

## THE BEATIFIC VISION

### Introduction

There is a tension in the Bible between Isa. 59:2, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden *His* face from you;” and 1 John 3:2, “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”<sup>1</sup> While theologians have resolved this tension by pointing out that it is the sinfulness of man that has hidden the face of God, a circumstance that will find its ultimate remedy in the resurrection of the saints, the task has not been so easy for philosophers. A deeper issue lies hidden below the surface, specifically, how can a finite, created person *see*, or perceive, the infinite, uncreated God. As God told Moses, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.” (Ex. 33:20)

It is not just the terror of sinful man in the presence of a Holy God; it is the basic inability of the finite mind to grasp the infinite. It would seem that unless that tension can be resolved the promise of Rev. 22:4, that the saints would see the face of God, stands empty. This tension did not rest easy on the minds of medieval theologians, however, and they endeavored to answer the question by synthesizing reason and revelation. Ultimately, the question was resolved in the doctrine of the beatific vision, a doctrine which found its fullest expression, and ablest defense, in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.

### The Doctrine

The beatific vision is “the direct and unhindered vision of God,”<sup>2</sup> or, as the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* puts it, “The direct, intuitive knowledge of the triune God which

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 1982.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1959 ed., s.v. “Beatific Vision.”

perfected souls will enjoy by means of their intellect; that is, the final fruition of the Christian life, in which they will see God as he is in himself.”<sup>3</sup> It is seeing God as He is and not in some representation of Himself. The doctrine is theologically important “because it indicates that the enjoyment of God in heaven is not only a historical end, or the aim of the divine plan of human salvation, but constitutes the fulfillment of the nature of each individual human person.”<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, “Medieval theologians, especially Thomas Aquinas and others heavily influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, defined the vision of God as a direct intuition or perception of his very being (*essentia*), as an eternal act of the intellect, . . . and as wholly supernatural in character, requiring special means (*medium*) known as the ‘light of glory’ (*lumen gloriae*).”<sup>5</sup>

The doctrine of the beatific vision is a grand synthesis of both reason and revelation. It is constructed of both revealed knowledge and philosophical speculation and stands as the result of the merging of two different streams of history: that of the Greeks and the Jews. Catholic theologian Peter Kreeft elaborates on these two historical currents:

If a visitor from another planet had observed the face of the earth some twenty-five centuries ago with an eye sensitive not merely to external but also to internal energies, he would have singled out not Persia or Egypt but Greece and Israel as the waves of the future and the roots of history’s civilized tree. They were the only two peoples who found modes of thought other than myth for answering life’s three great questions. For myth the Jews substituted faith in a historically active and word-revealing God, and the Greeks substituted critical, inquiring reason. For this reason they developed different hopes, different heavens, from those of the myths.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the different approaches to ultimate truth, Athens and Jerusalem had different conceptions of the nature of ultimate reality. In regards to the final state Kreeft says, “The Hebrew conception of heaven arises in exactly the opposite way from the pagan one; instead of rising out of humanity’s heart, it descends from God’s, as the New Jerusalem descends

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<sup>3</sup> J. Van Engen, “Beatific Vision,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 130.

<sup>4</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 ed., s.v. “Heaven,” 251.

<sup>5</sup> Engen, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart’s Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980), 14.

out of the heavens at the end of the story in Revelation. From the beginning of the story, God tells humanity what he wants instead of humanity telling God what it wants. Instead of humanity making the gods in its image, God makes humanity in his image; and instead of earth making heaven in its image, heaven makes earth in its image.”<sup>7</sup>

The good Jew would not speculate then on the nature of heaven because it was to be revealed by God, which is, as Kreeft says, “a proper and admirable restraint when contrasted with the extravagant myths of the rest of the world, who succumb to the irresistible temptation to fill in with human imagination the gaps left in God’s revelation.”<sup>8</sup> The Greeks on the other hand had no special revelation and so they pursued a speculative knowledge of heaven, albeit one guided by the objectivity of reason. Kreeft explains:

The Jews gave us conscience; the Greeks, reason. The Jews gave us the laws of morality, of what ought to be; the Greeks gave us the laws of thought and of being, of what is. And their philosophers discovered a new concept of God and a new concept of heaven. While the priests were repeating their stories of fickle and fallible gods . . . the philosophers substituted impersonal but perfect essences for the personal but imperfect gods and a heaven of absolute Truth and Goodness for one of pleasures or pains. Not Zeus but Justice, not Aphrodite but Beauty, not Apollo but Truth were the true gods: perfect unpersons rather than imperfect persons. (The Jews, meanwhile, were worshipping a Perfect Person, transcending the Greek alternatives.) The heaven corresponding to the Greek philosophers’ theology was a timeless, spaceless realm of pure spirit, pure mind, pure knowledge of eternal essences instead of the priests’ gloomy underworlds of Tartarus and Hades, earthly otherworlds of Elysian Fields, or astronomical overworlds of heroes turned into constellations.<sup>9</sup>

While the Greeks had not come to complete truth as regards the nature of God, neither had they missed the mark altogether. “Two of these heavenly essences stand out as ultimate values: Truth and Goodness. . . . Plato asks, ‘Is a holy thing holy because the gods approve it, or do the gods approve it because it is holy?’ The priests say the former, the philosophers the latter. For them the two eternal essences, Goodness and Truth, stand above the Greek gods. But they do

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 16.

not stand above the Jewish God, the God who is Goodness and Truth, emeth, fidelity, trustworthiness. The Greeks discovered two divine attributes; the Jews were discovered by the God who has them.”<sup>10</sup>

These two concepts of God and heaven were not to remain divided, however. “The meeting and blending of these two great rivers, the biblical (Judaeo-Christian) and the classical (Greco-Roman), produced the Middle Ages. Medieval thinkers were intensely conscious of being inheritors and synthesizers, preservers and blenders of two ancient foods. As medieval theology synthesized the personality of YHWH (incarnated in Christ) with the timeless perfection of the philosophers’ essences, the medieval picture of heaven synthesized the biblical imagery of love and joyful worship of God with the Greek philosophical heaven of the contemplation of eternal Truth. The medieval heaven is thus the Beatific Vision of God.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Biblical Justification**

The doctrine of the beatific vision was a synthesis of reason and revelation. It was founded in the revelatory authority of the Word of God, but it was expounded under the objectivity of reason. The foundation was laid in numerous biblical passages that stated not only the basic problem, but also revealed an ultimate solution. While man cannot at the present time see God (Ex. 33:20), a promise yet remains that he will (Rev. 22:4), at least in the case of the redeemed. And it is not just that man will see an appearance of God, rather God will be seen “as He is.” (1 John 3:2)

The promise given to the redeemed that they shall see God is a promise to fulfill what seems to be the one of the greatest desires of the saints. Job, in the agony and depression of what seemed to him to be abandonment by God, cries out:

Oh, that my words were written!

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

Oh, that they were inscribed in a book!  
 That they were engraved on a rock  
 With an iron pen and lead, forever!  
 For I know *that* my Redeemer lives,  
 And He shall stand at last on the earth;  
 And after my skin is destroyed, this *I know*,  
 That in my flesh I shall see God,  
 Whom I shall see for myself,  
 And my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
*How* my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:23-27)

Job yearned to experience God in a way that surpasses anything that man has yet to encounter in his present state. Job wanted to see God because he knew that then he would know the reason for his suffering and that he would find the peace that had so quickly deserted him in his calamity. And Job was not alone in his desire to see God, David penned words that also expressed the presence of a desire that could only be satisfied by God: “As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness.” (Psalm 17:15) Moses too desired to see God and at one point was even bold enough to ask God directly for the blessing. (Ex. 33:18) Fortunately for Moses God refrained. He explained to Moses that no man could see God and live. (v. 20)

It is in this encounter between Moses and God that a peculiar aspect of the doctrine of the beatific vision comes to light. While God denies Moses the opportunity to see Him in His essence, just a few verses previous to this passage there is an indication that Moses did see God. Exodus 33:11a says, “So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” This passage indicates that Moses had seen the face of God and survived to tell about it. This apparent contradiction illumines the distinction between seeing God as He is, in His essence, and seeing God through an image or manifestation. While it is true that God spoke face to face with Moses, He did so as a theophany (cf. Gen. 18). Moses did not see the Divine essence, but merely a manifestation of God in human form. The same can be said of Adam in the garden. Thus Aquinas says, “Man was made to see God, not in the beginning but in the last stage of his perfection. Therefore, that he did not see God through His essence at the beginning of his

existence was not the result of being hindered by some obstacle, but only the result of his own imperfection, because he did not then have that perfection which is needed to see the divine essence.”<sup>12</sup> The point to be made is that a theophany is not what Moses longed for. If all man ever sees of God is a theophany, then his greatest desire will remain unfulfilled.

### **Philosophical Justification**

Although the Word of God has all authority as a true revelation from God, it is still necessary to reconcile reason with revelation. The medieval theologians attempted to do just that. Theologian John Hick says, “The theology of the eschatological vision of God begins with Irenaeus, in the second century, who taught that ‘men therefore shall see God, that they may live, being made immortal by that sight and attaining even unto God.’ There was however little discussion of what ‘seeing God’ means until Thomas Aquinas, working within the framework of Aristotelian philosophy, described the *visio dei* as the intellectual knowledge of the divine substance.”<sup>13</sup> Applying the principles of philosophy, Aquinas sought to clarify the Biblical doctrine of the vision of God.

Aquinas asserted that the vision of God is a primarily intellectual phenomenon because it represents the ultimate perfection of man. He says, “For every nature has something ultimate in which its final perfection consists. Now, the perfection of man, in so far as he is man, consists only in the act of understanding, by which he is constituted man.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is the rational that separates man from animal, thus it is the perfection of the rational that is the perfection of man. But how is the intellect of man perfected? Not in its mode of operation but by the object of its perception. “It is not possible for the final limit of human perfection to be taken according to some manner of understanding, for among these modes of understanding one can

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<sup>12</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas *Truth* (trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S. J. [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1954]) 18.1.

<sup>13</sup> John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976), 205.

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas *Truth* 8.1.

perceive an infinite number of levels, one of which understands more perfectly, except God, who understands everything with infinite clarity. Hence, the final term of human perfection must lie in the understanding of some most perfect intelligible object, which is the divine essence.”<sup>15</sup>

Not all medieval theologians agreed that the essence of the beatific vision is intellectual. Thomistic philosopher R. Garrigou-Lagrange notes, “On this question Thomists and Scotists are at odds. St. Thomas holds that the beatifying activity is essentially an operation of the intellect, whereas Scotus says it is essentially an act of love, an act of the will.”<sup>16</sup> Aquinas held that “the notion of truth is more absolute, more independent, more universal, than the notion of good. The good presupposes truth and reality. Hence the truth, as object of the mind, antecedes the good, though no concrete thing can be perfect unless it is good.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, “By reason of its object, the intellect is, speaking simply, a higher faculty than the will.”<sup>18</sup> Scotus, on the other hand, “looking at the concrete subject rather than the differentiating object, denies these two positions of St. Thomas. The notion of truth, says Scotus, is not nobler than the notion of good. Hence the will, since it is the seat of charity, the highest of all virtues, is, simply speaking, a faculty higher than the intellect.”<sup>19</sup>

In defending the Thomistic position, Garrigou-Lagrange says, “As we must distinguish man’s essence (i.e., rationality) from his characteristics (i.e., laughter, wonder, and speech), so must we likewise distinguish the essence of beatitude from its characteristics. The essence of beatitude is possession of the beatifying object. From this essential possession flow many characteristics: love, joy, bodily glory.”<sup>20</sup> Beatitude then is the highest activity of the highest faculty in possessing the supreme good “since perfection consists in act, not potentiality, and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Beatitude: A Commentary on St. Thomas’ Theological Summa, Ia IIae, qq. 1-54*, trans. Patrick Cummins, O.S.B. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1956), 87.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 88.

since man's beatitude is his ultimate perfection."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he notes that many of the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria, also favored the intellectual beatification view.<sup>22</sup> And finally, Scripture seems to favor the position too: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (John 17:3) "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." (1 John 3:2)

The Thomistic view of the beatific vision stands, then, in opposition to that of the mystics. Garrigou-Lagrange points out that "many mystics seem to say that the soul's intimate union with God takes place, not in the operative faculties, but in the very essence of the soul, where sanctifying grace resides. Thus to Henry of Ghent is assigned this statement: Subjective beatitude consists in a descent of Divinity into the essence of the soul."<sup>23</sup> Not only is this view, as noted above, contrary to that of Scripture, it is also contrary to reason. "God is present in the essence of the soul by producing the soul's existence, or by granting it sanctifying grace. But this descent of God, since it is found in just men here on earth . . . cannot be essential beatitude. Further, the human soul, being a created existence, can operate only by faculties distinct from itself."<sup>24</sup>

For Aquinas, the beatific vision, as an operation of the intellect, is subject to the investigation of reason. While the authority of Scripture declared the fact of beatitude, philosophy justifies it according to reason. To demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine of the beatific vision Aquinas noted that "the ultimate perfection of all things consists in their reaching their principle,"<sup>25</sup> and since man is a rational creature his perfection must be a rational perfection. He says:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Aquinas *Truth* 8.1.

Now since the perfection of an intelligent being as such is the intelligible object, if in the most perfect operation of his intellect man does not attain to the vision of the Divine essence, but to something else, we shall be forced to conclude that something other than God is the object of man's happiness: and since the ultimate perfection of a thing consists in its being united to its principle, it follows that something other than God is the effective principle of man, which is absurd, according to us, and also according to the philosophers who maintain that our souls emanate from the separate substances, so that finally we may be able to understand these substances. Consequently, according to us, it must be asserted that our intellect will at length attain to the vision of the Divine essence, and according to the philosophers, that it will attain to the vision of separate substances.<sup>26</sup>

As noted before, the perfection of the intellect is not in its mode of knowing but in the object of its knowing, thus the most perfect intelligible object of the intellect is perfection itself, the Divine essence.

Not only is man's ultimate perfection a vision of the Divine essence, it is also his universal desire. Garrigou-Lagrange says, "Man is not perfectly happy as long as something remains to be desired. But man has a natural desire to know, not only that there is a first cause, but also what it is."<sup>27</sup> Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain explains; "It is as First Cause of things that all the proofs of the existence of God make us know God. Whether they be philosophical or prephilosophical, the approaches to God of which our nature is capable lead us to God, known in and through His effects or in the mirror of the things which proceed from Him."<sup>28</sup> But how could the intellect, knowing God only through His effects seen in His creation, fail to aspire to know Him as He is in Himself? He concludes, "It is natural and normal, knowing a reality - and the most important of all- from without and by means of a sign, we should desire to know it in itself and to grasp it without any intermediary. . . . There is in the human intellect a natural desire to see in His essence that very God whom it knows through the things which He has created."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Aquinas *Summa Theologica* (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948], suppl. 92.1.

<sup>27</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), 109.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Garrigou-Lagrange puts the argument succinctly: “Since natural desire can never be in vain, and since all men naturally desire beatitude, there must exist an objective being that is infinitely perfect, a being that man can possess, love, and enjoy.”<sup>30</sup> He points out that this argument rests on both inductive and metaphysical evidence. “Inductively, we take examples: the natural desire of life for air, of self-preservation for food, of the ox for grass, of the lion for meat. . . . Metaphysically. . . . because nature tends to an object that is real, not merely imaginary. If any action could be without some natural purpose, it could not exist at all, since everything that exists has a sufficient reason for its existence.”<sup>31</sup>

Maritain points out that the desire for beatitude is truly natural, not artificial: “Nothing is more human than for man to desire naturally things impossible to his nature. It is, indeed, the property of a nature which is not closed up in matter like the nature of physical things, but which is intellectual or infinitized by the spirit. It is the property of a metaphysical nature. Such desires reach for the infinite, because the intellect thirsts for being and being is infinite. They are natural, but one may also call them transnatural. It is thus that we desire to see God; it is thus that we desire to be free without being able to sin; it is thus that we desire beatitude.”<sup>32</sup> Because this desire is for what is actually impossible to nature but is yet a profoundly natural desire “Aquinas asserts that it cannot issue in an absolute impossibility. It is in no wise necessary that it be satisfied, since it asks for what is impossible for nature. But it is necessary that by some means (which is not nature) it be able to be satisfied, since it necessarily emanates from nature. In other words it is necessary that an order superior to nature be possible in which man is capable of that of which nature is incapable but which it necessarily desires.”<sup>33</sup>

Not only is the desire for beatitude natural, it is universal. According to Gilson this is evidenced in the history of philosophy, “and, we may add, the personal experience of every man

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<sup>30</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, 79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>32</sup> Maritain, 110-111.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

who, from the consideration of the world, rises to the consideration of its cause.”<sup>34</sup> Speaking of the beatific vision Hick says that “the basic thought is not distinctively medieval but is as old as Christianity, and indeed older. The notion of a direct and transforming awareness of the divine Reality had already excited the religious mind of the ancient world.”<sup>35</sup> For example, Plato’s philosophy included a well developed concept of beatitude. Garrigou-Lagrange says, “Plato sets up a stairway of beauty: from love of bodily beauty (sounds and colors) man rises to beauty of soul, because bodily beauty comes from the soul, which gives the body motion and life. Further, soul-beauty comes from noble deeds, noble deeds from elevated doctrines and precepts, and elevated doctrines depend on the highest branch of knowledge, which has as object self-subsistent beauty and good.”<sup>36</sup> The apprehension of this self-subsistent beauty and good results in beatification. He continues, “What felicity it would be, . . . what a blessed vision would be his, who beholds beauty itself, beauty pure, perfect, and simple, uncontaminated by human flesh, by colors, by all mortal trifles, a beauty uniformly permanent and divine! Would not such a man be truly virtuous, . . . truly an immortal among mortal men?”<sup>37</sup> Concluding he says, “Thus Plato . . . holds that beatitude does not consist chiefly in sense-pleasure, though it includes higher pleasures. Further, he holds that God, the supreme good, is man’s beatifying object, to be attained by him who by virtuous life imitates God. And the supreme virtue, higher than temperance, fortitude, justice, prudence, is that wisdom which is chiefly occupied with the contemplation of the supreme good.”<sup>38</sup>

Aristotle also developed a theory of man’s beatitude. Again Garrigou-Lagrange explains, “Contemplation is beatitude, because it is the highest act of man’s highest faculty, exercised on the highest of objects, namely, the supreme good. Contemplation is characterized by its

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<sup>34</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 261.

<sup>35</sup> Hick, 206.

<sup>36</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, 77.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

permanency, its delightfulness, its self-sufficiency, its supremacy. . . . But Aristotle speaks only of beatitude in the present life. On the future life he is silent.”<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, along with the other Greek philosophers, understood that man has a natural desire for happiness and he endeavored through the use of reason to discover that which would fulfill that desire. Although he pointed to an earthly, natural beatification, he nevertheless recognized the desire for happiness to be present in man.

### Objections

The doctrine of the beatific vision was not without challenge even in the medieval period. Numerous objections were raised against it, some biblical and some philosophical. In his usual style, Aquinas, in treating of this subject, sought to answer these objections from both authority and reason. For authority he looked not only to the Bible, but also to the opinions of the Church Fathers. For reason, he looked primarily to the philosophy of Aristotle, whom he called “the Philosopher.”<sup>40</sup>

#### Biblical Objections

The Bible asserts in John 1:18 that “no one has seen God at any time,” and in his commentary on this passage Chrysotom says “not even the heavenly essences, namely the Cherubim and Seraphim, have been able to see Him as He is.”<sup>41</sup> Some had apparently taken the comment to mean that the angels in heaven never would see the Divine essence. From this they reasoned that “equality with the angels is promised to [the saints]: *They . . . shall be as angels of God in heaven.* Therefore neither will the saints in heaven see God in His essence.”<sup>42</sup> Aquinas answered this objection by pointing out, on the authority of Augustine, the possibility of variant

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>40</sup> Aquinas *Truth* 8.1.

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas *Summa Theologica* suppl. 92.1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

interpretations. He says,

The words quoted can be explained in three ways, according to Augustine. In one way as excluding corporeal vision, whereby no one ever saw or will see God in His essence; secondly, as excluding intellectual vision of God in His essence from those who dwell in the mortal flesh; thirdly, as excluding the vision of comprehension from a created intellect. It is thus that Chrysotom understands the saying, wherefore he adds: *By seeing, the evangelist means a most clear perception, and such a comprehension as the Father has of the Son.* This also is the meaning of the evangelist, since he adds: *The only-begotten Son Who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him:* his intention being to prove the Son to be God from His comprehending God.”<sup>43</sup>

In other words, only an infinite mind could infinitely comprehend the infinite, which no mere mortal can do. This does not exclude, however, the possibility of a finite mind *apprehending* the Divine essence.

It was further objected that “in heaven God will be seen face to face, according to 1 Cor. 8:12. Now when we see a man face to face, we see him through his likeness. Therefore in heaven God will be seen through His likeness, and consequently not in His essence.”<sup>44</sup> The assumption of this objection seems to be that of some kind of representative epistemology. Aquinas responds that “the likeness of the corporeal object is received into the sight according to the same ratio as it is in the object, although not according to the same mode of being. Wherefore this likeness leads to the object directly.”<sup>45</sup> Aquinas means that we do not know by means of representations, or ideas, in the mind but rather by existence of the object in the mind as an immaterial form. The object has immaterial being in the mind and is therefore known in itself.

Aquinas also pointed to Scripture to counter any further objections that might challenge the biblical foundation for the doctrine of the beatific vision. He notes 1 John 3:2, “But we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” He takes this to mean that the saints will see God in His essence.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, he says, “It is written

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

(1 Cor. 8:12): *We see now through a glass in a dark manner, but then face to face.* Now that which is seen face to face is seen in its essence. Therefore God will be seen through His essence by the saints in Heaven.”<sup>47</sup> Finally, Aquinas says, “The desire of the saints cannot be altogether frustrated. Now the common desire of the saints is to see God in His essence, according to Exod. 33:13, *Show me Thy glory*; Ps. 80:19 (*sic*), *Show Thy face and we shall be saved*; and John 14:8, *Show us the Father and it is enough for us.* Therefore the saints will see God in His essence.”<sup>48</sup>

### Philosophical Objections

Not only were biblical objections raised against the doctrine of the beatific vision, but so were philosophical objections. Aquinas dealt with numerous objections in his writings but many of them are relative to the medieval period and so it is only necessary to address the main issues. Generally speaking there are three main arguments against the doctrine that the blessed will see the very essence of God: 1) the infinite distance separating God and the created intellect, 2) the formal nature of knowledge, and 3) the *via negativa*.

The first objection mentioned above deals with the infinite distance separating the knower and the known. “Since the intelligible object is the perfection of the intellect, there must needs be proportion between intelligible and intellect, as between the visible object and the sight. But there is no possible proportion between our intellect and the Divine essence, since an infinite distance separates them. Therefore our intellect will be unable to attain the vision of the Divine essence.”<sup>49</sup> This argument poses a real problem for the Thomistic philosophy because Thomism holds to an empirical view of knowledge, i.e., all knowledge comes through the senses. Since Plato’s epistemology could, theoretically, account for this problem, many medieval theologians turned to Platonism for the principles of a solution. However, Gilson says:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

“Not so St. Thomas Aquinas. Far from agreeing with Plato that the proper and natural object of our intellect is the intelligible Idea, to which we should endeavour painfully to rise by a violent effort to detachment from sense, he declares himself at one with Aristotle - and with experience - in affirming that, in this life, we can form no concept unless first we have received a sense impression, nor even return later on to this concept without turning to the images that sense has left behind in the imagination. There is therefore a natural relation, an essential proportion, between the human intellect and the nature of material things; whence it results that even granting the existence of purely intelligible Ideas, such as those of Plato, the very fact that their nature puts them out of reach of our senses makes it impossible to regard them as the natural object of the intellect. Now to eliminate the Platonic ideas from the normal field of human cognition is to eliminate all cognate objects whatsoever, that is to say all objects that transcend sense experience.<sup>50</sup>

Gilson continues, “How then can He Who at all points transcends both the human soul that knows and the sensible object that it knows, fall within the natural grasp of our intellect? Thus, then, the Thomist answer to the whole question will be both simple and clear: an intellect which bears naturally on sensible things cannot naturally have God for object.”<sup>51</sup> While it is true that a natural knowledge of the divine essence by the human intellect is a contradiction in terms, there is, nevertheless, a solution to the problem. Gilson says, “It is to be noted in the first place, that however feeble the intellect may be, it is and remains an intellect; that is to say a capacity to become, in a manner, all things by way of representation. It is due to its lowly estate among intellects that it can assimilate only the intelligible enclosed in the sensible; but what it seeks in the sensible is precisely the intelligible, and nothing will quench its thirst for that as long as there remains any intelligibility to be assimilated.”<sup>52</sup> The intellect maintains the capacity to know, even if it is bound to the sensible. Knowledge occurs when the intellect abstracts the form from the sensible object.<sup>53</sup> It is then that the known object comes to exist in the mind as an immaterial form. In light of this Aquinas is able to rebut the objection. “Properly speaking, a proportion is nothing else but a relation of a quantity to a quantity, such as arises when one quantity is equal to

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<sup>50</sup> Gilson, 249.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>53</sup> Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy Volume II: Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 488.

two or three times another. The term *proportion* was then transferred to signify the relation of one reality to another. For example, even though no relation of quantity is involved, matter is said to be proportioned to form inasmuch as it is related to form as its matter. Similarly, a created intellect is proportionate to the sight of the divine essence inasmuch as, in some way, it is related to the latter as to an intelligible form, even though the perfections of the two are incommensurable because an infinite distance lies between them.”<sup>54</sup>

The point that Aquinas is making is that while a created intellect could never comprehend the uncreated essence of God in a quantitative sense, it could *apprehend* His essence in a qualitative sense. If the Divine essence is related to the intellect precisely as something that is intelligible then it is proportionate to the intellects capacity to know the intelligible. This answer, however, raises another objection: how can the Divine essence be related to the intellect as an intelligible? If it is true, as Aquinas held it was, that the knower and the known become one in the act of knowledge, how can the created intellect become one with the Divine essence? Again, the empirical nature of Aquinas’s epistemology dictates that the natural mode of intellect is the abstraction of a form from a sensible object, but God’s essence is not material. Aquinas states the objection this way:

Whenever the intellect understands something actually it needs to be informed with the likeness of the object understood, which likeness is the principle of the intellectual operation terminating in that object, even as heat is the principle of heating. Accordingly if our intellect understands God, this must be by means of some likeness informing the intellect itself. Now this cannot be the very essence of God, since form and thing informed must needs have one being, while the Divine essence differs from our intellect in essence and being. Therefore the form whereby our intellect is informed in understanding God must needs be a likeness impressed by God on our intellect. But this likeness, being some thing created, cannot lead to the knowledge of God, except as an effect leads to the knowledge of its cause. Therefore it is impossible for our intellect to see God except through His effect. But to see God through His effect is not to see Him in His essence. Therefore our intellect will be unable to see God in His essence.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Aquinas *Truth* 8.1.

<sup>55</sup> Aquinas *Summa Theologica* suppl. 92.1.

The point is that because God's essence is His existence He is a necessary being. But in order to know God His essence must become one with the created intellect which is impossible because His being cannot be reduced to contingency, nor can the intellect's being be raised to necessity. Since it is impossible then for the intellect and God's essence to have the same being, God must create a form to act as a likeness of His essence. This, however, leaves the knower with a knowledge of the likeness of God, not God as He is in Himself.

Aquinas responds to this by denying the necessity of the oneness in being as it relates to the knowledge of God. He says, "In the vision wherein God will be seen in His essence, the Divine essence itself will be the form, as it were, of the intellect, by which it will understand: nor is it necessary for them to become one in being, but only to become one as regards that act of understanding."<sup>56</sup> In other words, it is not necessary that the intellect should become one with the intelligible in its natural being, "for it is clear that the intellect understanding a stone is not like it in its natural being,"<sup>57</sup> but that it should become one with it as it regards the mode of operation of the intellect. The intellect does not become one materially with the stone, but immaterially. In the same way the intellect becomes one with the Divine essence only as intelligible, i.e. the form, hence, "the form by which an intellect sees God when it sees Him through His essence is the divine essence itself. From this, however, it follows not that the essence is that form which is a part of a thing in its existence, but only that in the act of knowing it has a relation similar to that of a form which is a part of a thing in its existence."<sup>58</sup> While the concept is difficult to understand, it is not without precedent. The soul, a self-subsistent thing lacking matter, is the form of the body. "Similarly and in some way or other, and even though it is pure act and has an act of being entirely distinct from the intellect, the divine essence becomes related to the intellect as its form in the act of understanding. For this reason, Peter Lombard says that the union of the body with a rational soul is, in a way, an example of the beatifying union of a rational spirit with

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Aquinas *Truth* 8.1.

God.”<sup>59</sup>

The third objection to the doctrine that God will be seen in his essence is the *via negativa*, or the assertion that God is only known through negation. God is said to be eternal, i.e. without time, which is a negation of the positive element of what is known, i.e. time. Aquinas answers that the *via negativa* refers to the vision of God obtained in this life in which God is seen through some form or other. He says, “Since this form falls short of representing the divine essence, the latter cannot be seen through it. All that is known is that God transcends this intellectual representation of Him. Consequently, that which God is remains hidden; and this is the most exalted mode of knowledge that we can attain while we are in this life. Hence, we do not know what God is, but only what He is not. Nevertheless, the divine essence represents itself sufficiently. But when it becomes, as it were, the form of the intellect, the intellect knows not only what God is not but also what He is.”<sup>60</sup>

For Aquinas, the beatific vision stands in stark contrast to the limited knowledge that we now have of God. He says, “God’s splendor proves too much for the intellects of persons in this life for two reasons. First, it lies beyond the grasp of their intellectual power. From this it follows that the perfection of our vision is not equal to the perfection of His essence, because what an action can accomplish is determined by the agent’s perfection. Second, it transcends the form by which our intellects now understand. Consequently, God is not seen now through His essence, as is clear from what has been said. In the beatific vision, however, while God still transcends the power of a created intellect, and the perfection of our vision still does not equal the perfection of His being, He does not lie beyond the form by which He is seen. Consequently, that which is God will be seen.”<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

The medieval doctrine of the beatific vision as expounded by St. Thomas Aquinas asserts that the eternal vision of God had by the saints will be an eternal vision of Divine essence, God as He is in Himself. It is not only the desire of the saints, but it is the natural desire of every rational being to be united to the perfect object of the intellect. The finitude of the human mind, however, is unable of its own powers to raise itself to the vision of the Divine essence and must be so raised by a gift of grace from God Himself. In the beatific vision God impresses the intellect with His own essence, thus making it the form by which God is known. For Catholic theologian J. P. Arendzen this means that "God will not remain outside us. He will be within our mind itself, and there we shall see him. The nearest approximation to such knowledge on earth is our knowledge of ourselves. We know ourselves because we are ourselves; we are present to ourselves in our innermost being . . . We must not, therefore, imagine God in the Beatific Vision as some outside Object to look at, but as dwelling within the very essence of our soul, and thus being perceived from within by direct contact."<sup>62</sup> Maritain says, "This is to know God divinely, as He Himself knows Himself and as He knows us, in His own uncreated light."<sup>63</sup>

Heaven, considered in the light of the doctrine of the beatific vision, will be a far different place than traditionally conceived. Heaven will never be boring because the Divine essence will never be fully comprehended and so the saints will never exhaust their wonder at God's overwhelming glory. To enjoy the presence of God with unlimited passion and energy is the final reward of the redeemed.

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<sup>62</sup> J.P. Arendzen, 'Heaven or the Church Triumphant,' in *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, vol. 2, (na), 1253-4, quoted in Hick, 206.

<sup>63</sup> Maritain, 110.