

## THEOPHANIES AND VISION OF GOD IN AUGUSTINE'S *DE TRINITATE*: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

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### *Introduction*

With very rare exceptions, the project of a serious theological reception of Augustine seems to be lacking in Orthodox theology.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say, of course, that there is no talk of Augustine among Eastern theologians! On the contrary, even the appropriate designation of the bishop of Hippo is a matter of fierce debate: depending on which Orthodox theologian one happens to read, the verdicts on Augustine range from “heretic,” to “blessed,” to “saint.” Likewise, the theological reception of Augustine offers a perfect cacophony between charitable but uncritical agreement and radical rejection too often uninterested in grasping the context and nuances of Augustine’s thought.<sup>3</sup> A third option seems to be an

1 I am profoundly grateful to all those who have provided critical feedback at various stages of this article: Fr Joseph Mueller and Dr John D. Jones, both of Marquette University, and Fr John Behr.

2 One such exception is Andrew Louth’s article entitled “Love and the Trinity: Saint Augustine and the Greek Fathers,” *AugStud* 33 (2002):1–16.

3 For examples of radical rejection of the “heretical” Augustine, see Patric Ranson, “Le lourd sommeil dogmatique de l’Occident,” in *Saint Augustin: Dossier conçu et dirigé par Patric Ranson* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1988), 22–35; Michael Azkoul, *The Influence of Augustine of Hippo on the Orthodox Church* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990). On the other hand, Nicodemus Hagiorites’ uninformed acceptance of “saint” Augustine went so far as to attribute to him the thought of the Incarnation as preordained independently of the Fall. Fr Seraphim Rose articulated what may be called a “pastoral” reception of the “blessed” Augustine: “I myself fear the cold hearts of the ‘intellectually correct’ much more than any errors you might find in Augustine. . . . I feel in Augustine the love of Christ” (*The Place of the Blessed Augustine in Orthodox Church* [Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1997], 101).

ambiguous wavering between the previous two verdicts.<sup>4</sup> It appears, therefore—and we are indebted here to the work of recent scholars—that the last time Augustine was taken seriously in a theological manner by Orthodox thinkers was in fourteenth-century Byzantium, when both St Gregory Palamas and his adversaries seem to have known Augustine's *De Trinitate* and consciously reacted to its theology.<sup>5</sup> Even if the ultimately victorious Palamite synthesis rejected many of his ideas, "Palamas, quite clearly, was much less reluctant to benefit from Augustine's theological thought than many of his present day interpreters."<sup>6</sup>

4 For the ambiguous evaluation of Augustine by prominent Russian authors of the twentieth century, especially Bulgakov and Florovsky, see Myroslaw Tataryn, *Augustine and Russian Orthodoxy: Russian Orthodox Theologians and Augustine of Hippo, a Twentieth Century Dialogue* (Lanham/ New York/ Oxford: International Scholars Publications, 2000), 66–118. In his review of Tataryn's work (SVTQ 47 [2003]:116–120), Augustine M. Casiday deplores the fact that authors such as Fedotov, Bulgakov, Berdiaev, and Florovsky had a "painfully limited" knowledge of Augustine, which made their engagement with him "remarkably unencumbered by knowledge of the source material." He commends instead the dozen studies produced in pre-Revolutionary Russia for their authentic engagement with Augustine, rather than with the "caricature" or "straw man" set up by the émigrés. One should not forget, however, that in the Russian theological academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, instruction (and even everyday conversation!) in Latin was the vehicle of a marked theological alienation from the Orthodox life and theology. See, on this topic, Igor Smolitsch, *Geschichte der russischen Kirche, 1700–1917* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), esp. 575–82, and, more generally on the "pseudomorphosis" of Orthodox theology during that time, Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology* (Belmont, Mass: Nordland Publishing Company, 1979).

5 John S. Romanides, "Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics," *GOTR* 6 (1960/61):186–205; 9 (1963/64):225–70; Reinhard Flogaus, "Palamas and Barlaam Revisited: A Reassessment of East and West in the Hesychast Controversy of 14th Century Byzantium," *SVTQ* 42 (1998):1–32; Alexander Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagites in the Works of Saint Gregory Palamas: On the Question of a 'Christological Corrective' and Related Matters," *SVTQ* 46 (2002):163–90.

6 Flogaus, "Palamas and Barlaam Revisited," 32. Moreover, as noted by Golitzin ("Dionysius Areopagites in the Works of Saint Gregory Palamas ...," 189), "Maximus Planudes' translation of Augustine was a part of that conversation, as were the later translations of Thomas Aquinas by the Kydones brothers. There may then be the possibility of reading the Hesychast Controversy involved in this exchange, now underway *within* the Orthodox community itself, and dealing—*inter alia*—with the question of how to assimilate Augustine."

This essay will, of course, not do full justice to the problem of Augustine's theological reception in the East. However, Augustine's understanding of theophanies is certainly an important element of the debate. The choice to discuss only statements in *De Trinitate* is not only a matter of imposing certain limits on this essay. My main reason is that, in a careful historical study of Augustine's treatment of theophanies from the *Commentary on Galatians* (384) to *Against Maximinus* (428), Jean-Louis Maier has already shown that "*De Trinitate* represents Saint Augustine's definitive response to the problem of theophanies."<sup>7</sup>

The first step will be, quite obviously, a careful reading of the relevant passages especially in Books 2 and 3 of *De Trinitate*.<sup>8</sup> Building on the achievements of historical scholarship, I will then circumscribe the historical and doctrinal context of Augustine's theology of the theophanies, so as to measure his achievements against the relevant historical background. In the third section, I will attempt to relate Augustine's treatment of the theophanies to other areas of his theology. Finally, I will attempt a critical evaluation of Augustine's approach, together with a justification of the method and criteria employed in the evaluation.

### *Augustine's Account of Theophanies in De Trinitate*

The first four books of Augustine's *De Trinitate* are largely a treatise on the manifestations of God or theophanies. After noting that "the person of God Himself is not assumed in every event which is a message" from God (3.10.19),<sup>9</sup> Augustine distinguishes the following

7 Maier, *Les missions divines selon saint Augustin* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1960), 101–21. These pages comprise the fourth chapter of the book, entitled "Les théophanies de L'Ancien Testament."

8 The Latin text is taken from CC: Series Latina L; *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De Trinitate Libri XV, cura et studio W. J. Mountain, auxiliante Fr Glorie* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1968).

9 ... *nec in omnibus quae nobis a domino deo annuntiantur ipsius dei persona suscipitur*. "To assume a person" and other such expressions are part of a technical vocabulary, original to the world of theater, and deployed by Augustine both in Christology and in the theology of theophanies. Hubertus Drobner (*Person-Exegese und Christologie bei Augustinus: Zur Herkunft der Formel "Una Persona"* [Leiden: Brill, 1986], 140),

theophanic situations: 1) theophanies involving the form of an angel; 2) theophanies involving angels bringing about “a change of some kind” in a pre-existing material body; and 3) theophanies involving a body made for the occasion, which “is again discarded when its mission is accomplished, *re peracta rursus absumitur*” (3.10.19).

Commenting on such theophanic passages as Gen 18:1-2 (Abraham's sacrifice) or Ex 3:6 (“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”), Augustine considers that the appearance and the words were those of a real, created angelic being.<sup>10</sup> There is no question that God remains the ultimate source of the theophany: “The power of the will of God reaches through the spiritual creature, even to the visible and sensible effects” (3.1.6). However, on close examination, God is present in the theophany only inasmuch as the angel speaks *ex persona dei* (3.10.20), which is, says Augustine, “a manner of speaking in which the effect is attributed to the cause, *significatur per efficientem id quod efficitur*” (3.11.25). On the other hand, it can be said that the Word of God “was” in the angelic manifestation on Sinai in the sense that He was present in the decrees of the Law, and also in the sense that these theophanies “prepared and foretold” the Incarnation (3.11.26).

The second type of theophany is constituted by apparitions of “a form which is not that of an angel, although ordered and prepared for its ministry by an angel, *in ea specie quae non est quod angelus quamuis per angelum disposita ministretur*” (3.10.19). The respective

notes the following with regard to the use of “persona” in Augustine's theology of the theophanies: “... die Theophanien [sind] ein Paradeffall für die Person-Exegese, da in ihnen ja von ihrem Wesen her Gott durch eine andere Person (*ex persona*) spricht” (136); “*Persona* bedeutet in diesem Zusammenhang nur ‘Rolle’ die angenommen (*personam dei suscipere*), auferlegt (*imponi*) und ausgeführt (*gerere*) wird.”

<sup>10</sup> Augustine had already mentioned the possibility that theophanies be in fact “angelophanies” in Book 2. First he presents it a hypothetical case (a situation in which “one of many angels ... by some dispensation represented the person of his Lord,” 2.13.23), but then he seems to take this possibility as a matter of fact: “it is not sufficiently clear which person of the Trinity *that angel* represented” (2.13.23; emphasis added).

creature will, by angelic manipulation, come to signify something about God and God's will.

The third type of theophany is rather more "spectacular." For Augustine, God produces bodies out of nothing in order to be signified by them. Two elements are clearly emphasized here: on the one hand, this created matter had not existed prior to the theophany and is brought into existence by the will of God.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, such bodies are material, visible and ephemeral: the dove (Lk 3:22), the tongues of fire (Acts 2:3), the burning bush (Ex 3:2), the pillar of fire (Ex 13:21), the lightning and thunder on Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16), all "came into being ... to signify something and then pass away, *ut aliquid significaret atque praeteriret*" (2.6.11).<sup>12</sup>

In order to enable a full and correct appreciation of Augustine's thought on these issues, it is imperative to present, as briefly as possible, the historical context of Augustine's theology of the theophanies.

### *The Historical Background to Augustine's Discussion of the Theophanies*

The use of Old Testament theophanies as building-blocks for Christology is a very prominent and characteristic feature of early Christian thought.<sup>13</sup> In the second century, apologists such as Justin

11 "... the will of God is the first and the highest cause (*prima et summa causa*) of all the forms and movements of the corporeal beings" (3.4.9).

12 The same applies to the visions of Adam (in the garden of Eden), Abraham, or Moses (2.10.17). The "stuff" of these manifestations is "form of a creature, made for the occasion" (2.5.10); "these things appeared ... as a creature serving the Creator" (2.6.11); "the material form of those things came into being ... to signify something and then pass away" (2.6.11); "those corporeal forms were made visible in order to show what had to be shown ... and afterwards ceased to be" (2.6.11).

13 For a voluminous dossier of passages illustrating the christological understanding of theophanies in the first five centuries (from Justin to the Cappadocians, in the East, and Leo of Rome, in the West), see Georges Legeay, "L'Ange et les théophanies dans l'Écriture Sainte d'après la doctrine des Pères," *RThom* 10 (1902):138–58, 405–24; 11 (1903):46–69, 125–54. The material is systematized in the opening pages of Jules Lebreton, "Saint Augustin, théologien de la Trinité: Son exégèse des théophanies," *Miscellanea Agostiniana* 2 (1931):821–36. Similarly Laurens Johan van der Lof, "L'exégèse exacte et objective des théophanies de l'Ancien Testament dans le 'De Trinitate,'" *Augustiniana* 14 (1964):485–99.

Martyr or Theophilus of Antioch are using Old Testament theophanies as a means of affirming that Christ is the One who appeared to Adam in the Garden of Eden, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to Moses on Sinai. This type of "YHWH Christology" (also called "deity" or "divine" Christology) has been traced back to the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, the Pauline corpus, the Catholic Epistle of Jude.<sup>14</sup> A second context in which theophanies play an important role is the anti-dualistic polemic of authors such as Irenaeus or Tertullian: their argument that Christ is not a "new" God rests upon the thesis that he has already manifested himself in the old dispensation. Theophanies were also invoked against modalism: since Christ has appeared in Old Testament theophanies, whereas the Father has not, it follows that the Son is distinct from the Father.<sup>15</sup>

Several observations are necessary at this point. First of all, the identification of Christ with the Glory, Name, Angel, Son of Man manifested to the patriarchs and prophets, was neither the fruit of second-century polemics, nor a pious exegetical tradition among others. This is rather a constitutive element of early Christology.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, this is not simply "christological exegesis of the Old

14 Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965); Jarl Fossum, "Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5–7," *NTS* 33 (1987):226–43; E. Earle Ellis, "Deity-Christology in Mark 14:58," in *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays in the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. Joel B. Greene and Max M. Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 192–203; David Capes, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology* (WUNT 2/47; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992); Walther Binni, Bernardo Gianluigi Boschi, *Cristologia primitiva: Dalla teofania del Sinai all'Io sono giovanneo* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2004); Charles Gieschen, "The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68 (2004):105–26 (with abundant references). For the christological use of the divine Name in early Christianity, see Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), 147–63; Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *VC* 57 (2003):115–58.

15 See the "Epistle of the Six Bishops" against Paul of Samosata (Gustave Bardy, *Paul de Samosate* [Louvain, 1929], 16–18), and Eusebius of Caesarea against Marcellus (*De Eccl. Theol.* 2.2.1).

16 See, in this respect, the essays collected in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (ed. James R. Davila et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1999); Margaret Barker, *The Great*

Testament,” in the sense in which scholars understand exegesis today. What is at stake in identifying the “Lord,” the “Angel of the Lord,” the pillar of fire, the “Glory,” etc, with Christ is the christological interpretation of the transformative *experience* shared by “our fathers,” the patriarchs and prophets.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, we are reading Scriptures in light of Christ just as much as we are reading Christ in light of the Scriptures. It is only in light of what is known and remembered—the God who did great deeds, to whom we are committed in faith—that one is able to recognize in the Crucified One the King of Israel and ruler of the whole world, glorified and reigning from Zion.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, however, as John Behr notes, patristic reflection remains focused on the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. The vantage point of the exegete is not somewhere outside sacred history, in an “objective” history from where he would offer a mythological biography of the Logos before and after the Incarnation; the vantage point is rather the Cross, and the subject of theophanies is always identified by the characteristics

*Angel, A Study of Israel's Second God* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

17 By “transformative” I mean that the addressees of divine theophanies are changed in fundamental ways by this interaction: their appearance becomes luminous (e.g., Moses’ shining face), they are given new names (e.g., Abram-Abraham, Jacob-Israel, Saul-Paul), entrusted with divine missions (Isaiah, Ezekiel, St Paul), etc. In short, theophanies are real encounters with God, in which the recipient is made holy by interacting with the Holy One.

18 The Byzantine hymns of Good Friday are quite explicit in this sense. Whom did Joseph and Nicodemus wrap in linen cloths? Him “who wraps himself in light as in a garment.” (Ps 103/104:3). Whom does Judas deliver to death? Him who delivered Israel out of bondage. Who is given gall and vinegar? He who sent manna to his people in the wilderness. Who is judged? The Judge of Israel. Who is it that has his arms stretched out and is hanging on the Cross? He who stretched out the heavens, he who hung the earth upon the waters (Ps 135/136:6; Is 42:5, 44:24; Job 26:7). For a more detailed account, see Bogdan G. Bucur, “Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies in Byzantine Hymnography: Rewritten Bible?,” *TS* 68 (2007): 92–112; “*The Feet that Eve Heard in Paradise and Was Afraid*: Observations on the Christology of Byzantine Festal Hymns,” *Philosophy and Theology* 18 (2007): 3–26.

of the Passion.<sup>19</sup> It is in this theological logic that theophanies can be understood as prefigurative of the Incarnation.

After this rather long excursus, I return to the discussion of theophanies in Augustine. The historical background that is immediately relevant to the discussion in *De Trinitate*, is the polemic engagement between three parties in the second half of the fourth century: the Modalists (who denied the hypostatic existence of the Word, claiming that the three hypostases are merely three “modes” of divine manifestation), the Homoians (advocates of the thesis that the Son is “similar,” *homoios*, to the Father), and the supporters of Nicea. It is this three-side theological conflict that spurs the intense debate over the theophanies that is echoed in *De Trinitate* 1–4.<sup>20</sup> The Homoians sought to refute the modalist denial of Christ’s preexistence by appealing to theophanies (as had already been done earlier against Paul of Samosata; see my earlier note). However, the Homoians also extracted a subordinationist doctrine from theophanies: since the Son was manifested in theophanies, he must be visible in a way that the Father is not, and therefore be of a different nature than the Father.<sup>21</sup> Augustine’s adversaries, identified by Basil Studer and Michel Barnes as Western Homoians, are using the theophanies as proof that the Son is inherently visible.<sup>22</sup> For

19 John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001), 239; idem, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001), 173–74, 178, 450.

20 Even though a rough map of the theological debate (“Arians” versus “Modalists”) had been sketched out by the earlier studies of Lebreton and van der Lof, credit goes to Basil Studer and Michel René Barnes for their precise identification of the historical parties involved in the conflict. See Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins: Untersuchung zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der Schrift ‘De Videndo Deo’* (Studia Anselmiana LIX; Rome: Herder, 1971); Barnes, “Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* I,” *AugStud* 30 (1999): 43–60; idem, “The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt 5:8 in Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology of 400,” *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 329–356.

21 Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins*, 8; Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 341.

22 See *De Trinitate* 2.9.14–16; 2.16.27. Barnes considers the idea of the Son’s inherent visibility to have been “the bedrock of early Latin Trinitarian theology.” I find this difficult to reconcile with the following statements of Tertullian: “We declare, however, that the Son also, considered in himself (as the Son), is invisible, in that he is God, . . . but that he was visible before *the days of his flesh*, in the way that he says to

them, the Son is, on the one hand, distinct from the Father (against Modalists), and on the other, visible and, therefore, inferior to and unlike in nature to the Father (against Nicaea).

Since Augustine's contribution to this debate is, to a large extent, a rehearsal of traditional anti-Homoian arguments, it is necessary to see what these arguments were. The Homoian interpretation of theophanies relied on the following causal chain: in the theophanies, the Son is visible *ergo* mutable *ergo* not divine.<sup>23</sup> The pro-Nicene reply can be seen as an attempt to invalidate the conclusion by attacking the first link of the causal chain. According to their explanation, the Son is not mutable, because even while condescending to manifest himself to the patriarchs and prophets, he is and remains invisible in his essence. Invisible according to *nature*, the Son is seen in the theophanies according to his *will*, in condescension to the weakness of human perception. As Studer observes, the distinction between what remains invisible (the divine *natura*) and what becomes visible (the *species* produced by the will) could raise suspicions about a composite character of the Son.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the pro-Nicene tendency to weaken the link between the divine nature and the visible form of the theophany: the "stuff" of these manifestations is "visible," "ephemeral," and even, in a loose sense, "material" and "created"—clearly different from the Son's divine essence; yet, it is also different from the creaturely essence of creation.<sup>25</sup> Finally, to counter their adversaries' fascination with the

Aaron and Miriam, ... *in a vision*"; "... the Son of God appeared to the prophets and the patriarchs, as also to Moses indeed himself. ... Well, then, was the Son visible? (Certainly not), although he was the Face of God ... He was visible indeed in the flesh, but was invisible before his appearance in the flesh" (*Adv. Prax.* 14–15). Irenaeus' famous dictum *invisibile etenim Filii Pater, visibile Patris Filius* (*Adv. haer.* 4.6.6) refers exclusively to the incarnate Son, leaving no room for any speculation on the inherent visibility of the Son. See Adelin Rousseau, Louis Doutreleau, and Charles Mercier, eds. and trans., *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les hérésies* IV/1 (SC 100: Notes justificatives; Paris: Cerf, 1965), 208–9).

23 Cf. Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 8, 69.

24 Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 91.

25 Phoebadius, *Contra Arianos*, 17 (Studer, *Theophanie-Exegese*, 23n104); Gregory of Elvira, *Fide Orth.* 76 (Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 24n23); Hilary, *De Trin.*

form manifested in theophanies, pro-Nicenes insist on the interior, spiritual character of theophanies, and especially on their importance in foreshadowing the Incarnation. In Hillary's words, "[t]he resemblance was perfect between himself, after his birth, and himself, as he had been seen in vision. As he was born, so he had appeared; as he had appeared, so was he born."<sup>26</sup>

The polemic intention and the specific vocabulary of pre-Augustinian authors will reoccur in Augustine's treatment of the theophanies. However, unsatisfied with what he probably perceived as his predecessors' incomplete solutions, Augustine will take several innovative theological moves. As for Gregory of Elvira, Hilary and Ambrose, even when they are describing the theophanic phenomena loosely as "created" or "material," their understanding of theophanies comes much closer to that of patristic writers in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Numidia, Palestine, Syria, and Greece, than to the new solutions advanced by the bishop of Hippo. This issue, however, requires a separate investigation.

### *Augustine's Revolutionary Theology of the Theophanies*

Augustine shares with his predecessors the distinction between *natura* and the *species* produced by divine will. But he finds this solution incomplete. He solves the paradoxical coexistence of what is visible and what is invisible in the theophany by severing the ontological link between the two, so that the *species* is no longer "owned" by the subject of the *natura*.<sup>27</sup> The exegetical translation of this position is especially relevant for what I have called theophanies of the first type: unlike earlier authors, who would interpret "angel" as a reference to Christ in the form of an angel, Augustine has *two subjects* involved in the action: the angel—a real, created angel—and God who speaks his words through him. What he

5.17, 12.46 (Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 31n139, 142); Ambrose, *Expos. in Lucam* 1.24–25; *De Incarn* 3.22 (for a detailed analysis of the distinction between *species* and *natura* in Ambrose, see Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 46–53).

<sup>26</sup> Hillary, *De Trin.* 5.17.

<sup>27</sup> Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 96.

means by "signification" is, then, not the presence of God *himself*, but rather God's "impersonation" by an angel.<sup>28</sup> Further elaboration is necessary at this point on the mode of divine presence in the theophanies, and the "who" in the theophanies.

According to Augustine, God produces visible effects in the creature "in order to signify his presence, and to reveal himself in them ... but without appearing in that substance itself by which he is" (3.4.10). If the creature is an angel (first type of theophany), God is present in the theophany inasmuch as he is "impersonated" by the angel. If it is a pre-existing body (second type theophany), God is present in the theophany inasmuch as the angelic "preparation" of this body makes the latter capable of signifying something about him. If the creature is not a pre-existent creature, but one created for the occasion, God is present in the theophanies inasmuch as his presence and will are signified by the various (human or other) forms that are made manifest.

In conclusion, in the first two cases, theophanies are either angelophanies or evanescent manifestation created for the occasion. For pre-Augustinian authors, instead, the visible manifestation is the Son *Himself*, directly present and directly active in the lineaments of the visible form of an angel, human being, and so forth.

As I have already said, what *all* authors before Augustine share, throughout Syriac, Greek, and pre-Augustinian Latin Christianity, is a tradition of interpreting the theophanies as "Christophanies."<sup>29</sup> From this point of view, Augustine's response to the Homoians completely changes the terms of the debate: while Homoians would argue that the Son who manifests himself in the theophanies cannot, in virtue of this very manifestation, be

28 That this is, indeed, the case, is also made clear by Augustine's special use of *persona*, noted above. Augustine's understanding of OT theophanies becomes clearer when compared to the NT: "Die Einmaligkeit der Theophanie des Logos besteht darin, dass in der Menschwerdung Rolle und Träger der Rolle identisch waren. Ein Engel konnte zwar vorher die Person des Logos symbolisieren und vorherverkünden, er konnte sie sich aber nicht so zu eigen machen, dass er sie selbst war" (Drobner, *Person-Exegese*, 140).

29 Cf. Legeay, "L'Ange et les théophanies," *passim*.

divine,<sup>30</sup> and the pro-Nicenes would struggle to reaffirm the divinity of the Son, even while maintaining the traditional belief about theophanies, Augustine altogether eliminates the idea that theophanies are manifestations of the Logos.

This new understanding seems, as I said, revolutionary. Andrew Louth, on the contrary, asserts that Augustine's new understanding of the theophanies exemplifies a theological shift taking place not only in the West but also in the East, and that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* offers something comparable to Augustine's interpretation of the theophanies.<sup>31</sup> I cannot but express my sharp disagreement with this conclusion. Ps-Dionysius defines God's intelligible providences as "His gifts, appearances, powers, attributes, allotments, abodes, and every theophany of the Old Testament" (*Ep.* 9:1, 1105A), and all these elements of the divine procession are "concentrated ... specifically in the second Person of the Trinity."<sup>32</sup> Aside from this general christological framework of procession and return, in which "thearchy," "ray," or "providence" are christological titles,<sup>33</sup>

30 "What is being argued by the Homoians is that the Son's role as revealer of the Father means that the Son cannot be God as the Father is God. The very attributes which constitute, as it were, the Son's capacity to reveal are judged as decisive indications of the Son's inferior status to the Father who is revealed by the Son—the Father who is the 'one true God'" (Barnes, "The Visible Christ," 330).

31 "Whereas earlier Christian theology ... had interpreted the theophanies of God in the Old Testament as manifestations of the Word of God, ... by the fifth century Christian theology had come increasingly to interpret theophanies as the work of angels. E.g., in the West Augustine, *On the Trinity* III, and cf. Dionysius, CH IV.3" (Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* [Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse, 1989], 37, 51).

32 Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 105.

33 For the equation of "Ray" with Christ, see István Perczel, "Une théologie de la lumière: Denys l'Aréopagite et Évagre le Pontique," *REAug* 45 (1999): 79-120, esp. 86. For the more problematic equation of "Thearchy" with the Logos, see idem, "Le Pseudo-Denys, lecteur d'Origène," in *Origeniana VII: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts*, ed. W.A. Bienert and U. Kühneweg (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 673-709, esp. 681-85. See also John N. Jones (not to be confused with John D. Jones), "The Status of the Trinity in Dionysian Thought," *JR* 80 (2000): 652. See also Lambros Siassos, "Des théophanies créées? Anciennes interprétations de la Ie Lettre de Denys l'Aréopagite," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en orient et en occident: actes du colloque international*, Paris 21-24 septembre 1994 (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1997), 227-35.

Ps-Dionysius also identifies “The-One-Who-Is,” who spoke to Moses, with Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from the polemic against those who maintained an inherent visibility of the Son, a second factor that shapes Augustine's option to cease reading theophanies as Christophanies is the pro-Nicene theology of common operations. Indeed, the logical outcome of thinking that “the Trinity works inseparably in everything that God works” (1.5.8; similarly 2.10.18) is that the entire Trinity is at work in theophanies. Certain theophanies, however, can be associated with a particular divine person. For instance, the dove at baptism or the tongues of fire at Pentecost signify the Holy Spirit, while “the voice from above” is that of the Father. Augustine solves this problem by pointing to the paradigmatic character of the Incarnation, where the *entire* Trinity is involved in “producing” the human form (2.10.18), even though it is only the Son that becomes man. Similarly, the entire Trinity is at work in “producing” the created forms of theophanies, through which a specific divine person may be signified.<sup>35</sup> However, Augustine refuses to commit himself to a definitive identification of the subject of particular theophanies (2.7.13, 18-19, 35), because the Biblical statements often provide insufficient ground for such precise determinations: “the thing is obscure, at least with regard to this testimony of Scripture” (2.10.18).<sup>36</sup>

In all three types of theophany, the “substance” of the visible

34 Perczel, “Une théologie de la lumière,” 82–83. The main arguments are concentrated in notes 7, 8, and 9. In CH 1:2, 121 A (*Οὐκοῦν Ἰησοῦν ἐπικαλεσάμεοι τὸ πατρικὸν φῶς τὸ ὄν τὸ ἀληθινὸν ὃ θωπίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχομενον εἰς τὸ κόσμον*), the participle *τὸ ὄν* can be read either as reinforcing “light” (the fatherly light, the true one), or it can be treated in its own right, which would result in translating: “Jesus, the fatherly light, the Existing One.” According to Perczel, this second reading is supported by the Syriac manuscript tradition, by stylistic arguments, and by the occurrence of the same construction in Ep. 1, 1065 A.

35 Even though the dove signifies the Spirit, simple faithful have trouble understanding how “the Trinity ... produced (*operata sit*) that form of a dove that signifies the Spirit” (1:5:8).

36 This is Augustine's verdict on Gen 3:7, but it is perfectly applicable to other theophanic passages.

form is not the divine substance, but rather something created. A more precise determination is quite easy for theophanies of the first or second types, which involve either an angel or some other non-angelic creature. As for the third type, the “stuff” of the visible form in the theophanies is first of all ephemeral.<sup>37</sup> According to Studer, it consists of a special substance, “brought forth in an unmediated manner, without birth, by the will of God,”<sup>38</sup> distinct from ordinary created substance: unlike the rock from which Moses drew water, which had been an ordinary rock, existing as such prior to the miracle that prefigured Christ, the dove had not existed before, but came into being “suddenly, *repente*” (2.6.11).

Augustine's theology of theophanies not only moves away from the christological content of theophanies, but also marks a break with the transformative character of theophanies. Traditionally, the theophanies at the Lord's Baptism in the Jordan or at the Transfiguration Mount Tabor were considered a revelation of Christ's *own* divine glory to the apostles, which transfigured them. For Augustine, instead, “what appeared in events such as the theophany atop Mt Tabor was created matter being used as an instrument of communication by the Trinity.”<sup>39</sup> And while “an encounter

37 “All these tangible signs were displayed through a creature that has been made subject (*per subiectam ... creaturam*) in order to signify the invisible and intelligible God” (2.15.25); “those visions were wrought by a changeable creature (*per creaturam commutabilem*) ... they do not reveal God as he properly is, but signify his presence by ... signs” (2.17.32); “some form of a creature was made for the occasion (*facta est enim quaedam creaturae species ex tempore*), in order that the Holy Spirit might be visibly manifested by means of it” (2.5.10).

38 “Ohne Geburt vom Willen Gottes unmittelbar hervorgebracht” (Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 95).

39 Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 346. Lebreton makes the very same point, with reference to the Baptism in the Jordan (i.e., “Theophany,” in Eastern Orthodox parlance), and Pentecost: “Quant aux manifestations divines postérieures à l'incarnation, soit au baptême du Christ soit à la Pentecôte, elles s'expliquent comme les théophanies de l'Ancien Testament, par le ministère de créatures corporelles et intelligentes” (Lebreton, “Saint Augustin, théologien de la Trinité,” 835).

with such an instrument ... was an occasion for faith in God,"<sup>40</sup> it could not, obviously, have any transformative power.

This break with the previous theophanic tradition, and with the theology of the Christian East, whose core remains "theophanic" is, however, perfectly coherent with the whole of Augustine's theology. It would, indeed, make little sense to speak of Tabor as revelation of Christ in divine light and glory once "the divinity of the Son is, until the eschaton, unseen and unseeable, although it can be symbolized or signified by some created artifact."<sup>41</sup>

### *Augustine Interpreting Augustine*

In *De Genesi ad litteram* 12, Augustine presents a hierarchy of three levels of vision of God: corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual. According to this classification, theophanies instantiate either the corporeal vision (Isa 6:1–7; Rev 1:13–20) or the spiritual vision (Ex 19:33).<sup>42</sup> What seems to be clear is that theophanies cannot grant the higher, "intellectual," vision. Theophanies are thereby relegated from the center to the periphery of Christian theology, or, in a vertical perspective, from the top to the bottom of the ladder leading to the vision of God.

Perhaps the most determinant driving force of Augustine's new approach to the theophanies is his eschatological transference of the *visio Dei*. If the theophanies (whether of the Old or of the New Testaments, or theophanies in the lives of Christian saints) do not confer a direct experience of the divine, it is because such an experience is reserved for the eschaton. It is necessary at this point to take

40 Barnes, "Visible Christ," 346.

41 Barnes, "Visible Christ," 335.

42 In *De Trinitate*, too, Augustine hints at the different types of theophanies recounted in the Scriptures: thus, the vision in Rev 5:6 "was not shown to bodily eyes by bodily figures, but was shown in the spirit by the spiritual images of bodily figures" (2.6.11), whereas the dove at Christ's Baptism was seen "with the eyes" (2.6.11). Augustine also raises the possibility that the form of the dove and that of tongues of fire were different, in that the latter may have been perceived not with the eyes, but in the spirit; however, the idea is enunciated as a mere possibility, and does not inform the discussion (2.6.11).

a closer look at Augustine's understanding of the *visio Dei*. As will become apparent, this is an area of striking divergence between scholars.

According to Barnes, Augustine's thought on of faith and vision can presented in syllogistic form:

- a. faith is not vision of *God's essence*;<sup>43</sup>
- b. knowledge is vision;<sup>44</sup>
- c. faith is not knowledge of *God's essence*.<sup>45</sup>

In support of his understanding of the *visio Dei*, the bishop of Hippo deploys what Barnes calls "a constellation" of Scripture passages: Mt 5:8; 1 Cor 15:24–28; Phil 2:5–7. To these passages should be added Jn 14:21; 1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 5:6. The resulting account is the following: while during his earthly life Christ, under the form of servant, reveals the Father "only through the instrumentality of the faith," at the end of time the Same will reveal, in the form of God, the essence of God as Holy Trinity to the pure of heart.<sup>46</sup> Phil 2:5–7 and 2 Cor 5:6 are fundamental in interpreting the Christian's earthly journey, and function as a reading lens through which the visionary element of passages such as Jn 14:21 becomes eschatological.<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that Augustine's

43 I should note that the qualification "of God's essence" is very important at this point, since Books 9–11 make it clear that understanding is a sort of mental seeing. This, however, is not a direct vision of God. Another crucial verse in Augustine's exegesis and theology is Heb 11:1 is: "we cannot see that which we are commanded to believe" (13.1.3).

44 "One of the distinctive features of Augustine's thought is the emphasis he places on the understanding that 'knowing' is a 'seeing,' ... Augustine makes it the foundation for much of his thought" (Barnes, "Visible Christ," 343).

45 "If even noetic knowledge is most properly understood as a kind of sight, and faith is not sight but the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen (Heb 11:1) then clearly faith is not knowledge..." (Barnes, "Visible Christ," 344). "Faith is not knowledge, because it is not a 'seeing,' either sensible or intellectual, and knowing is understood to be a kind of sight" (Barnes, "Visible Christ," 349 n. 21).

46 Barnes, "Visible Christ," 334–35. For Augustine's account, see *De Trin.* 1:13:28. Christ contemplated "in the form of God" by the faithful only (1:8:16) is precisely what the Son's "handing over of the Kingdom" to the Father means.

47 Barnes ("Exegesis and Polemic," 52ff) offers a detailed survey of how "Philippians

exegesis departs significantly from the interpretative tradition dominant before him (and after him, in the East).<sup>48</sup>

Given this exegetical underpinning of Augustine's reflection on faith, knowledge of God, and vision of God, it comes as no surprise that the vision of God became for him a strictly eschatological event. According to Barnes, by the year 400 Augustine believed that the *visio Dei* is "impossible in this life," and that visions were in fact undesirable, since they had no soteriological value whatsoever.<sup>49</sup> To put it briefly, faith and a love rooted in faith are "now," while seeing God and a love rooted in that seeing are reserved for "thereafter."<sup>50</sup> This theology is echoed in *Epistles 147* and *148*, writings posterior to the early books of *De Trinitate*, and dedicated specifically to the theme of theophanies and *visio Dei*.<sup>51</sup>

What, then, are the factors that transform "vision of God," "eternal life" and "eternal joy" (1.12.31) into exclusively eschatological realities? We may certainly point to Augustine's axiom that

2:5–7 has a sort of 'canonical' function in trinitarian (or christological) theology," which Augustine inherits from his predecessors Marius Victorinus and Hilary.

48 This is especially true of Mt 5:8 and Jn 14:21. Even though Barnes presents some precedents for the eschatological interpretation of Mt 5:8, even the younger Augustine seems to have interpreted Mt 5:8 as a vision possible *hic et nunc*: "To the pure in heart is given the power of seeing God ... And those promises can indeed be fulfilled in this life, as we believe them to have been fulfilled in the case of the apostles" (*On the Sermon On the Mount* 1:4:12).

49 "By the year 400, Augustine had come to understand that in this life we were incapable of a vision of God — that we were now incapable of direct knowledge of the truth ... Augustine had also come to understand something else about such visions: fundamentally, there was no virtue to them ... Augustine had a new understanding not simply of the (im)possibility of a vision of God in this life, but of the significance of any such vision: ... no salvation in or from that vision. Salvation came from faith—this is faith's 'utility'" (Barnes, "Visible Christ," 342).

50 Cf. *Sermon* 3.6: "At present then these eyes are enlightened, as is suitable to their infirmity, by faith; hereafter as shall be suited to their strength, they shall be enlightened by sight." Very similar observations with regard to Jn 14:21 can be found in *Tractate on John* 75.5, which is roughly contemporary to *De Trinitate* 1–4.

51 Cf. van der Lof, "L'exégèse exacte et objective des théophanies," 487; Barnes, "Vision of God," 354, n67. For texts and extensive commentary, see Augustinus, *Über Schau und Gegenwart des unsichtbaren Gottes. Texte mit Einführung und Übersetzung von Erich Naab* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998).

“the nature itself, or the substance, or the essence (*ipsa natura uel substantia uel essentia*) ... the thing itself that God is ... cannot be seen corporeally” (2.18.35), and that such seeing will be available only “when the darkness of this mortality and corruption shall have passed” (1.8.17). A second factor is polemical: the eschatological interpretation of the *visio Dei* “should be understood as Augustine’s solution to the Homoian subordinationist understanding of the Son’s visibility.”<sup>52</sup>

I submit that there is a third factor involved in shaping Augustine’s epistemology of faith. Augustine criticizes those who claim “to be able to do what an angel can do, rather than to be by their piety what an angel is” (8.7.11). Aside from other implications of this passage,<sup>53</sup> it must be noted that “to be able to do what an angel can do” has, in Christian tradition, strong gnoseological and visionary implications. “What angels do” is first and foremost worship before the throne of Glory and unceasingly gaze upon the life-dispensing face of the enthroned One.<sup>54</sup> Given that Augustine often targeted various more or less orthodox ascetic groups, his critique in 8.7.11 could well be carrying overtones of a conflict between his own epistemology of faith, and that shared by the fringe groups he is attacking. The text under discussion seems to be saying that certain Christians claim to do what only angels can do, namely exist as bodiless creatures and see God. Such a claim is manifestly false, since apart from the pride of these people, and their

52 Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 331.

53 For one, here Augustine lays out the contrast between the vain claims of pride, and the humility of piety. Secondly, as Augustine understands these people, they are directing their search for God towards *exterior* realities, when, in fact, knowledge of God calls for one to seek *inwardly*: “they seek to walk by outward paths, and abandon their own interior things, in the midst of which is God” (8.7.11).

54 This explains why becoming similar to the angels, or even being granted “the true nature of angels” (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc* 3.9.7), is an established *topos* of the ascetical literature (see Athanasius’ portrayal of Antony the Great in the Syriac Life, or Gregory of Nyssa’s portrayal of Macrina and Basil). The younger Augustine himself speaks about “the change into the angelic form” that is promised after this life as of “promises can indeed be fulfilled in this life, as we believe them to have been fulfilled in the case of the apostles” (*On the Sermon on the Mount* 1.4.12).

erroneous move *outwards* instead in *inwards* the vision of God will only be granted at the end time. Whosoever, then, although aware that “the divinity ... is seen by that sight in which those who see are no longer men but above men, *iam ... non homines, sed ultra homines*” (1.6.11), claims to see God, like an angel, thinks himself *already* in the future age. Thus, the theological logic that Augustine is attacking finds its concrete embodiment in the ascetic theories put forth by a variety of Christian groups. The polemics against such groups is a contributing factor to Augustine's theology of the theophanies.

So far, I have outlined Barnes' account of Augustine's theology of the *visio Dei*. His conclusion is that “the most accurate description of Augustine's judgment about the possibility of a vision of God in this life is that it cannot happen, but it sometimes does anyway” namely in extraordinary cases such as those of Moses and St Paul.<sup>55</sup> However, a good number of statements in writings covering Augustine's entire lifespan seem to imply, or even affirm explicitly that some among the apostles, *other than St Paul!* were granted this vision, and that it continues to occur, quite often in mystical rapture.<sup>56</sup> Hence, a substantially different account, proposed by Roland

<sup>55</sup> Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 352n48.

<sup>56</sup> All following quotes are from Roland J. Teske, SJ, “St. Augustine and the Vision of God,” in *Augustine Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. F. van Fleteren et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 287–308. “We believe that certain great and peerless souls have also seen and do see these things” (*De Quant. Animae* 76, quoted in Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 288). Commenting on *De Quant. Animae* 76, Teske writes: “Augustine at this point is confident that he and his friends will attain in this life to the vision of God that the great and peerless souls he has mentioned have described”—according to Teske, these are Plato, some of the Neoplatonists, and, possibly, St Paul (Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 289). “In this life few arrive at this knowledge, but beyond this knowledge no one can advance even after this life” (*De ordine* 2.9.26, quoted in Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 290). This is, according to Teske, “perhaps the clearest indication that Augustine did hold that such a vision of God was attainable in this life” (Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 289). ... Augustine clearly implies that in this life at least a few good men see the divine substance ...” (Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 291). *On the Sermon on the Mount* (1.4.12) counts “the change into the angelic form” among “promises that can indeed be fulfilled in this life, as we be-

Teske, holds that Augustine never abandoned the conviction that the vision of God is “not merely a dim foreshadowing of the life of heaven, but a genuine anticipation of the eternal life of the saints,”<sup>57</sup> beyond which there can be no real qualitative progress in the end time, and which occurs even *in via* for a number of great souls.

On this second reading of Augustine the development from earlier to later works does not entail the expected transition from acceptance to rejection of the *visio Dei* in this life, but rather consists in a transition from considering that the “great souls” who attain the vision in this life are the Platonists, to a more careful consideration of the saintly persons in Scriptures; from relatively few to numerous biblical references; and from the visionary experience as result of one’s own effort, to a theology of grace.<sup>58</sup>

The divergence between these two versions of Augustine is epitomized in the tentative reconstructions of what may have been Augustine’s own relation to mystical experience. While Barnes says that “by the year 400, Augustine had come to understand that in this life we were incapable of a vision of God,”<sup>59</sup> Teske finds that Augustine’s conviction that the vision of God is attained even in this life by a few souls was “very probably grounded in his own experience of God.”<sup>60</sup>

The elements adduced as proof by both exegetes of Augustine are undeniably present in Augustine. This, however, does not say anything about the *functional value* of these elements. If we ask to what extent the respective elements are operative in the articulation of Augustine’s doctrinal discourse, it becomes clear that we are

lieve them to have been fulfilled in the case of the apostles” (*On the Sermon on the Mount* 1.4.12). Augustine’s later explanation, in the *Retractations*, that by “as the apostles attained them” he, in fact, meant “to the degree to which ...,” implying the limited, relative knowledge granted to the pious inhabitants of the earth, does not sound very convincing. Finally, *Ep. 147 (De uidendo Deo)* mentions Paul’s rapture in 2 Cor 12:1–10 as a model for what is happening *usually* (*sicut solet in vehementiore exstasi*).

57 Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 299.

58 Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 299.

59 Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 342.

60 Teske, “St Augustine and the Vision of God,” 299.

dealing with elements whose importance to articulating that discourse is quite different. The visionary element, although present here and there, is far from exerting any significant influence over the articulation of doctrine.<sup>61</sup> Statements about the possibility of *visio Dei* on earth, and especially the examples of Moses and Paul, reflect much more the pressure of traditional views than Augustine's own reflection. Quite to the contrary, the other two elements (the eschatological exegesis of the above-mentioned "constellation" of passage, and the faith-knowledge relation) are crucial articulators of Augustine's thought.

I find, therefore, more convincing the arguments marshaled by Barnes and agree with his conclusion, which I find useful to repeat:

By the year 400, Augustine had come to understand that in this life we were incapable of a vision of God—that we were now incapable of direct knowledge of the truth ... Augustine had also come to understand something else about such visions: fundamentally, there was no virtue to them ... Augustine had a new understanding not simply of the (im)possibility of a vision of God in this life, but of the significance of any such vision: ... no salvation in or from that vision. ...<sup>62</sup>

61 By way of contrast, the articulation between the theme of *visio Dei* and the imagery of interiorized temple sacrifice (the sacrifice of prayer on the altar of the heart) is the foundation of a theology of the universal priesthood. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, explains that a Christian is a "a priest unto God, anointed ... for this very office to offer a gift to God ... a gift that is really ... 'the inner man,' who must be perfect and blameless." To be crucified with Christ is "to present yourself a sacrifice to God, to become a priest unto the most high God, to make yourself worthy of the vision of the Almighty ... the consequence of presenting ourselves to God is that we shall be changed from the rank of human nature and human dignity to that of angels; for so speaks Daniel, that 'thousand thousands stood before him.' ... To say, again, that one makes oneself worthy to see God, produces no less a result than this; that one is made worthy to see God" (*On Virginity* 24, NPNF). In the Syriac tradition, the fire of the Holy Spirit descends to consume the interior sacrifice of prayer, and grants the vision of God. See, in this respect, Sebastian Brock, "The Priesthood of the Baptized: Some Syriac Perspectives," *Sobornost* 9 (1987):14–22, esp. 18–19.

62 Barnes, "Visible Christ," 342.

### *Critical Evaluation*

I have shown that Augustine's theory of the theophanies as "created manifestations" of the Trinity is part of a highly sophisticated and coherent theological complex. It is integrated with the theology of common operations, with a distinctly Augustinian exegesis of certain key passages of Scripture, his epistemology of faith, and his anthropology.

This entire doctrinal complex represents the rise of a new theological framework, which has dominated and irreversibly shaped Western Christianity to this day.<sup>63</sup> Among other features of this new framework is also a new understanding of theology. Emancipated from the expectation of an imminent divine manifestation that would illumine, deify, and grant fullness of knowledge in a burst of divine light, theology in the aftermath of Augustine develops a consuming passion for understanding, to the fullness of one's ability here on earth, the depth of the Christian revelation. This patient yet ardent wrestling with the unclarity, difficulties, and paradoxes of the confessed faith, which is the characteristic feature of *De Trinitate*, will be the theological method inherited from the bishop of Hippo.

There was, of course, a certain price to pay for the new development.

1. From an Orthodox perspective, the discontinuity with the traditional understanding of the theophanies is in itself, aside from its theological implications, a regrettable fact.<sup>64</sup> And it is of great importance that the liturgical tradition of the Western Church was less eager to adopt the new theology: the pre-Augustinian understanding of theophanies as Christophanies is still present in hymns

<sup>63</sup> Golitzin ("The Form of God and Vision of the Glory") notes that "his [Augustine's] treatment [of the theophanies] is strikingly different again and, indeed, marks a genuine revolution, if not an actual rupture, with regard to prior traditions" in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Numidia, Palestine, Syria, and Greece.

<sup>64</sup> It is noteworthy that Lebreton's article came in reaction to one of the conclusions voiced by Legeay: "Il nous est, ce semble, permis de préférer, à l'opinion de saint Augustin, le sentiment à peu près unanime des Pères des quatre premiers siècles de l'Eglise ..." (Legeay, "L'Ange et les théophanies," 405).

such as the *Improperia* of Good Friday, where the crucified Christ is still identified as the One Who appeared to the Moses, and led Israel out of captivity, struck the first born of Egypt, and drowned the pursuer in the Red Sea.<sup>65</sup> It is the very same theology displayed unambiguously in Eastern and Western iconography.<sup>66</sup> The dissonance between *lex credendi* and *lex orandi* was eventually “solved” by divorcing theological reflection from the ancient hymns and orations, thereby creating the perception that worship and piety somehow belong to a different “realm” than theology.

2. As I noted earlier (footnote 56) with reference to the link between the vision of God and the theology of interiorized Temple sacrifice, the *visio Dei* was, in the patristic era, a crucial component in understanding the universal priesthood. Certainly, Augustine has much to say about the universal priesthood.<sup>67</sup> He is fond of using the traditional image of Christians as temples and the heart as altar of one's own oblation to Christ.<sup>68</sup> And yet, in transferring the vision of God, formerly an inextricable part of the theology of interior sacrifice, to the realm of eschatology, Augustine seems, indeed, to erode one of the pillars that support the understanding of universal priesthood.

65 See also the following verses from the ninth-century Advent hymn *Veni Immanuel*, here in the popular English rendering: “O come, Thou Lord of might, Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height, in ancient times didst give the law in cloud and majesty and awe...” Cf. the so-called “O” Antiphons, from the eighth and ninth centuries: “O Adonai, and Ruler of the house of Israel, Who didst appear unto Moses in the burning bush, and gavest him the law in Sinai, come to redeem us with an outstretched arm” (December 18).

66 Eastern iconography regularly depicts Christ as the enthroned Glory seen by Isaiah and Ezekiel, or as creator of Adam and Eve. Not surprisingly, these and other themes occur in the Monreale mosaics in Sicily. In the West, even as late as the twelfth-century Winchester Bible and Lambeth Bible, Christ continued to be depicted as “extracting” Eve from Adam's side, or as the Lord on top of Jacob's ladder, or as handing out the Law to Moses on Sinai.

67 For a collection of relevant texts, see Cyril Eastwood, *The Royal Priesthood of the Faithful. An Investigation of the Doctrine from Biblical Times to the Reformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg: 1963) 94–101, and *Sacerdoce des Baptisés, Sacerdoce des Prêtres* (Paris: Brepols, 1991) 97–113.

68 E.g., *De Civ. Dei* 10:4 and many of the sermons.

3. In the Eastern (and Western pre-Augustinian) tradition—including both the theological writings of the Fathers, and the largely anonymous hymnography—theophanies are understood as transformative and prefigurative visions of God: *prefigurative*, because they were taken as manifestations of the Logos in preparation for the Incarnation; and *transformative*, because they were understood as luminous manifestations by which the visionaries—prophets, patriarchs, or Christian saints—are really transfigured, and really transformed, *deified*. Theophanies are the heart of theology, because they exemplify the availability and necessity of seeing God in this life. On balance, the mature Augustine seems quite opposed to such theology.

4. It has been noted that “the Orthodox theology of icons is based on the hermeneutics of theophanies.”<sup>69</sup> It may be significant that the Carolingian theologians, for whom “Augustine became the most authoritative church father,”<sup>70</sup> had difficulties assimilating the theology of icons. Today’s attempts at recuperating the art of the icon in Western Christianity can only be genuine and fruitful if serious consideration is given to the underlying theology of icons and its “theophanic” apriori.

5. Studer notes the erosion of the unique relation between the second Person of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which took place

<sup>69</sup> According to Nikos Matsoukas, “iconoclasm is a rejection of the energies of the Holy Spirit in creation and history. Orthodox theology takes it for granted that everything is full of these energies, has been made alive and sanctified. For this reason *the Orthodox theology of icons is based on the hermeneutics of theophanies* ... Moreover, Orthodox iconography has a solid foundation of theological method which stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in creation and history ... All this implies an indissoluble link between the physical and the metaphysical, between heaven and earth.” Matsoukas, “The Economy of the Holy Spirit. The Standpoint of Orthodox Theology,” in *Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation: An Orthodox Approach for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Canberra, Australia 6–21 February 1991*, ed. G. Limouris (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1990), 175.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Haugh, *Photius and the Carolingians: The Trinitarian Controversy* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1975), 17; 196.

as a consequence of the new understanding of theophanies.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, this disconnection between *theologia* and *oikonomia* became dominant in the West and was only recently challenged by Rahner's radical critique in his own *The Trinity*. Rahner's "diagnosis" on the effects that the Augustinian–Thomistic doctrine of the Trinity has had on the Western Church is well-known: a Trinitarian doctrine for which the theophanies have become quite irrelevant is a Trinitarian doctrine disconnected from salvation history, which creates believers for which the Trinity itself is quite irrelevant, people who, in their practical life, are mere "monotheists"; a theology that can no longer make sense of the Trinity as root of spirituality; its doctrine of grace is, in fact, monotheist, not trinitarian; its doctrine of creation is disconnected from any theology of the Trinity; its doctrine of beatific vision is unsustainable theologically, because "the contemplation of any reality ... [cannot] beatify us, if intrinsically it is absolutely unrelated to us in any way."<sup>72</sup>

### *Conclusions*

A theological evaluation of Augustine's achievement cannot be objective, but depends entirely on the observer's location *within* or *outside* the Augustinian theological heritage and on one's a priori decision about what is inalienable to the Christian faith. One can, for instance—and this is certainly Studer's position—view Augustine's theology of the theophanies as a continuation of developments already at work in earlier anti-Homoian polemic, and as a qualitative breakthrough in comparison to earlier authors.<sup>73</sup> From

71 "... das innertrinitarische Verständnis [war] so vom Heilsgeschehen gelöst worden, dass nicht nur alle Personen gleich unsichtbar, sondern auch gleich sichtbar waren, und darum im Grunde auch alle in gleicher Weise Mensch werden konnten" (Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 102). Similarly, Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (from *Mysterium Salutis 2*; New York: Crossroad, 1999) 11.

72 All these ideas are found in the introductory part of Rahner's *Trinity* (10–21), in a section significantly entitled "The Isolation of Trinitarian Doctrine in Piety and Textbook Theology."

73 Studer notes Irenaeus' "*allzu* realistisches Verständnis der Theophanien" (*Zur Theophanie-Exegese*, 82), or that Hilary "schrieb den Theophanien des Sohnes eine

a non-Augustinian position, however, discarding the belief in Christ as the Glorious One of Israel, who heals, illumines, deifies, may be a *breakthrough* in terms of anti-Homoian argumentation, but it is first and foremost a *break with* the very heart of Christian tradition. From an Eastern Orthodox perspective, it is difficult not to feel that that what was sacrificed and lost with the new theological framework offsets by far any anti-heretical virtues or the brilliant horizons opened by the new theological framework.

My findings could, in fact, be summed up by saying that the theophanies are *not* the center and commanding force of Augustine's theology. For Augustine, Mount Sinai and Mount Tabor are not the epitome of our journey to God, but rather located at the periphery of Christian dogma and spirituality. East of the Adriatic, however, theology remained decidedly "theophanic." The divine manifestations recorded in the Old Testament continued to be seen as divine and deifying apparitions of Christ: Jesus Christ resplendent in the light of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed "Son" by the Father. The Palamite synthesis eventually consecrated the Hesychast perspective on Sinai and Tabor as the fiery heart of all Christian theology.

For the Orthodox East, this theophanic centering of the theological enterprise is crucial. Theophany discloses the meaning of Christian life as well as that of "doing theology" in the academia. It is in this way, face turned towards the Face of Christ in theophany, that are unveiled the truth of Scriptures, the richness of Liturgy, the foundation and horizon of social *diakonia*.<sup>74</sup>

Paradoxically, the method used to conduct the research that has led to this conclusion is itself the product of a theology and culture

*zu grosse Wirklichkeit zu,*" or that "diese [Nizäner] die Erscheinungen *zu* ausschliesslich dem Sohne vorbehalten und sie zugleich mit der Menschwerdung *zu* sehr in einer Kontinuität sahen" (Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese* 37; emphasis added).

<sup>74</sup> See Golitzin, "Theophaneia: Forum on the Jewish Roots of Orthodox Spirituality" and "Christian Mysticism over Two Millenia," in *The Theophaneia School: Jewish Roots of Christian Mysticism*, (ed. A. Orlov, B. Lurie; Scrinium 3 (St Petersburg: Byzantinorossica, 2007), 17–33.

heirs to Augustine. Two elements of this heritage I have found particularly helpful: Augustine's confessed need to *understand* faith, that is, to appropriate the Church's faith *also* at the level of the discursive intellect; and the consideration that such an endeavor can progress to its ultimate possibilities only if one resists the temptation, quite common in the Christian East, to transform the expectation of the vision of God in this life into an excuse for intellectual lassitude. I take this little paradox as a lesson about the specific charismata of Eastern and Western Christianity, and about the need to use the talent of the one to bring to fruition that of the other.