly add up to a full treatment of this heavenly beatitude, as we shall see.

A further reason to suppose that Aquinas was to return to the beatific vision is based on the fact he understood the bodily glory of the saints in terms of an overflow of the glory of the soul (*ST*, I-II, q. 3, a. 3 ad 3). He could not have treated the glory of the body under the resurrection without recalling the glory of the soul, where the glory of the intellect takes pride of place as the act of beatific vision. Back when Aquinas was dealing with the role of supernatural grace, he had not neglected to treat of it in regard to the *intellect*, before turning to the will (*ST*, I-II, q. 109, a. 1). In the case of glory, which is the consummation of grace, we should likewise expect attention to the intellect and indeed to its most important act. Moreover, Aquinas had certainly indicated as recently as the Second Part that the infused (as distinct from beatific) knowledge of the saints could increase up to the day of judgement (*ST* II-II, q. 52, a. 3; cf. *ST*, I, q. 106, a. 4). The intellectual life of heavenly glory was thus ripe for further consideration in the *Summa's* eschatology.

Having confirmed that such eschatological questions were to be treated in the Third Part, it seems to me highly implausible, on the basis of a sound historical theology, to suppose that Aquinas intended to treat these or any other questions in this Christological Part of the *Summa* without treating them *Christologically*. I made the point in my response to Boersma that Aquinas's approach to the sacraments in the Third Part was perspicuously Christological (Gaine 2018, 10). The upshot is that we cannot suppose that Aquinas was going to treat the life of heaven in an explicitly Christological context without asking about the role played by Christ in the heavenly lives of the saints. The fact that Aquinas says at the beginning of the Third Part that their arrival at "immortal life" takes place through Christ by their resurrection alludes to his teaching that their rising depends *causally* on Christ's (cf. *ST*, III, q. 56, a. 1). Given that Aquinas held that at the essential core of heavenly life lies the intellectual act of beatific vision, the only fair assessment historical theology can give is that it is highly unlikely that he would not have asked about the causal role of Christ in regard to this act too. Not to have done so would have been a decisive departure from the Christological character he envisaged for the whole of the Third Part.

Moreover, we know what answer Aquinas would almost certainly have given to this question, since, as Boersma now agrees, he already took the view that the saints' glory was causally dependent on that of Christ, as indicated so recently as III, q. 22, a. 5. For Aquinas to have abandoned this answer for another in the meantime would have meant also relinquishing his thoroughgoing commitment across physics, metaphysics and theology to the principle that the first in the genus is the cause of all else in the genus, together with the identification of Christ as the Head *especially* of those in glory (*ST* III, q. 8, a. 3; see Gaine 2018, 7-9). From the point of view of a sound historical theology, the burden surely lies on one who entertains such a decisive departure to produce a reason why Aquinas would have abandoned such a

strong a philosophical commitment and so clear a recognition of the causal primacy of Christ as Head of the Body. But that is not what Boersma does.

Boersma (2018b, 4) limits his agreement with me in this to what Aquinas *should* have done: he should have treated the question of Christ's role in the beatific vision of the saints, and he should have said that their glory was dependent on that of Christ. For some reason, Boersma hesitates to commit himself to the view that this is what Aquinas *would* have done. While, on the basis of my approach to historical theology, I take the view that Aquinas, with his characteristic consistency, would surely have done what he should have done, Boersma holds back. While he treats Aquinas's affirmation of the thesis here as a mere possibility, I have treated it more as probable, almost certain, on the basis of a wider set of evidence. If my approach to historical theology is sound, then Aquinas can be shown to have been going some way to clearing himself of the charge of a Christological deficit.

Boersma, however, by his own dogmatic lights, demands more than a single treatment at the end of the *Summa*: he expects Aquinas to mention Christ's role every time the beatific vision is addressed. And so I turn from my first point about what Aquinas might have written to my second point, namely, those treatments of the beatific vision he did complete, and what he did and did not write there. The passages Boersma (2018b, 8) brings forward are *ST* I, q. 12 and *ST* I-II, qq. 1-5. The first asks whether God's essence can be known, and the second enquires into human happiness or beatitude. Our question is whether there must be a deficit on Aquinas's part if he did not mention the heavenly causal role of Christ in these two previous treatments of the beatific vision. While Boersma answers, on the basis of his own dogmatic position, that there is a deficit, my own more historically-informed view has been that Aquinas had no reason to make explicit mention of the thesis in either passage, because each was addressing questions that did not require the thesis to be raised at those points (Gaine 2018, 9-10). I argue, again in connection with the theological method expressed in the

structure of the *Summa*, that whether or not an individual passage is guilty of a Christological deficit should be judged according to whether or not Aquinas's own method required him to speak of the thesis here. If it required him to do so, and he did not, there would be a deficit. But if it did not require him to do so, he cannot be blamed for any such deficit. This is why, on my more historical approach, we should assess Aquinas's content on the basis of what he took himself to be doing in each case, in the context of his wider work.

Boersma, however, rejects my view. He says, "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." (Boersma 2018b, 8) I take Boersma to mean not just that we can have our own assumptions about *which* questions Aquinas should ask in a formal way, but also about the content of his answers, together with his reasons for treating these questions and answers. In terms of content, it seems to me that, on Boersma's own dogmatic view of the relationship between Christ and the beatific vision, he must assume that *any* treatment of the beatific vision by *any* theologian should include how that theologian envisages the role of Christ in the vision. Given then that Aquinas held to the heavenly causal power of Christ's vision, it can be assumed that he should have treated that causal power at every point he treated the beatific vision.

Boersma also introduces a further but more historical assumption about why Aquinas should have mentioned the thesis in the two passages he brings forward. He explains: "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 ... 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." However, Boersma gives no clue as to how the historic content of these

controversies about the beatific vision would have required Aquinas to appeal to Christ's heavenly role. Nevertheless, he makes the very strong conclusion that "Aquinas would have had every reason to turn his attention to Christ's eternal role in his prolific writings on the beatific vision." In what follows I shall clarify my own understanding of why Aquinas did not discuss this issue in I, q. 12 and I-II, qq. 1-5 with reference to the overall structure of the *Summa*. In doing this I hope to confirm, according to this more historical approach, how we may legitimately have a different expectation of what Aquinas should and would do under the heading of eschatology from what he had done in earlier sections of the *Summa*.

The Third Part aims among other things to show why Christ was a very fitting Saviour for us. Aquinas did not think that incarnation was the only way open to God by which he could have saved us (*ST*, III, q. 1, a. 2), and this is of crucial importance to his method and the *Summa's* structure.¹ What Aquinas aims to do is to explore God's wisdom in freely choosing the incarnation of the Son as his way of saving sinners. This theological understanding is achieved by setting out beforehand in the Second Part what it would take for human creatures to return to God as their happiness. This supernatural beatitude and the means to attain it are things God could have conferred on us without an incarnation. But, having set out in the Second Part the character of such beatitude and what would be required for attaining it in terms of grace, virtues and gifts, and so on, Aquinas has put himself in a good position to show in the Third Part why the incarnate Son was so a fitting a way for human beings to make this return to that end through such means.

This method of reserving Christology to the Third Part, and so seeing its divine wisdom in the light of the divinely-established requirements of the Second Part, calls for a nuanced approach to how Christ makes any appearance in the First and Second Parts. While Christ is unavoidably present throughout the *Summa*, whether implicitly or indeed explicitly,

¹ For relevant literature, see Barnes (2012, 183-93). Also of interest is Jordan (2017, 12-16).

since much of the contents of the First and Second Parts, as with the Third, is dependent on divine revelation through Christ, Aquinas aims to avoid unnecessary repetition (cf. *ST*, proem.) by reserving formal treatment of questions about Christ to the Third Part. This means that he made reference to Christ in the earlier parts only insofar as it was useful to his theological purpose. Hence, while his doctrine of grace, for example, was undoubtedly shaped in his own mind by revelation through Christ, he held that grace could have been given without an incarnation, and so he does not speak explicitly of Christ so much in the treatise on grace. But once that treatise is set out within the Second Part, Aquinas has made suitable preparation to show in the Third Part why Christ fittingly possessed a fullness of grace so that he might cause it in us as Head of the Body (*ST*, III, q. 7, a. 9).

The causation of grace provides us with a ready example of how Aquinas typically would have occasion to mention Christ in the Second Part. In I-II, q. 112, a. 1, Aquinas asks what the efficient cause of grace is. Despite the important fact that the grace we experience is the grace of Christ our Head, his response is not given over to emphasising this important Christological truth. Instead his argument runs through the limitations of created nature, grace as surpassing nature, and grace as divinization, to the conclusion that only God and no creature can cause grace. He does not need to bring forward Christological material from the Third Part to establish this conclusion.

Where Christ does appear in the article, as is typical in this treatise, is in an objection and its answer. He is explicitly of importance to the issue of grace's cause because John 1:17, as was widely known, says that grace came through Jesus Christ. But if Scripture says that "Jesus Christ" (signifying here not only his divinity but also his created nature) brings about grace in us, then that seems to suggest that a created reality can be the cause of grace after all. Aquinas answers the objection by distinguishing between a principal cause and its instrument, where the principal cause is divine and Christ's humanity the instrument: Christ's

humanity causes grace not by its own power but by virtue of its union with the divinity, through which Christ's actions are salvific (ad 1). It is only in the Third Part that Aquinas unfolds the saving meaning of this instrumentality for us in regard to Christ's human nature, his sufferings, and his actions on our behalf from this life through to the next. My point is that the Second Part does not make this brief anticipation of an extensive Christological doctrine for the reason that it is important in a general way to the causation of grace (though it is). For Aquinas, this mention of Christ in the Second Part would have been deemed necessary because of the well-known witness of Scripture, its potential to be misinterpreted, and so the question of the causation of grace to be wrongly answered by misidentifying Christ's humanity as the principal cause of grace. Aquinas has a positive reason here to anticipate material that properly belongs to the Third Part.

This is but one example of how, whenever Aquinas anticipates the material of the Third Part in an objection, a response, or a *sed contra*, he does so with a specific theological purpose in mind. Absent such a purpose, he tends to leave Christological material to the Third Part, where it can have best effect in light of what had gone before. But, given that there are examples of where Aquinas anticipates material from the Third Part for definite reasons, we need then to ask whether Aquinas should have made a similar anticipation in his earlier treatments of the beatific vision, for reasons such as historical controversy about the vision, which Boersma suggests. If he should have done so, but failed to, that would surely count as evidence of a Christological deficit in that passage. Should it be found plausible that he had no need to do so, an absence of the thesis can hardly be reckoned a deficit.

Although it is true that various aspects of the issue were controversial in Aquinas's time, it is not clear to me how the causal power of Christ's beatific vision would help Aquinas in his entry into controversy on any of these issues. For his part Aquinas evidently did not find it "in place" to bring forward to the First Part a thesis that properly belonged to

the Third Part, and I take that to be the case for the following reasons. I understand Aquinas's omission to be rooted in the fact that in I, q. 12 he was not giving a full account of heaven or even of that core aspect which is the beatific vision (Gaine 2018, 10). He is rather, as part of his treatise on God in himself, asking about the different ways in which God can be known. One suggestion among others is that intellectual creatures can know God by vision of his essence. Aquinas wants to ask whether such knowledge is possible, by what epistemological means it would take place, whether it would be exercised through natural power, and so on. In each case Aquinas's argumentation does not include reference to Christ's beatific vision causing that of the saints, and, as I have said, this is presumably because Aquinas did not judge that Christological material appropriate to the Third Part was needed to make any of the arguments required in his responses.

For example, since he held that the incarnation, though so very fitting a way for God in his wisdom to bestow supernatural life on creatures, was not in theory absolutely necessary for that bestowal, I take it that he judged there to be no need to appeal in the first article to Christ and his causal power in order to establish the general possibility of beatific knowledge. Instead that is done by an appeal to such things as the natural desire to know God. As for an appeal to revelation in the response and the *sed contra*, he thinks that the reality of knowledge of God's essence in heaven can be most easily secured by authoritative reference to the fact that blessed know God just as he is (1 John 3:2). No further reference from Scripture or Tradition to the causal dependence of the saints' eternal enjoyment of this knowledge is required to establish the fact of their heavenly knowledge and so of its possibility. How it is caused by Christ is thus reserved to the Third Part, where the actual relationship of the beatific vision to Christ, given the fact of the incarnation, is properly raised. However, we may wonder whether, while not required in the response or *sed contra*, the causal power of Christ's beatific vision might appear in the objections and their answers. In response, it seems

to me that, since any objection in this article must as such seek to undermine the possibility of knowledge of God's essence, any appeal to the causal power of Christ's beatific vision would be self-defeating to such an extent that it could hardly merit inclusion in any objection. But with no requirement to base his conclusion on Christ's heavenly causal power in this or indeed any other article in the question, it seems to me that Aquinas must be cleared of any Christological deficit in I, q. 12. If there is no case to show why he *should* have anticipated material from the Third Part here, he cannot be found guilty of not doing so.

I turn now to the other section Boersma brings forward, that is, the opening questions of the Second Part. Boersma thinks it not unreasonable that Aquinas should have discussed Christ's mediating role in the beatific vision in his treatment of happiness and our final end. He points out that Aquinas does not strictly reserve eschatological questions for the end of the *Summa*, but addresses them at the beginning of the Second Part (Boersma, 2018b, 8). As we shall see, this is to some extent correct. Boersma then (on the basis of his own theological assumptions) goes on: "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." And not only that: "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?" It is evident, however, that it need not be mentioned among the first, if it need not be mentioned at all. In seeking to explain why Aquinas does not mention it at all, I shall again appeal historically to the overall theological structure of the *Summa*. While I agree with Boersma that Aquinas should mention Christ's causal role in connection with our heavenly beatitude, I take the view that he would have done so in his treatise on eschatology at the end of the Christological Third Part, where Boersma's demands would indeed apply. The reason why Aquinas did not do so in the Second Part lies in the way the Second Part makes ready for the Third by treating

eschatological questions in a way that laid the ground for a fuller, Christological treatment of eschatology later on.

As I said above, Aquinas did not think that God could have made human beings perfectly happy *only* through an incarnation. He thought that God could have conferred the beatific vision on them without an incarnation, but that the incarnation was a most fitting way to do so, freely chosen by God in his wisdom. Aquinas expresses this in the *Summa* by offering a more general account of human happiness in the Second Part, which is the basis of then showing in the Third Part how that very happiness, already delineated, is fittingly caused in us through Christ. The opening questions of the Second Part are thus not meant to give a complete eschatology, but among other things to prepare for a more complete eschatology in the Third Part. To a significant extent this means reserving Christ's role in causing human happiness to later in the *Summa*, rather than (as Boersma supposes) treating it now. As with the consideration of the beatific vision in the First Part, and the First and Second Parts more generally, Aquinas does not bring forward material from the Third Part without a specific reason (see *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 7 ad 2). He does not in general need to bring material forward from Christology (and that includes the heavenly causal role of Christ's beatific vision) to establish for instance that God is the final end of all creatures (*ST*, I-II, q. 1, aa. 7-8), or that human beings as such attain their beatitude through an act of intellect (*ST*, I-II, q. 3), and so on. Nor does any particular historical controversy about these matters, as far as I can see, mean that mention of Christ's causal power is required to make any argument work. Aquinas can show that only the beatific vision answers to the human desire for beatitude without appealing to the fact that Christ causes the beatitude of the saints through his own. But, having argued in this way for his conclusions, Aquinas puts himself in a position to show the fittingness of Christ's actual role in all this in his Christological account of heaven at the end of the Third Part. But if Aquinas was not required to bring this forward to the opening of the

Second Part in order to make his arguments there work, as my more historical approach has shown, then he can be cleared of any Christological deficit in this passage.

Since neither of the passages Boersma brings forward requires appeal to the causal power of the heavenly Christ to establish their conclusions, we can suppose that each is cleared of the charge of Christological deficit. Since neither passage nor both together can be reckoned the *Summa's* complete treatment of the beatific vision, Aquinas's position on that vision in the *Summa* overall cannot be assessed without counting in the eschatological treatise he never wrote. On the assumption that Aquinas would have properly addressed the question of Christ's heavenly role in the Third Part, which I have argued is highly probable, we could regard him as entirely free of the first element of Christological deficit. If Boersma were now more convinced of my historical-theological argument from the *Summa's* method and structure, but still unsure that Aquinas would have done as he should, he might be willing to admit at the very least that the jury must remain out.

Almost all of what I have said, however, in considering the first factor in Aquinas's alleged deficit is not what is of primary importance to Boersma. I turn now to the second part of his alleged Christological deficit, which he holds to be the more important of the two. He writes, "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 ... 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." (Boersma 2018b, 8) Boersma (2018a, 51) is of the opinion that Aquinas "substitutes" the divine essence for the incarnate Christ. It is here, he says, where "the main dogmatic disagreement appears: is it the divine essence (Aquinas and Gagne) or is it Jesus Christ (Owen and I) that constitutes the object of the beatific vision?" (Boersma, 2018b, 18)

In my reply I had naively supposed that a single quotation from Aquinas's *Compendium Theologiae* substantiating Christ's humanity as a second object of the beatific vision would have been sufficient to refute the suggestion that Aquinas denied that Christ was seen in this vision. As we saw in regard to the first element of his alleged deficit, Boersma is impressed by many references and unimpressed by few. Boersma (2018b, 9) is singularly unimpressed with this one "incidental reference". He is impressed by Owen's many references to Christ as object, "in comparison with which the one reference in Aquinas's *Compendium theologiae* simply fades in significance." (Boersma 2018b, 10) It would thus surely help little to add that Aquinas makes the same point in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, and yet it seems interesting enough to add, since the *Commentary* is regarded by scholars as an important expression of Aquinas's mature thought (e.g., Emery 2003, 271-319). When commenting on Jesus' words to the Father in 17:3, "this is eternal life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent," Aquinas says that by those words "we are given to understand that in eternal life we shall also take joy from the humanity of Christ" (*In Ioannem*, 17.1). In explaining the substantial meaning of "eternal life", Aquinas is clearly referring to the beatific vision, meaning that that very act of the intellect must be directed to the humanity of Christ also. Of course adding this reference to the one from the *Compendium* simply makes one plus one equal two, and two is not many! What may be more helpful is to explain how, in view of Aquinas's "unrelenting focus" (Boersma 2018, 12) on the divine essence, he can maintain that Christ's humanity is *also* an object of the vision.

To understand this, we must begin with his account of God's own knowledge, in which the beatific vision participates. According to Aquinas, God knows himself perfectly through himself (*ST*, I, q. 14, a. 2), and he is identical with his own essence (*ST*, I, q. 3, a. 3). Thus he knows his own essence through that same essence. What, though, if one were to

suppose that such focus were to mean that God did not know anything besides himself, especially in view of the fact that Christian faith holds that God is omniscient? Must such focus exclude knowledge of all other realities, including the humanity assumed by God the Son? For Aquinas, that is not the case because God's perfect knowledge of himself naturally includes knowledge of his power, of all he can and does do (*ST*, I, q. 14, a. 5). This knowledge is perfect and cannot be improved on or added to in any way. By knowing himself in this way, God will also know whatever he freely wills to be, including the humanity of the divine Son, and will do so more powerfully than any created intellect can by its own connatural knowledge, even with the help of faith.

Since the beatific vision is a created intellect's participation in this divine knowledge through the divine essence, it makes no more sense to suppose that the beatific vision's participated focus on the divine essence necessarily excludes knowledge of Christ than does the focus of God's knowledge on himself. Of course a saint will not be omniscient through the divine essence, as God is, since while God's act of knowledge is infinite, the beatific act of any creature is as such finite. While God knows all he can do in the divine essence, the blessed do not perfectly match that knowledge but, knowing God as the cause of all, the more powerfully they know God (Aquinas thinks), the more extensive will be their knowledge of God's effects in the divine essence. Aquinas establishes this as a general rule in the First Part (*ST*, I, q. 12, a. 8), which sets up an account of knowledge of God's essence in such a way that we will be able to learn in the Third Part how this is fittingly brought about through Christ. At this earlier stage Aquinas has no need to mention Christ, especially as he will not establish until the Third Part that an incarnation is fitting. In the First Part it is simply concluded in a general way that the blessed will have knowledge of God's effects, whatever they might be (whether they include an incarnation or not), in the divine essence. Aquinas surmises that this has to include whatever is required to satisfy the natural human desire for

knowledge, though this leaves much not required for such satisfaction (ad 4). How all this is applied in individual cases, according to the individual needs of the blessed, will come only in the Third Part, once it is established that our salvation comes most fittingly through the Son's incarnation.

The only individual case Aquinas treated before he left off writing was Christ himself. Since Christ's act of beatific vision must be finite, it cannot extend to all God could possibly do (as does Christ's divine knowledge). Aquinas nevertheless argues that, since Christ is the judge of all, he himself must have knowledge in the divine essence of all that God actually wills to be (*ST*, III, q. 10, a. 2). Since this includes the incarnation, it is implied that Christ enjoys beatific knowledge of himself in the divine essence. It would thus be wrong to conclude that, when Aquinas attributed vision of the divine essence to Christ, he was thereby substituting the divine essence for Christ's knowledge of himself or indeed of all creation. But since Aquinas did not complete the *Summa* with a further exploration of the beatitude of the glorified members of Christ's Body, he did not give any further examples.

However, from what Aquinas said in the *Commentary on John*, namely, that eternal life includes taking joy from Christ's humanity, we can be sure that, beyond the minimum mentioned in the First Part (what would count for any world God might create, including a world where there was no incarnation), the Third Part would have added Christ's humanity as principal among what is known in the divine essence. The short *Compendium* gives us a reason for this, namely, that the saints can render fitting thanks for their salvation through Christ. The eschatological section of the larger *Summa* may have added a number of reasons, including the fact that the saints' eternal vision depends eternally on the glorified Christ. Since all the saints have Christ as the instrumental cause of their grace and glory, they would in every case have knowledge of Christ in the divine essence, a beatific knowledge of him of a kind that could not be bettered. To focus on the divine essence is thus to *include* Christ as

an object of beatific knowledge, not to exclude him. While we might expect that Aquinas would have made more explicit mention of Christ as object in his unwritten eschatological treatise, were he to have spoken there simply of the members of Christ's Body seeing the divine essence, he must be understood to have been saying also that they see Christ, since the divine essence is seen not to the exclusion but to the inclusion of Christ. Was it then a Christological deficit for Aquinas to focus the beatific vision on the divine essence? I would say: Not at all, and that Aquinas is evidently not guilty of Boersma's second charge.

I am conscious in all this how Boersma's criticisms of Aquinas are surely related to his own theological assumptions about the place of Christology in any systematic theology. If, on dogmatic grounds, one rejects Aquinas's reservation of Christology to the Third Part of the *Summa*, then one is going to suppose that he should have treated Christ in any earlier section that treated the beatific vision, and be disinclined to arguments in Aquinas's favour from historical theology. What Boersma's position seems to come down to is a theological rejection of the structure of Aquinas's whole project (which is not without formidable defenders), and this colours his judgement about whether or not Aquinas was guilty of a Christological deficit. For my part, I suggest that the historical theologian can in principle attempt a fairer verdict on some aspect of a predecessor's work, not by dismissing it along with the whole, but rather by assessing that aspect as it stands within the context of the wider work in which that theologian happened to be engaged. In this way historical theology can make a more positive contribution by allowing theologians to be sympathetically and fairly assessed and so allowed to speak more genuinely in a fruitful dialogue with other theological voices of past and present to the advantage of systematic theology today.

Boersma (2018b, 13), however, having examined both factors in his alleged deficit and found Aquinas wanting, moves the discussion on "towards a theophanic view of the beatific vision," meaning one in which God is eternally seen by the saints in and through his

manifestation in Christ's (created) humanity. Comparing Owen and Aquinas (at least by my interpretation of him) on Christ's role in the beatific vision, he sees Aquinas as employing Christ as (instrumental) *cause* of the vision, and Owen employing him as (epistemological) *means*. He asserts that Aquinas's identification of Christ as cause of the beatific vision "yields" the divine essence as the vision's object, while Owen's identification of him as means "leads to a theophanic and Christological account" of its object (Boersma 2018b, 14). He next says Owen would reject Aquinas's identification of the divine essence as object because it means that the beatific vision is no longer theophanic, and in that interpretation of Owen Boersma is surely correct. After some exposition of Owen and others, Boersma (2018b, 15) declares that a theophanic approach is "the right one". He then asserts that "[t]he reason we need a theophanic understanding of the beatific vision has to do with Chalcedonian Christology". Boersma thinks that, while the unity of Christ's person is expressed in a theophanic account (which is true), Aquinas's non-theophanic account of the beatific vision *separates* rather than unites his two natures. In this more controversial claim Boersma attempts to undercut Aquinas's Chalcedonian credentials.

Boersma's argument for this conclusion is weak. He bases it on an analogy I had employed to show how a saint must be "in Christ", a member of his heavenly Body, in order to see God through a participation in Christ's own vision. The comparison was of a sightseer standing in a certain place to enjoy a certain view. The point of the analogy was to show the importance of the close union of the saints with Christ, not to imply anything about distance in the relationship between the human nature of the Body's Head and the divine essence. But Boersma makes a wholly unjustified leap from the analogy's distance between the viewer and the landscape to the conclusion that Aquinas's theory of Christ's heavenly causal power puts the object of vision, the divine essence, at a "distance" from Christ own human body. Though he recognises that the spatial analogy is just that – an analogy – he concludes that it is "hard

to escape the idea that the divine essence must be separate from and behind the incarnate Lord.” (Boersma 2018b,17). It seems to me that the idea of “distance” derives less from Aquinas’s theory of union in the Body of Christ and Christ’s heavenly causality, and more from Boersma’s gratuitous over-extension of the analogy. It is worth noting that Aquinas’s theory can be adequately expressed without any spatial analogy. If Boersma insists on overextending the analogy, I need not appeal to it at all. But even so, Aquinas’s Chalcedonian credentials remain intact.

While I hold there to be many theological advantages to Aquinas’s account that could be listed here (see Gaine 2016, 440-46; Cortez 2018, 335-38), it might be useful at this point to conclude with just one of them by sketching out a Thomist alternative to Boersma’s move “towards a theophanic view of the beatific vision.” (Boersma 2018b, 13; see Gaine 2016, 441-42) I begin with the fact that Aquinas does not deny heavenly theophanies. Unlike Owen, however, he does this explicitly in the wider context of theophany throughout the whole of the new creation (Gaine 2016, 444-45). In his early *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas wrote that the glorified eye of a resurrected saint “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” (*SsS*, lib. 4, d. 48, q. 2; a. 1; *ST*, Suppl., q. 91, a. 1). Again he writes that “bodily sight will see so great a glory of God in bodies, especially in glorified bodies and most of all in the body of Christ” (*SsS*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 2, a. 2; *ST*, Suppl., q. 92, a. 2), and this brings “a certain beatitude” to the saint’s body (ad 6). From this we may conclude that Aquinas envisages heaven as “theophanic”, where God is eternally manifested in the renewed creation, but above all in the Word made flesh.

However, although Aquinas affirms here that the saints see an eternal manifestation of God in and through Christ, it is nevertheless true that Aquinas does not identify this physical

vision, which brings “a certain beatitude”, with the *beatific* vision, which is the very “essence of beatitude” (cf. *ST*, I-II, q. 3, a. 4). In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas was explicitly distinguishing the eye’s vision of Christ (with its theophanic manifestation of divinity) from the intellectual vision of the divine essence. He does the same in his *Commentary on Job* when commenting on Job’s declaration that “in my flesh I shall see God, whom I myself will see and my eyes will behold him.” (19:26-7). Aquinas takes Job to be indicating that the body “will be also a participant in that vision in its own way ... not because the eyes of the body would see the divine essence but because the eyes of the body will see God-made-man,” adding that the glory of God would be seen shining (theophanically) throughout the renewed creation (*In Iob*, 19). Thus Aquinas held that there would be what Boersma calls a “theophanic” manifestation of divinity in the new creation, above all in Christ’s body, for all eternity, but without conflating such manifestation in Christ with the beatific vision.

While Boersma concedes that Aquinas holds that the saints will have physical sight of Christ’s body (Boersma 2018b, 7), in *Seeing God* he nevertheless raises the question of why Aquinas “did not discuss in detail how the saints will see Christ in the resurrection”, but was largely content in passages such as I, q. 12, a. 3 to discuss how the beatific vision is a vision of the “mind’s eye.” (Boersma 2018a, 367). I suggest that, if Aquinas planned to go into any more detail, he would have done so in his treatise on eschatology at the end of the *Summa*. That Aquinas had not abandoned his view that there would be a physical vision of Christ at the resurrection is clear from earlier in the Third Part. When dealing with the question as to whether Christ could be seen by the physical eye (whether glorified or not) under the form of the eucharist, Aquinas stated that “the glorified eye always sees Christ as he is in his own form” (*ST*, III, q. 76 sed contra). However, it is true that it was Aquinas’s priority in earlier sections of the *Summa* simply to avoid confusion of *any* theophanic vision with the beatific

vision. As far as Aquinas was concerned, *no* act of the senses could constitute the essence of beatitude in an intellectual creature (*ST*, I-II, q. 3, a. 3). He had no need to appeal to a theophany specifically of Christ to establish that.

While Boersma supposes, as noted above, that Aquinas's theory of Christ's causality "yields" a non-theophanic account of the beatific vision, what in fact yields it is Aquinas's conviction that no finite, created entity, including the humanity of Christ and every other theophany, can ever be an adequate epistemological means for knowing the infinite divine essence as such (cf. *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2). Since human beings have a natural desire to know God, and this can only be fulfilled by knowledge of God's essence, they can only be truly fulfilled through a means of knowledge that is adequate to that infinite essence and so non-theophanic. The only means of knowledge adequate for knowing God's essence is that essence itself, which God gifts to the blessed in a self-communication that in fact comes by way of the heavenly Christ's causality and transcends any theophany.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that God's supra-theophanic self-gift destroys rather than perfects the heavenly reality of theophany. Boersma is concerned that a non-theophanic beatific vision undermines the role of the theophanic, and so of Christ. But, as we have seen, Aquinas treats the new creation, and especially the incarnate Christ, as thoroughly theophanic. What knowledge of and through the divine essence provides, which no theophany itself can provide, are the resources for perfect knowledge of this new creation as precisely what it is, namely, the theophanic manifestation of God. It is in light of these supra-theophanic resources that the saint beholds Christ and his Kingdom, truly knows them for what they are, and so gives high praise to God. While in this life we perceive by faith, not without a measure of indirectness, that God is manifest in his creation, in the next we shall truly know the new creation, and especially the humanity of Christ, precisely as theophanic,

that is, by way of an immediate vision that transcends the theophanic and so brings the theophanic not to its ending but to its eternal significance.

Bibliography

Aquinas, St Thomas. *Opera Omnia S. Thomae*. www.corpusthomisticum.org. English translations are my own.

Barnes, Corey L. 2012. *Christ's Two Wills in Scholastic Thought: The Christology of Aquinas and Its Historical Contexts*. Toronto, Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies.

Boersma, Hans. 2017. "The 'Grand Medium': An Edwardsean Modification of Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision." *Modern Theology* 33:187-212.

Boersma, Hans. 2018a. *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans.

Boersma, Hans. 2018b. "Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit." *TheoLogica* 2 (2). <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v2i2.14733>.

Cortez, Marc. 2018. "The Body and the Beatific Vision." In *Being Saved*, edited by Marc Cortez, Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton, 326-43. London: SCM.

Emery, Gilles. 2003. *Trinity in Aquinas*. Ypsilanti, Michigan: Sapientia.

Gaine, Simon Francis. 2015. *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Gaine, Simon Francis. 2016. "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the beatific vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald." *New Blackfriars* 97: 432-46.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12218>.

Gaine, Simon Francis. 2018. "The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ." *TheoLogica* 2 (2). <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v2i2.7623>.

Jordan, Mark D. 2017. *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Fordham.

McDonald, Suzanne. 2012. "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the 'Reforming' of the Beatific Vision." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, edited by Kelly M. Kopic and Mark Jones, 141-58. Farnham: Ashgate.