

The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ

SIMON FRANCIS GAINÉ, O.P.

Blackfriars, Oxford

simon.gaine@bfriars.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: This article argues that Thomas Aquinas is to be interpreted as holding that the beatific vision of the saints is causally dependent on the glorified humanity of Christ. It opposes the view that, for Aquinas, Christ's humanity has causal significance only for those who are being brought to the beatific vision by grace, and not for those who have attained this vision, such that there is a Christological deficit in Aquinas's eschatology. The argument proceeds somewhat in the manner of an article of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. Having briefly outlined the recent debate, especially the contribution of Hans Boersma, two objections are put against my position. A *sed contra* is formulated on the basis of quotations from the *Summa*. The *responsio* is based on Aquinas's extensive use of a philosophical 'principle of the maximum' and its particular application by Aquinas to grace. After replies to the objections, based on the method and structure of the *Summa*, I locate Aquinas's position in the debate on Christ's heavenly mediation between that of John Calvin and that of John Owen and Jonathan Edwards.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Mediator, Thomas Aquinas, Beatific vision, Eschatology

This article argues that it follows from the overall thought of St Thomas Aquinas that the beatific vision of the saints is mediated to them through the humanity of Christ, and that their heavenly glory thus depends eternally on the beatific vision enjoyed by Christ in his human mind. I go about this a little in the manner of an article of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, recounting objections that say this was not his view, seeking some authoritative statements *sed contra* from the *Summa*, and arguing for my own interpretation of Aquinas on the basis of one of his philosophical commitments. After responding to the objections, I conclude by commenting on the historic debate about the mediatorial role of Christ's humanity in heaven, and locating Aquinas more precisely within it.

The position I am opposing holds that, while Aquinas certainly grants Christ's humanity a causal role in bringing us to the beatific vision through faith, it no longer has any such role once our souls have arrived there, leaving a Christological deficit at the heart of Aquinas's eschatology. In contrast, I am envisioning Aquinas's view

of heaven more in terms of a perpetual dependence of the saints' glorious vision of the divine essence on the continuing causal power of the heavenly Christ. The interpretation of Aquinas I am opposing supposes that, once the saints have been brought by their Saviour to the beatific vision, the latter can continue without any ongoing causal influence on the part of Christ's glorified humanity. On that view, the humanity of Christ—and the beatific vision it enjoys—functioned for Aquinas more as a ladder needed by us to reach our final end, but once our souls have arrived, that ladder is no longer required and can be safely kicked down, so to speak, or at least set aside. One would no longer need to be standing on the ladder of Christ's humanity in order to gaze on the essence of God, it is thought, because that gaze takes place immediately, without any creaturely medium, without even the humanity of Christ.

Were it merely a question of whether or not Aquinas attributed to Christ any kind of heavenly role in mediating knowledge to the saints, the matter would be settled by what he said explicitly in his earliest systematic work, the *Commentary on the Sentences*. There he claimed that, in heaven, Christ's soul enlightens all other glorified intellectual creatures with knowledge up till the day of judgement, when they will know all that God knows by his 'knowledge of vision' (that is, all that God wills to be, but not all that he could will), after which Christ continues to hold this enlightenment in being (*SsS*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 2, a. 5; *ST*, Suppl., q. 92, a. 3). To this claim Aquinas referred Revelation 21:23, where it is said that the glory of God enlightens the heavenly city and the Lamb is its lamp, the latter clearly indicating an enlightening role for Christ's humanity (*SsS*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 2, a. 5, ad 12; *ST*, Suppl., q. 92, a. 3 ad 12). On the basis of this text, it is undeniable that, for Aquinas, Christ's humanity has the heavenly role of illuminating other glorified intellects, whether angels or human souls.

However, we should note that the illumination of which Aquinas spoke here was the communication not of beatific knowledge in itself, but of some further knowledge besides that vision. Aquinas argued for this further illumination from the premise that, in his own beatific vision, Christ enjoyed the full extent of knowledge corresponding to God's 'knowledge of vision', but no other glorified intellect did: these knew more or less according to their degree of clarity of vision and in every case less than Christ. The point was that Christ, knowing more than them in his own vision, was able to enlighten them further. The final result would be that, from judgement day, these intellects could also know all that God knows by the knowledge of vision, but with some of these things known in the beatific vision itself and others by further enlightenment from Christ.

This means that we should beware of mistaking the latter illumination for any communication to them by Christ of the beatific vision itself. While that vision is unmediated by any created modification of the mind (its means of knowledge being the divine essence itself), in this other case knowledge is communicated through finite *species* infused into the mind. I suggest that Aquinas may have been supposing here that the soul of Christ is able to communicate such knowledge because it can

draw such created similitudes from the beatific vision, a power Aquinas attributes to all the blessed, including Christ (*ST*, I, q. 12, a. 9, ad 2; *De Veritate* [hereafter, *DV*], q. 20, a. 3, ad 4).¹ Thus, while this passage shows that Aquinas held that Christ was a heavenly mediator of some form of knowledge to the blessed, it does not directly settle the debate as to whether or not their beatific vision was somehow derived from his.

I have already entered the latter debate in a reply to Suzanne McDonald, who maintains that Aquinas's account of the beatific vision was surpassed in Christological terms by the seventeenth-century English Puritan, John Owen (McDonald 2012, 144–45, 157). While Owen's account brings Christ's humanity to the fore, she says, the Thomist tradition in contrast "struggles to accommodate Christ's glorified humanity within an account of the beatific vision." (McDonald 2012, 153) For McDonald, Aquinas held that Christ's humanity plays a crucial role in *bringing* us to heaven, but no real role once we have arrived there (McDonald 2012, 150–54). While McDonald states that Owen's account has advantages over that of Aquinas, in my reply I set out what I took to be the advantages of Aquinas's position on the beatific vision, from a Thomist point of view (Gaine 2016). Among these was the fact that a Thomist could *base on* Aquinas a sense in which the beatific vision of the saints in heaven, and not just their journey there, is in fact eternally dependent on Christ's own beatific vision (Gaine 2016, 439–40). This is not because I dispute that Aquinas held that the beatific vision is as such immediate, unmediated by any created *species*, the divine essence itself taking the place of any such *species* as the means by which the divine essence is known (*ST*, I, q. 12, a. 9). Rather I suggested that, while Christ's humanity does not mediate the beatific vision in any such epistemological sense, one can develop from Aquinas's principles *another sense* in which the beatific vision comes to the saints through the heavenly vision of Christ the Mediator.

Not long afterwards an article by Hans Boersma (2017) appeared, in which he argued that the eighteenth-century American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, modified Aquinas's theology of the beatific vision, again in Christological terms. Boersma emphasises how Edwards spoke of Christ as the "grand medium," which extends even to mediating heavenly knowledge of God such that, for Edwards, there cannot be the immediate vision that Aquinas affirmed. While Boersma deserves a reply to the whole of his argument on Edwards and Aquinas, here I want to respond only to one point that he makes in his more recent book on the beatific vision. This book, which incorporates material from his article on Edwards, and again deserves a

¹ In Gaine (2015, 100), I suggested that this ability, which comes only with the beatific vision, takes place under the supernatural light of glory, while the natural light of reason "has no power to give the mind access to the vision of God." However, Thomas Joseph White (2018) represents me as holding that these similitudes are instead formed "naturally" (White 2018, 636) where "the agent intellect in its ordinary human mode of operation would have some form of access" to beatific knowledge (White 2018, 637).

proper reply to its fuller argument elsewhere, also takes account of my reply to McDonald on Owen (Boersma 2018, 159–61).

While Boersma accepts that my suggestion about the causal dependence of the saints' beatific vision on Christ's "may be consonant with Aquinas's overall position," Boersma emphasises that Aquinas "does not spell this out anywhere," (Boersma 2018, 160) which is true. Aquinas did not suggest, he contends, that we shall enjoy the beatific vision by participating in Christ's beatific vision. While I agree that it is true that Aquinas never explicitly spells out what I have proposed, my aim in this article is to suggest that there is reason to think not only that such a view is *consonant* with Aquinas's overall thought, but that it follows so securely from Aquinas's overall thought, philosophical as well as theological, that Aquinas may be fairly said to endorse it. What is at stake in the present article then is the question of how to interpret Aquinas himself on the role of Christ in the beatific vision of the saints.

Boersma presents an objection against any suggestion that such heavenly mediation by Christ is to be found in Aquinas's thought. Boersma (2018, 160) writes that "it seems likely that had this been his actual position, he would have explicitly mentioned it at some point in his relatively prolific writing both on the beatific vision in general and on Christ's own beatific vision." But since he never mentioned it in any of these passages, Boersma implies, the heavenly mediation of the beatific vision by Christ was not in fact Aquinas's position at all. Having stated Boersma's objection to my position, I shall now offer a second objection before proceeding to formulate a *sed contra*.

This second objection I base on the passage from the *Commentary on the Sentences* on heavenly illumination by Christ, which I have already mentioned. Now this was an early work in which the assertion of a communication of knowledge from Christ's soul appeared, and it is a point Aquinas never explicitly makes again. Since he never repeated it in any of his more mature works, it may be reasonable to suppose that he had given up the idea. But if Aquinas gave up the idea of Christ's heavenly mediation of knowledge by *species*, this gives us less reason to suppose that he embraced any notion that the beatific vision itself was mediated to the blessed by Christ. If he gave up the communication of one form of knowledge by Christ, there can be no reason to suppose he accepted the other.

So what can I offer as a *sed contra*? I can certainly quote someone else who takes the same position as I do, namely, Paul O'Callaghan (2011, 185–86), who states that the action of Christ's humanity in heaven "is in some way involved in the reception and maintenance of the perpetual vision of God" in the saints, basing his conclusion on quotations from Aquinas. However, this conclusion can only be as good as its basis in Aquinas, and here O'Callaghan refers to two passages from the *Summa Theologiae*. The first is from Aquinas's central argument for Christ's possession of the beatific vision. Aquinas says, "Human beings are led to beatitude through the humanity of Christ ... and so it was necessary that that knowledge which consists in the vision of God be found most excellently in Christ, because a cause must always

be more potent than what is caused.” (*ST*, III, q. 9, a. 2) In other words, I suggest, Christ’s beatific vision in his human mind, the essence of his beatitude, is in some sense the cause of the beatitude of the saints, of which the essence is again the beatific vision. What could be more straightforward as a *sed contra*? However, Boersma (2018, 160, n. 106) does not treat this quotation as so straightforward at all.

At the very least Aquinas’s terse statement does take a little unpacking. It is not only concerned, in my view, to indicate that by his beatific vision Christ is a cause of the saints’ beatific vision in heaven. It is also meant to show more urgently the dependence of our earthly pilgrimage to the beatific vision on Christ’s possession of the beatific vision during his earthly lifetime. This is indicated by the Scriptural quotation from Hebrews that Aquinas uses to show that we are *led* to beatitude through Christ’s humanity: “It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, *in bringing many sons to glory*, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.” (2:10) Aquinas’s support for Christ’s beatific vision on earth and its influence over the life of faith is of course controversial, and I have defended Aquinas’s conclusion elsewhere (Gaine 2015). However, critics of Aquinas on this point normally have no problem about any *heavenly* aspect in Aquinas’s position. But in McDonald and Boersma we have quite a different criticism of Aquinas, because they urge that Aquinas did not in fact hold that Christ’s beatific vision in heaven has any such causal influence. According to these critics, Aquinas saw Christ’s beatific vision as having causal influence on our earthly pilgrimage of faith *only*, and not on our vision in heaven. This is how Boersma (2018, 160, n. 106) responds to my own appeal to this text: “Gaine appeals rightly to *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2, although here Aquinas speaks of the beatific vision that Christ had from the moment of the incarnation. Aquinas does not specifically deal here with the eschaton.” So while I take this text to indicate Christ’s beatific vision as having responsibility for both our being on pilgrimage and then our being at our destination, Boersma takes it to be speaking exclusively of the former. But if a text that speaks specifically of the eschaton is what Boersma requires for a convincing *sed contra*, we can now introduce the second quotation O’Callaghan presents.

This text comes later in the *Tertia Pars* when Aquinas is treating of Christ’s priesthood. He says, “The saints who will be in heaven will have no further need to receive expiation through Christ’s priesthood; but now, having been expiated, they will need to be consummated through Christ himself, on whom their glory depends.” (*ST*, III, q. 22, a. 5, ad 1) Now what is the “glory” of which Aquinas is speaking here? Since Aquinas takes the act of seeing God to be the essential core of heavenly glory, it seems to me that Aquinas may be saying that this act itself in heaven “depends” causally on Christ’s humanity. The saints are elevated to the act of glory, according to Aquinas, by the gift of the heavenly “light of glory,” and there is reason to think that by “glory” Aquinas means this “light” also. Immediately after Aquinas says that the glory of the saints depends on Christ, he goes on with reference to Revelation 21:23: “as is said in the Apocalypse: the glory of God has enlightened it—that is, the city of the saints—and the Lamb is its lamp.” In the *Prima*

Pars (in contrast to his earlier use of it in the *Commentary on the Sentences* mentioned above) Aquinas had already directly referred this verse to the light of glory by which the “society of the blessed who see God” is divinely enlightened (*ST*, I, q. 12, a. 5), and now in the quotation on Christ’s priesthood he explicitly includes mention of the Lamb, thereby specifically denoting the enlightening role of Christ’s humanity. Hence we may suppose that Aquinas means here that the saints’ light of glory is dependent on Christ’s humanity, and since the act of glory is dependent on this light, we may suppose too that the glorious act of beatific vision in the saints depends also on the Lamb. But what is it in particular in Christ’s humanity that makes it that on which the saints’ light of glory depends? I suggest that it is Christ’s own light of glory by which his humanity is elevated to the beatific vision, and that this causal dependence is such that the saints’ glory—light and act—is dependent for all eternity on that of Christ.

However, before endorsing this reading we should ask whether opponents like Boersma might be able to interpret the text according to their own understanding of Aquinas. The text is a reply to an objection about Christ’s priesthood where Aquinas’s response distinguishes two things in the priestly office, namely, the actual offering of a sacrifice and its consummation, the latter meaning that those for whom the sacrifice is offered reach the end or purpose of the sacrifice, which in this case is the eternal goods of heaven with their sins forgiven. So as the high priests of the Old Covenant entered the holy of holies with the blood of goats and calves, Christ entered heaven to prepare for us to enter through his blood (*ST*, III, q. 22, a. 5). An opponent could take this to mean that consummation denotes for us *being brought* to the eternal good of heaven, such that the saints’ glory depends on Christ *bringing them* to heaven, rather than their actually being in heaven depending on his glory.

However, it seems to me that this does not do justice to the role Aquinas’s statement about the dependence of the saints’ glory plays in the article as a whole. The article asks whether Christ’s priesthood will remain *forever*. It is not merely the purpose of the article to ask whether there is some purpose for Christ’s priesthood now, but whether his priesthood lasts *forever*. The objection being answered says that, since the saints no longer stand in need of expiation and so of the offering of sacrifice, they will no longer have need of any priesthood and Christ will not be a priest forever (*ST*, III, q. 22, a. 5, obj. 1). Aquinas’s response is that, while they have no further need of expiation, they do have need of the consummation of the sacrifice. On the reading of this I am suggesting that someone like Boersma might take, not only will Christ have completed the actual offering of his sacrifice, but in the case of each saint the consummating of the sacrifice *will have come to an end* with their arrival at the beatific vision, and so there would be no need of Christ’s priesthood once all the elect were glorified. However, this reading would not support Aquinas’s intended conclusion that Christ is a priest *forever*; this reading would certainly extend Christ’s priesthood beyond the offering of his sacrifice of Calvary *but not* beyond the arrival at the beatific vision of the last of the elect. But since Aquinas means to conclude that Christ’s priesthood is forever, it seems to me that one must

read him as saying that the glory of the saints is eternally dependent on Christ's humanity, and conclude that his beatific vision is the source of theirs, forever.

With the *sed contra* more or less settled, I turn to my own *responsio*. Here I suggest that the causal dependence of the glory of the saints on the glory of Christ is of a piece with Aquinas's deployment of a certain philosophical "principle of the maximum" for which he draws on book two of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Aristotle says that something possesses a quality maximally with respect to those other things that possess the same quality through it (*Metaphysics* 2, 1, 993b24–25). Aquinas's use of this principle has been explored most extensively, together with its particular application to Christ's maximal charity as the cause of our charity, in an as yet unpublished thesis from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, by John Emery (2017), to which I am indebted.

Aquinas speaks of what is first in a genus being the cause of all else in that genus (e.g., *ST*, III, q. 56, a. 1). In speaking of "genus" in this connection, he is not employing it in its stricter sense of a class, such as "animal," where all members possess the same generic essence, whatever the difference of species. A reality Aquinas takes to transcend every genus in *that* sense, such as being and truth (e.g., *Summa contra Gentiles* [hereafter, *ScG*], 1.25; *DV*, q. 1, a. 1; q. 21, a. 1; *ST*, I, q. 3, a. 5), he *will* treat as a genus in this wider sense. According to Emery (2017), what he means here is a class of things that possess the same actuality or perfection, where the members of the class vary in how far they possess that perfection, and are thus internally ordered in terms of relative priority among themselves. The very first in the genus, which need not be first in a temporal sense but is first in terms of the actuality or perfection, Aquinas takes to possess that perfection maximally or pre-eminently or most excellently, such that all else in the genus has the perfection derivatively from the first member, and is nearer to the first insofar as it has the perfection to a greater degree. The first Aquinas calls the "measure" of all else in the genus, and it is the cause of the others in at least the sense of an exemplary cause (e.g., *DV*, q. 3, a. 8.). While the first has the perfection *per* or *propter se* or through its essence, the others have it through another or by participation (e.g., *ScG*, 2.28.5; *Super Ioannem* [hereafter *SI*], 5, lect. 5). The cause is thus nobler and more potent than what it causes (e.g., *ScG*, 1.41.4). All this means that Aquinas can argue from something's priority or pre-eminent perfection to the fact that it is the cause of all else in the genus of those things that possess that perfection (e.g., *Super Boetium de Trinitate.*, q. 5, a. 4).

Aquinas gives the principle a wide range of application. For example, in the realm of physics, the element of fire is the hottest reality in the genus of hot things, and all else that is hot is so by participation in fire, an example he takes from Aristotle (e.g., *ST*, I, q. 44, a. 1; I-II, q. 90, a. 2; III, 56, a. 1). As far as metaphysics is concerned, while Aristotle had simply applied his version of the principle to truth, concluding that metaphysical truths were the highest truths, Aquinas applies it more broadly. The fact that Aristotle commented in the same passage in *Metaphysics* 2 on the relationship between truth and being was already suggestive of a wider application

of the principle (*Metaphysics* 2, 1, 993b30–31). Famously, in his fourth way of proving the existence of God, Aquinas argued from degrees of being in the world to a maximal being, which all call God (e.g, *ST*, I, q. 2, a.3). Thus one can see from the fact of God’s maximal being that he is cause of all else that exists. While God is being *per se*, everything else exists by participation (e.g, *ST*, I, q. 44, a. 1). Aquinas also employed the principle theologically in Christology, for example to Christ’s pre-eminent priesthood (e.g., *ST*, III, q. 22, a. 4) and to the causal relationship between his resurrection and ours (e.g, *ST*, III, q. 56, a. 1). It is not my intention here to defend the philosophical validity of this principle, but rather to argue from the *fact* of Aquinas’s use of it towards the conclusion that he was thus committed to applying it also to the relationship between Christ’s beatific vision and that of the saints. Given how broadly he applies the principle, as far as truth, goodness, and being, how can we suppose that he would not apply it also to the genus of those who enjoy the actuality or perfection that comes with the light of glory?

I want to approach this more precisely by observing how Aquinas made particular use of the principle to make sense of the Christian doctrine of grace in relation to St Paul’s doctrine of Christ as Head of the body, and St John’s declaration that “grace ... came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17), bearing in mind the close relationship that existed, for Aquinas, between the life of grace and the glory of the beatific vision. Now Aquinas identifies “grace” as an habitual perfection (*ST*, I–II, q. 110, aa. 2–3). There is then, for him, in the broad sense of “genus,” a class of those who have the actuality or perfection of habitual grace to varying degrees. Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is, according to Aquinas, “the highest and the first” in this genus of the graced, “a universal principle in the genus of those who have grace.” (*ST*, III, q. 7, a. 9)² Endowed with such a fullness of grace, together with the accompanying virtues and gifts, Christ is equipped to communicate the life of grace to others as their Head, the first in the body (*ST*, III, q. 8, a. 5). As Aquinas says, “The soul of Christ so received grace that it is poured out in a way from it into others.” In this sense our grace is causally dependent on that of Christ. From the Head’s fullness of grace there is an overflow to others, meaning that through his fullness he is in his humanity the instrumental efficient cause of the graces in all intellectual creatures, the principal efficient cause being the divinity (all this reflecting Aquinas’s mature position on the real instrumental causality of grace) (*ST*, I–II, q. 112, a. 1, ad 1; III, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1).³ Speaking further in respect of habitual grace in his *Commentary on John* of the evangelist’s “of his fullness we have received grace upon grace,” Aquinas adds that Christ “received all the gifts of the Holy Spirit without measure, according to a perfect fullness, but we participate some part of his fullness through him.” (*SI*, 1, lect. 10) But just as the efficient causality exercised by the fully graced Christ is identified as an instrumental one, so the fact that Aquinas speaks of our participation or sharing in Christ’s fullness of grace should not obscure the fact that

² On the relationship between grace and Christ’s headship, see Daria Spezzano (2015, 152-90).

³ On instrumental causality in this connection, see Spezzano (2015, 179-90).

our *ultimate* participation through grace is, strictly speaking, in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4): it is our deifying participation in the divinity that is communicated to us through a sharing in Christ's fullness, where our measured grace is ever dependent on the grace of the Mediator.

My point is that, if this is the case with the mediation of grace to Christ's members through his own grace, and grace is the seed of glory and so glory is the full flowering of grace (*ST*, II-II, q. 24, a. 3, ad 2), then should we not expect glory to be likewise mediated to us through Christ, and explained theologically with the help of the same philosophical principle? After all, the beatific vision is, according to Aquinas, enjoyed to varying degrees (*ST*, I, q. 12, a. 6), and Christ is the Head even of those who are in glory—in fact he is their Head “first and principally.” (*ST*, I, q. 12, a. 6) Aquinas says that Christ saw the divine essence, the First Truth, “more clearly” in his human mind than does any other creature, noting that John says not only that he was full of grace but also full of truth (*ST*, III, q. 10, a. 4), which surely places Christ first in the genus of those who have the vision. Adapting what he says of Christ in the genus of the graced, we may thus say that he is also “a universal principle in the genus of those who have glory.” It follows, on the basis of Aquinas's principle, that, since he is endowed with the fullness of glory, he is equipped to communicate glory to others as their Head. As Aquinas might say, adapting what he says of Christ's grace, “The soul of Christ so received glory that it is poured out in a way from it into others,” and in that sense the saints' beatific vision is causally dependent on his. From his fullness of glory there will be an overflow, such that in his humanity he is the instrumental efficient cause of the glory of the saints, the principal efficient cause being the divine glory and beatitude. Adapting my quotation above from Aquinas's *Commentary on John*, we can conclude that for Aquinas the saints must “participate in some part of the fullness of Christ's glory,” meaning the fullness of his vision. In other words, the saints' varying degrees of vision all participate in Christ's pre-eminent vision. Thus it is by sharing in the fullness of his glory that the saints participate ultimately in the divine beatitude, their measured glory being ever dependent on that of Christ.

Once we grasp that Aquinas's overall thought, philosophical as well as theological, commits him to this causal relationship, the meanings of the passages cited in my *sed contra* become more perspicuous. Aquinas said that it “was necessary that that knowledge which consists in the vision of God be found most excellently in Christ, because a cause must always be more potent than what is caused.” (*ST*, III, q. 9, a. 2) In light of my *responsio*, there is surely a stronger case that this text indicates not just Christ causing grace as our path to glory, but as also causing the saints' eternal state of glory, since he is the first in the genus of glory. Again, when Aquinas says that the saints' glory depends on Christ, meaning forever, we must understand this to imply that their glorious vision forever depends on the pre-eminent vision of the one who is first in the genus of glory, namely, the Lamb of God who is their lamp.

However, in view of Boersma's objection, we still need to ask why Aquinas did not actually speak of this heavenly mediation. I suggest in response that this has to do with Aquinas's theological method, and so of what we can expect of his writings in different places. It seems to me that our expectations of what points Aquinas is going to make in any question or article should be determined by what he is asking in any particular question or article within his wider scheme, rather than according to our own assumptions about what he ought to be talking about. Boersma is quite right that Aquinas often discusses the beatific vision, and this is true for example of the *Summa Theologiae* in more than one place, such as question twelve of the *Prima Pars*. But if we were to suppose that the purpose of this question were to discuss everything Aquinas thought about the beatific vision, which Boersma seems to presuppose, then we will be disappointed, because what Aquinas is in fact asking is how we can know God. This takes him into a discussion of various such ways, including the possibility of knowing God by means of his own essence. But this is hardly meant to be a discussion of everything about heaven or even about the beatific vision, and no appeal to *Christ's* beatific vision at all is required to establish the conclusion Aquinas wants to draw here. Again, in question 3 at the beginning of the *Prima Secundae* on the content of human beatitude, the article that verifies that the vision of the divine essence is the essence of beatitude makes no mention of *Christ's* vision because it is not required for the argument. Though *Christ's* own beatitude is adverted to in passing in q. 5 (*ST*, I-II, q. 5, a. 2, ad 2), *Christ's* beatific vision makes no real appearance until the *Tertia Pars*, when Aquinas, in considering *Christ's* knowledge, has need of asking what kinds of knowledge our Saviour possessed. So, if we were left with only I, q. 12 and I-II, q. 3, together with the expectation that Aquinas was going to tell us everything about the beatific vision in those texts, then we would be disappointed on account of the fact that he does not even mention the important doctrine of *Christ's* earthly beatific vision, let alone its role at the eschaton. What Aquinas does tell us depends on what he is asking at that particular point, not on our own assumptions about what he should be doing.

Now we do have these three key places in the *Summa* where the beatific vision figures, but not one is a discussion of the beatific vision in the wider context of heaven. I suggest that we find ourselves in the position of not having a specific treatment of the heavenly role of *Christ's* beatific vision, because Aquinas discontinued writing before the relevant question arose. I suggest he was planning to treat this issue under the last things, for which he envisioned no eschatological *fourth* part of the *Summa* in succession to the Christological *Tertia Pars*, but he rather planned to treat heaven within this Christological Part, indicating that, like his sacramentology, and far more so than his eschatology in previous works, his eschatology in the *Summa* would be fundamentally Christological (*ST*, I, q. 2, proem.). Hence *my* expectation, based on the very plan of the *Summa*, is that questions about *Christ's* role in heaven would present themselves to Aquinas later in the Third Part *more insistently* than in any of his previous attempts at eschatology. We have grounds then to suppose that, were Aquinas to have completed the *Summa*,

his commitment to the principle of the maximum, when interpreting Revelation 21:23, would have made him draw the explicit conclusion that the Lamb's pre-eminent beatific vision is for eternity the source of that of the saints.

A completed *Tertia Pars* would thus have two treatments of the beatific vision: first, the beatific vision of the earthly Christ, when Aquinas asked about Christ's own knowledge with reference to salvation, for our coming to the beatific vision; and secondly, the significance of Christ's beatific vision for that of the saints who have arrived at their destination, when Aquinas finally came to treat heaven, which of course he never did. When we take all this into account, which Boersma does not, there is no more reason to suppose Aquinas was bound to speak of the heavenly role of Christ's vision in the First or Second Parts than there is to suppose that he needed to introduce the earthly Christ's beatific vision in I, q. 12 or I-II, q. 3. What we have in my *sed contra* and a few other texts contain hints, in view of the *Summa's* structure and method, at what was to come towards the end of the *Tertia Pars*.

This leads us into the reply to the second objection, which was based on the fact that Aquinas never repeated his early claim that Christ's soul mediated some further knowledge to the glorified. I suggest that the same principle applies as in the answer to the first objection, namely, that the point was not made again because no relevant question was put that would require it. Commenting on the *Sentences*, Aquinas made the point in answer to a particular objection in regard to the question whether the saints, in seeing God, will see all that God sees. The particular objection was based on the claim that, while the higher angels illuminate lower angels, this enlightenment will cease at the day of judgement, meaning that the angels must then know all things, such that the saints will also know all things. As we have seen, Aquinas's response is that, while they may know all things at the last day, all is not known through the beatific vision but in part through a further illumination from Christ. When Aquinas treats the same question in the *Summa*, as is typical he reduces the number of objections and this is one he does not use, and so he does not repeat the point about Christ's communication of this knowledge. That he remains committed to the general doctrine of heavenly enlightenment is confirmed in the *Prima* and *Secunda Pars* where he allows for the continuation of such illumination in general, besides the beatific vision, up to the day of judgement (*ST* I, q. 106, a. 4, ad 3; II-II, q. 52, a. 3). That he does not mention Christ's particular role here is intelligible in view of the fact that Christ is not properly treated until the *Tertia Pars*, and we can reasonably expect that Aquinas would have treated Christ's place in this illumination towards the end of this unfinished Part. Thus there is no reason to suppose that Aquinas had given up his point, and so no reason to suppose that that would have prevented him from embracing Christ's mediation of the beatific vision itself. Rather, each would have surely confirmed the other in Aquinas's Christological account of heaven, where Christ would mediate to the saints both their beatific vision and further enlightenment by means of finite *species*.

Before I conclude, I want to say something about Aquinas's position in the theological debate over Christ's heavenly mediation of the beatific vision. I said

earlier that critics of Aquinas on Christ's possession of the beatific vision during his earthly lifetime, who are mainly Catholic, have no problem with accepting that Aquinas held that the beatific vision of the saints is causally dependent on Christ's own beatific vision. McDonald and Boersma, however, who come from the Reformed tradition, do not accept that Aquinas thought this, and present Owen and Edwards as surpassing Aquinas's account through their own epistemological account of Christ as a heavenly means of knowledge. I suggest, however, that, historically speaking, a more illuminating background for Owen and Edwards may be found in the theology of John Calvin. Speaking in the *Institutes of Christian Religion* of Christ as Mediator, Calvin concluded from Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:24 that Christ will at the last "deliver the Kingdom" to the Father, and that Christ's being seated at the right hand of the Father will continue only for a time "until we enjoy the direct vision of the Godhead." (Calvin 1960, 485) Calvin supposed that the office of Mediator, which Christ *currently* exercises on our behalf in heaven, will have been completely discharged when we finally become partakers in heavenly glory and see God as he is. At that point, Calvin says, Christ "will cease to be the ambassador of his Father, and will be satisfied with that glory which he enjoyed before the creation of the world."

It seems to me that it is Calvin's curtailment of Christ's mediating work at the beatific vision rather than any teaching of Aquinas that forms the proper theological background to the kind of Christological accounts of heaven offered by Calvinist theologians such as Owen and Edwards. It is dissatisfaction with Calvin, I would suggest, that drives them to an account of Christ as an epistemological medium of the beatific vision such that they cease to regard the vision as immediate in the epistemological sense endorsed by both Calvin and Aquinas. McDonald (2012, 141, n. 1) does not recognise this background in Calvin, saying of Calvin only that he has nothing to say directly about the beatific vision in the *Institutes*. Boersma (2018, 259) is critical of this, saying that Calvin's thinking on the beatific vision, as evidenced especially in his biblical commentaries, was "careful and creative." But Boersma is also critical of the fact that Calvin saw Christ's mediatorial role as having an end, and congratulates Owen, Edwards and others for their more Christological approaches, even though Owen, like Calvin, saw Christ's mediatorial office, being specifically concerned with sin, as finished at the eschaton (Boersma 2018, 325). However, when Boersma turns to Edwards, it is Aquinas and not Calvin who forms the foil to their abandonment of immediate vision: it is Aquinas rather than Calvin whom Boersma takes Edwards to be modifying (Boersma 2018, 354–84). It seems to me that Boersma wrongly assimilates Aquinas to Calvin, and that Aquinas in fact held a midway position, one might say a mediating position, later taken up by other Reformed theologians such as Francis Turretin (1994, 490–94), between extremes adopted by Calvin on the one hand and Owen and Edwards on the other. While Calvin abandoned *any* eternal mediation by Christ, Owen and Edwards abandoned the epistemological immediacy of the vision of the divine essence. Taking these as extreme positions in the debate, Aquinas can perhaps be viewed as providing a

distinct solution that retains both the immediacy of the vision in itself and its heavenly mediation to the saints through the humanity of Jesus Christ. My argument in this paper has been that this is not merely a position that “may be consonant” with Aquinas’s overall thought, but that it is definitely entailed by his overall theological and philosophical approach.⁴

Bibliography

- Aquinas, St Thomas. *Opera Omnia S. Thomae*. www.corpusthomisticum.org. English translations are my own.
- Boersma, Hans. 2017. “The ‘Grand Medium’: An Edwardsean Modification of Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision.” *Modern Theology* 33:187–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12296>
- Boersma, Hans. 2018. *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans.
- Calvin, John. 1960. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20. Philadelphia PA: Westminster; London: SCM.
- Emery, John. 2017. *A Christology of Communication: Christ’s Charity according to Thomas Aquinas*. Fribourg, Switzerland: unpublished PhD.
- Gaine, Simon Francis. 2015. *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12218>
- Gaine, Simon Francis. 2016. “Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the beatific vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald.” *New Blackfriars* 97: 432–46.
- 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. Kapic and Mark Jones, 141–58. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Spezzano, Daria. 2015. *The Glory of God’s Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas*. Ave Maria FL: Sapientia.
- Turretin, Francis. 1994. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2. Phillipsburg NJ: P&R Publishing.
- White, Thomas Joseph. 2018. “The Infused Science of Christ.” *Nova et Vetera* (English Edition) 16: 617–41. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2018.0031>

⁴ A shorter version of this article was presented as a paper at the Society of Christian Philosophers’ UK workshop on the beatific vision held on 25 May 2018.