CHAPTER 16

Incarnational and Theophanic Anagogy in *De Trinitate*

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> Human kind cannot bear very much reality …
>
> T. S. ELIOT, "Burnt Norton"

1 Introduction

In Book II of *De Trinitate*, Augustine considers various Old Testament theophanies in light of the biblical notion that God can never be seen by human eyes.[2] Two theological themes are woven together in *De Trinitate* II. First, Augustine is exploring the concept of 'seeing God.' What is entailed in the promise of the beatitude that "the pure in heart will see God" (Matt 5:8)? And how do we understand the Johannine hope that "we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2)? Will the vision of God be a physical vision seen with corporeal resurrected eyes? To what extent can God already be seen in this life? The second theme addressed in Book II concerns the missions of Word and Spirit in time (sometimes referred to as the 'economic Trinity'). In Book II of *De Trinitate*, Augustine considers various Old Testament saints to whom the Word and the Spirit were sent in theophanic form: Adam, who walked and

1 I had the opportunity to develop some of the ideas in this essay in the spring of 2016 at Villanova University. I am grateful for the convivial hospitality I was shown by the Augustinian Institute during the semester I spent as a research fellow at Villanova. I also thank Hans Boersma, Corine Milad, and the editors of this volume for their perceptive suggestions, which much improved this essay.

2 One may fruitfully engage with other elements of Augustine's corpus to extract a more full-orbed account of the bishop's theology of theophanies. Nevertheless, I am an agreement with the assessment of Jean-Louis Maier: "*De Trinitate* represents Saint Augustine's definite response the problem of theophanies." Maier, *Les Missions divines selon Saint Augustin* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1960), 101–2.

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talked with God in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden; Abraham, to whom the Lord appeared under the oaks of Mamre; Lot, who was visited by the Lord in Sodom; and, finally, Moses, who encountered God at the burning bush and on Mount Sinai. In *De Trinitate* II these two themes—a human vision of God and the missions of Son and Spirit—coalesce into a single question: Was the God 'sent' to Adam, Abraham, Lot, and Moses really *seen* by human eyes?

Augustine is heir to a well-developed theological tradition of interpreting theophanies. Eastern and Western exegesis of such texts was unanimous in interpreting these events as 'Christophanies'—as visions of the pre-incarnate Logos.[3] In a surprising turn, Augustine rejects this received exegetical tradition. He is the first Christian figure to engage with theophanic narratives and sever their connection with the literal Christological reading of his predecessors.[4] Augustine's revolutionary exegesis has been criticized for breaking with the unanimous consensus of previous centuries of theophanic exegesis, which saw the pre-incarnate Word as becoming visible for the saints of the Old Testament. I will argue that while Augustine does break with the previous theophanic exegetical tradition, careful attention to the theological intentions of Augustine's handling of the theophanies demonstrates that his theological goal is, nevertheless, to understand the theophanies in light of the Incarnation. The theophanies share in the soteriological purpose of the Incarnation by inviting a transposition of both sight and desire from the temporal to the eternal. As such, for Augustine, the theophanies share in the anagogical intention of the Incarnation. Scholarship on *De Trinitate* in the last two decades has emphasized the continuity Augustine establishes between the economic and immanent Trinity by highlighting the indispensable role that the Incarnation and faith (mediated ecclesially, scripturally, and sacramentally) serve to lead the believer 'up' to 'see' God. But the motif of ascent (anagogy) via divine descent, which animates the broad trajectory of *De Trinitate*, has not yet informed our understanding of Augustine's handling of the theophanies. My contribution in this essay is the application of this broader anagogical reading of *De Trinitate* to the theophanies of Book II. First, I will explicate the

3 This is but a chapter in a much larger narrative concerning the critical role theophanic literature plays in early Christian theology, particularly in the development of Christology. A helpful introduction is found in 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. Cf. Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), 147–63.

4 The novelty of Augustine's theophanic exegesis vis-à-vis the earlier tradition is carefully brought to light by Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God: Augustine's Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

anti-Homoian context of *De Trinitate*, which serves to explain why Augustine rejects the traditional understanding of theophanies as visible appearances of the pre-Incarnate Word. Second, I will argue that despite his rejection of the literal Christological reading of his predecessors, Augustine nevertheless understands the theophanies in conjunction with the Incarnation in that both serve an anagogical purpose.

2 Augustine's Pro-Nicene *Regula*: Indivisible Operations

Augustine's extensive engagement with the Old Testament theophanies in the early books of *De Trinitate* is in response to a nuanced Homoian theology that emphasizes the communicative and mediating character of the Son, which tended to subordinationism.[5] For Augustine, the challenge of this Homoian theology lies precisely in its traditional character: the Son had long been associated with mediating the Father, both in the work of creation and in re-creation. Further, the theophanies—as visible appearances of the Son to the Old Testament saints—had a long interpretive history as anticipating the Son's revelatory, communicative, and mediating mission.

Augustine's response is to insist on the distinction between the *forma dei* and the *forma servi* that was so foundational to the previous generation of

5 All quotations from Scripture in *De Trinitate* are given as translated in *Edmund Hill, The Trinity*, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (New York: New City Press, 2002). In the last two decades, scholarship on Augustine's *De Trinitate* has been increasingly attentive to the polemical context of the work, situating it within the broader Western pro-Nicene response to Homoian theology. The Homoians applied the anti-Monarchian exegesis of Tertullian and Novatian to suggest that the Son is distinct, derived from, and subordinate to the Father, for which reason they insisted the Son is intrinsically visible while the Father is intrinsically invisible. According to the Homoians, the Apostle Paul refers only to the Father as "the king of ages, the immortal, invisible only God" (1 Tim 1:17) "who dwells in light inaccessible, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). (On numerous occasions in the first books of *De Trinitate* Augustine tries to wrench back this scriptural citation to the Nicene cause, applying it also to the Son.) For the Homoian context of Augustine's theophanic exegesis see Basil Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins: Untersuchung zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der Schrift "De Videndo Deo"* (Rome: Herder, 1971); Michel Barnes, "Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine's *De Trinitate* I," *Augustinian Studies* 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), 329–56. Barnes points out that for "Augustine's opponents, the full visible and material existence of the Son which requires them to deny His full divinity is discovered not so much in the Incarnation but, as is well known, in the theophanies of the Old Testament." Barnes, "Exegesis and Polemic," 48.

pro-Nicene theologians.[6] Near the outset of *De Trinitate* II, Augustine lays down the pro-Nicene rule (*regula*) with which to read Scripture:

> We find scattered through the scriptures, and marked out by learned Catholic expositors of them, a kind of canonical rule (*canonicam regulam*), which we hold onto most firmly, about how our Lord Jesus Christ is to be understood to be God's Son, both equal to the Father by the form of God in which he is (*secundum dei formam in qua est*), and less than the Father by the form of a servant which he took (*minor patre secundum serui formam quam accepit*). In this form indeed he is seen to be not only less than the Father, but also less than the Holy Spirit, less, what is more, than himself—and not a self that he was but a self that he is. For when he took the form of a servant he did not lose the form of God.[7]

Exegesis of Scripture requires, above all, careful application of this *regula*. For Augustine, it is critical to distinguish between places where Scripture refers to the nature or substance of the Son (*in qua est*) and places where it refers to the form he assumed (*accepit*). Texts such as "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) clearly speak of the *forma dei*, while texts such as "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) speak to the *forma servi*. In line with this, Michel Barnes describes

6 This *regula* is already clearly articulated in the first book of *De Trinitate*, in which Augustine has Homoian antagonists in his sights:

"For he did not so take the form of a servant that he lost the form of God in which he was equal to the Father. So if the form of a servant was taken on in such a way that the form of God was not lost—since it is the same only begotten Son of the Father who is both in the form of a servant and in the form of God, equal to the Father in the form of God, in the form of a servant the mediator of God and men the man Jesus Christ—who can fail to see that in the form of God he too is greater than himself and in the form of a servant he is less than himself? And so it is not without reason that scripture says both; that the Son is equal to the Father and that the Father is greater than the Son. The one is to be understood in virtue of the form of God, the other in virtue of the form of a servant, without any confusion." *Trin*. 1.7.14 (CCSL 50 45).

7 *Trin*. 2.1.2 (CCSL 50 81): "*quamobrem quamquam firmissime teneamus de domino nostro iesu christo et per scripturas disseminatam et a doctis catholicis earundem scripturarum tractatoribus demonstratam tamquam canonicam regulam quomodo intellegatur dei filius et aequalis patri secundum dei formam in qua est et minor patre secundum serui formam quam accepit, in qua forma non solum patre sed etiam spiritu sancto, neque hoc tantum sed etiam se ipso minor inuentus est, non se ipso qui fuit sed se ipso qui est quia forma serui accepta formam dei non amisit.*"

Philippians 2:5–7 as having "a sort of 'canonical' function in [Augustine's] Trinitarian (or Christological) theology."[8]

The governing principle for both the *forma dei* and the *forma servi* passages, Augustine reminds his readers, is "this other rule" (*haec regula*).[9] This is the pro-Nicene *regula* that the Son is of one, equal substance with the Father, which is manifest in their unity of operations. While it is true that the Son is generated *de patre*, the work of Father and Son is indivisible. Thus, when Scripture says that whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19), this makes clear that "the working of the Father and of the Son is equal and indivisible, and yet the Son's working comes from the Father."[10]

This principle (*regula*) is per force operative also in the temporal missions: while the Son and the Spirit are 'sent' in time, they are also the same God who sends. Thus, the Incarnation, in which "God sent this Son, made of a woman" (Gal 4:4), is the sending of the Son by the Triune God: "Father and Son have but one will and are indivisible in their workings."[11] The Incarnation is "indivisibly wrought by one and the same working of Father and Son, not leaving out, of course, the Holy Spirit."[12] The pro-Nicene *regula* of indivisible operations entails that the eternally begotten Son also sends the Son in time, and yet only the Son becomes visible in the Incarnation.

Echoing the distinct pro-Nicene concerns that animate the Christology of Hilary and Ambrose, Augustine warns that the visibility of the Son in the Incarnation is in no way to be understood as a subordination of the Son to the

8 Barnes, "Exegesis and Polemic," 52. Lewis Ayres adds that for Augustine "Scripture itself sets out a *regula* or rule for our reading, speaking sometimes of Christ insofar as he was a human being, and sometimes with reference to his *substantia*, to his status as eternal. The division, it should be noted, is not simply between the two 'natures' of Christ, but relies on an understanding of Christ as one subject who may be spoken of as he is eternally and as he is having assumed flesh." Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 146. Ayres (drawing on Alois Grillmeier SJ) describes this exegetical principle as Augustine's "Panzer," which he deploys with force to numerous Christological controversies. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, "*Canonica regula*: The Trinitarian Hermeneutic of Augustine," in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, J. Schnaubelt and F. van Fleteren, eds. (New York: Lang, 1990), 329–43; Albert Verwilghen, *Christologie et spiritualité selon saint Augustin: L'hymne aux Philippiens* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985); idem, "Le Christ médiateur selon Ph. 2, 6–7 dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin," *Augustiniana* 41(1991), 469–82.

9 *Trin*. 2.1.3 (CCSL 50 84).

10 *Trin*. 2.1.3 (CCSL 50 83): *ac per hoc inseparabilis et par operatio est patri et filio, sed a patre est filio*.

11 *Trin*. 2.5.9 (CCSL 50 90): *una uoluntas est patris et filii et inseparabilis operatio*.

12 *Trin*. 2.5.9 (CCSL 50 90–91): *sic ergo intellegat illam incarnationem et ex uirgine natiuitatem in qua filius intellegitur missus una eadem que operatione patris et filii inseparabiliter esse factam, non utique inde separato spiritu sancto*.

Father. Divine equality is preserved because the Son is, like the Father, invisible. Both the invisible Son and the invisible Father send the Son in time. But when the *forma servi* was assumed (*accepta*) by the Son, he did not cease to exist as the 'sending' *forma dei*. Rather, the invisible Father and the invisible Son send the Son in time in one indivisible operation.[13]

3 Augustine's Theophanic *Regula*: *per subiectam creaturam*

Augustine's rigorous adherence to the pro-Nicene *regula* of indivisible operations (entailing unity of substance) results in a striking new development in the history of theophanic exegesis. Augustine maintains that if everything said of the Father applies equally to the Son (as *forma dei*), then none of the divine persons has ever been seen. Thus, the application of the pro-Nicene *regula* leads to the remarkable conclusion that theophanies, in their literal sense, are a theological impossibility. The description of God as "invisible" (1 Tim 1:17), "who dwells in light inaccessible, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16), applies equally to Father, Son, and Spirit.[14] The orthodox (i.e., pro-Nicene) interpretation of the theophanies presented especially in Book II of *De Trinitate* is anticipated in Book I, in which Augustine wrests 1 Tim 6:16 back from his Homoian opponents.[15] Augustine notes that when Paul says that "no man has seen or can see" the immortal God, "this too should be taken as applying to Christ in his divinity."[16] Augustine is categorical: "Now divinity cannot be seen by human sight in any way whatever."[17] Going beyond his pro-Nicene predecessors (Hilary and Ambrose), Augustine develops a second *regula*, so that the 'theophanies' (if we can still call them that) can be interpreted in accordance with the (first) pro-Nicene *regula* of indivisible operations: theophanies are not manifestations of the divine substance, but are

13 *Trin*. 2.5.9 (CCSL 50 92): *cum uero sic accepta est forma serui ut maneret incommutabilis forma dei, manifestum est quod a patre et filio non apparentibus factum sit quod appareret in filio, id est ab inuisibili patre cum inuisibili filio idem ipse filius uisibilis mitteretur*.

14 The centrality of 1 Tim 6:15–16 to Arian and Homoian polemic is well established. The text featured in one of the earliest Arian creeds, found at the outset of Arius's *Letter to Alexander*. This letter circulated widely and was well known in the West by the 350s. Cf. Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 88–90; Barnes, "Exegesis and Polemic," 46.

15 Cf. Paul A. Patterson, *Visions of Christ: The Anthropomorphite Controversy of 399 CE*, Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 78–80.

16 *Trin*. 1.2.11 (CCSL 50 40).

17 *Trin*. 1.2.11 (CCSL 50 40): *Videri autem diuinitas humano uisu nullo modo potest*.

rather manifestations of a creature subject to God (*per subiectam creaturam*).[18] Going beyond the previous tradition, Augustine emphasizes the signatory quality of theophanies: they are signs (*signa*) that point to a reality (*res*) from which they are distinct.[19]

It is significant that Augustine conceives theophanies under the category of *sign*.[20] The appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove or tongues of fire "visibly expressed" (*uisibiliter expressa*) the sending of the Spirit. Augustine explains, "Its object was not that his very substance (*ipsa substantia*) might be seen, since he himself remains invisible and unchanging like the Father and the Son."[21] Rather, the purpose of these temporal, visible signs is anagogical; it is to lead the viewer to an eternal, invisible reality. "Outward sights," explains Augustine, "stir the minds of men and draw them on from the public manifestations of his coming in time to the still and hidden presence of his eternity sublime."[22] In Augustine's handling of theophanies we see his intent to keep the sign and its referent distinct: "But these phenomena appeared, as and when they were required to, *creation serving the creator* (Wis 16:24), and being changed and transmuted at the bidding of him who abides unchanging in himself, in order to signify and show (*significari et demonstrari*) him as it was proper for him to be signified and shown to mortal men."[23] Augustine uses the language of 'sign' to express *how* the unchanging God communicates a divine reality through the changing medium of theophanies.[24]

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18 Six times in Book II of *De Trinitate* Augustine repeats the phrase *per subiectam creaturam* to describe theophanies as God's self-communication through a creature subject to him (*Trin*. 2.9.16; 2.10.17; 2.13.23; 2.14.24; 2.15.25; 2.18.35). This expression from the book of Wisdom ("creation serving the creator") is Augustine's favorite mode of explaining his theophanic *regula*. Three times in Book II of *De Trinitate*, Augustine quotes Wisdom 16:24 to argue that in theophanies God uses a creature to communicate a divine reality (*Trin*. 2.6.11; 2.15.25; 2.16.27). Again, notice that with Augustine we no longer have actual theophanies in the strict sense. (That is, the substance of divinity is not seen.) Rather, for Augustine, a theophany is a creature employed to communicate the divine.

19 Kloos, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God*, 143–44.

20 This is evident in the verbs Augustine uses when discussing theophanies: "appear" (*apparere*), "show" (*demonstrare*), "manifest" (*ostendere*), and "signify" (*significare*).

21 *Trin*. 2.5.10 (CCSL 50 93): *non ut appareret eius ipsa substantia qua et ipse inuisibilis et incommutabilis est sicut pater et filius*.

22 *Trin*. 2.5.10 (CCSL 50 93): *sed ut exterioribus uisis hominum corda commota a temporali manifestatione uenientis ad occultam aeternitatem semper praesentis conuerterentur*.

23 *Trin*. 2.6.11 (CCSL 50 94).

24 Studer likewise demonstrates that in Augustine's handling of the theophanies the Bishop sharply distinguishes between the invisible divine substance and the visible creaturely mode of manifestation, that is, between God's appearance and his nature. Cf. Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins*, 97.

The theophanic appearances are *temporary* appropriations of creatures, such as the wind and fire that denoted the appearance of the Spirit at Pentecost. They are fleeting instances, signs, that come suddenly (*repente*) into existence and then cease: "All these physical phenomena only happened in order to signify something (*aliquid significaret*) and then to pass away."[25] This is much different from the Incarnation, in which the Word joined humanity to his person in "an everlasting union" (*coniunxit in aeternum*). In the Incarnation the Word himself actually assumed the *forma servi* without losing the *forma dei*. For Augustine, only the Incarnation is a theophany in the strict sense of the word. Against his Homoian antagonists, Augustine insists that God's essence (*essentia*) is intrinsically invisible (2.18.35) and that the divine substance (*substantia*) cannot be seen (2.14.24; 2.15.25, 26; 2.18.34, 35). God "as he is in himself" (*proprie sicuti est*) (2.17.32) is not accessible to human senses.

As Augustine cycles through the various theophanies in Genesis and Exodus in the second book of *De Trinitate*, two themes are repeated: first, it is not always clear which of the divine persons was 'seen' through the creature that God uses to reveal himself. Indeed, precisely because God himself is not seen (but only indicated), any of the divine persons could be manifest in a theophany. Second (and we have already seen this), these theophanies do not manifest God himself, but are, rather, God's communication through a creature subject to him. In short, Augustine's entry into the long tradition of theophanic exegesis severs their explicit relation to the Incarnation: They are not visible appearances of the pre-existent Word. What is more, Augustine rejects the very possibility of such appearances of God himself.[26]

4 Theophanic Anagogy

The radicalism of Augustine's theophanic *regula* (which is in fact a rejection of the theological possibility of genuine theophanies) has been criticized for breaking with the unanimous consensus of previous centuries of theophanic exegesis, which maintained the pre-Incarnate Word became visible for the saints of the Old Testament. Bogdan Bucur notes that Augustine's interpretation

25 *Trin.* 2.6.11 (CCSL 50 96): *Ad hoc enim rerum illarum corporalis exstitit species ut aliquid significaret atque praeteriret.*

26 Cf. *Trin.* 2.9.16 (CCSL 50 101): "We say that God has never shown himself to bodily eyes, neither the Father nor the Son nor the Holy Spirit, except through some created bodily substance at the service of his power." (*nos qui numquam apparuisse corporeis oculis deum nec patrem nec filium nec spiritum sanctum dicimus nisi per subiectam suae potestati corpoream creaturam.*)

of the theophanies is "first and foremost a *break with* the very heart of Christian tradition."[27] While Augustine does break with the earlier Christian tradition by not interpreting theophanies as Christophanies, my contention is that careful attention to the theological intentions of *De Trinitate* as a whole, as well as the handling of the theophanies in particular, demonstrates Augustine's intention to hold together theophanic revelations and the Incarnation.

It is true that for Augustine the theophanies do not disclose God himself; they are not pre-Incarnate appearances of the Word (both because the Word cannot be seen and because it is often not clear which of the divine persons is communicating through the creature). Nevertheless, for Augustine, there is a profound degree of continuity between the theophanies and the Incarnation. Both have an anagogical or upward-leading role. Both are intended to lead the believer from the corporeal to the incorporeal. The purpose of the Incarnation, for Augustine, is precisely that humanity may be led by the hand of the *forma servi* to participate in the *forma dei*.[28] Or, we might say, from the economic Trinity one is led to the immanent Trinity. This anagogic principle is likewise the purpose of the theophanies. Augustine sets up his discussion of the theophanies in Book II of *De Trinitate* by establishing, in Book I, the principle that the Incarnation has the anagogical role of inviting a transposition of physical vision, into a vision of faith, and ultimately into a vision of contemplation. That is to say, (1) the physical sight of the historical Jesus presents an invitation (2) to perceive (in faith) his divinity and thereby prepare for (3) a vision of glory.[29]

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27 Bogdan Bucur, "Theophanies and the Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008), 92. Bucur notes the originality of Augustine's theophanic exegesis. The pre-Augustinian tradition was unanimous, maintains Bucur, that the Son was himself manifest in the theophanies: "What *all* authors before Augustine share, throughout Syriac, Greek, and pre-Augustinian Latin Christianity, is a tradition of interpreting the theophanies as 'Christophanies.'" Bucur, "Theophanies and the Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*," 70.

28 Studies of *De Trinitate* in the past twenty years (especially by Lewis Ayres, John Cavadini, Luigi Gioia, and Rowan Williams) have pointed to the anagogical character of *De Trinitate* as a whole. In this respect, the Incarnation plays a central role in leading the reader up by means of the material towards an understanding of the immaterial Trinity received in faith. Augustine's handling of the theophanies, I suggest, comports with the broader anagogical aims of *De Trinitate*.

29 A helpful analogue to these three types of vision is suggested in *De Genesi ad litteram* 12, where Augustine distinguishes between corporeal (*corporale*), spiritual (*spiritale*), and intellectual (*intellectuale*) vision. However, the correspondence is not perfect: it is not clear that "spiritual vision" and "intellectual vision" described in *De Genesi ad litteram* 12 map perfectly onto the "vision of faith" and "vision of contemplation" articulated in *De Trinitate*. What is clear, however, is that theophanies are not included in the third and highest "intellectual vision." Bucur criticizes Augustine on this score: "Theophanies are

Augustine uses three examples from John's Gospel in the first book of *De Trinitate* to illustrate this principle. First, in the context of Christ's teaching that he must depart so that the Spirit may come (cf. John 16:7), Augustine explains that Christ's ascent beyond corporeal touch is the necessary precondition for faith's ascent beyond corporeal touch: "This is why I must go to the Father, because while you see me like this you assume from what you see that I am inferior to the Father, and thus with all your attention on the creature and on the adopted condition, you fail to understand the equality I enjoy with the Father."[30] The *forma servi* had to be withdrawn, explains Augustine, lest his disciples imagine that Christ was merely the human being they saw in front of them.

Second, Augustine suggests that the *noli me tangere* of John 20:17 is the invitation to perceive Christ's divinity in faith: "Touching concludes as it were the process of getting acquainted. He did not want this heart, so eagerly reaching out to him, to stop at thinking that he was only what could be seen and touched. His ascension to the Father signifies his being seen in his equality with the Father, that being the ultimate vision (*finis uisionis*) that suffices us."[31] Mary Magdalene's physical sight of the post-resurrected Christ is to be translated into a vision of faith that perceives his divinity, and it is this vision in faith that allows for the 'ultimate vision' of contemplation.

The last example to highlight is Augustine's exploration of the prima facie contradiction found in Christ's words, "He who believes in me does not believe in me, but the one who sent me" (John 12:44). Christ is teaching that the one who believes in him does not believe only in a creature perceived by the eyes, but rather "believes in him who took a created form in which to appear to human eyes, and thereby to purify our minds for contemplating him by faith in his equality with the Father."[32] It is when Christ is no longer physically seen that the anagogical principle of the Incarnation is realized, namely to ascend in faith from the corporeal to the incorporeal, by means of the *forma servi* to

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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." Bucur, "Theophanies and the Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*," 81.

30 *Trin*. 1.8.18 (CCSL 50 54): *propterea me oportet ire ad patrem quia dum me ita uidetis, et ex hoc quod uidetis aestimatis minor sum patre, atque ita circa creaturam susceptumque habitum occupati aequalitatem quam cum patre habeo non intellegitis*.

31 *Trin*. 1.8.18 (CCSL 50 54): *Tactus enim tamquam finem facit notionis. Ideoque nolebat in eo esse finem intenti cordis in se ut hoc quod uidebatur tantummodo putaretur. Ascensio autem ad patrem erat ita uideri sicut aequalis est patri ut ibi esset finis uisionis quae sufficit nobis*.

32 *Trin*. 1.12.27 (CCSL 50 68): *'Qui in me credit, non in hoc quod uidet credit,' ne sit spes nostra in creatura, sed in illo qui suscepit creaturam in qua humanis oculis appareret ac sic ad se aequalem patri contemplandum per fidem corda mundaret?*

the *forma dei*. This vision of faith culminates in the vision of glory.[33] In the gospel, suggests Augustine, we consistently witness Christ drawing our attention beyond his humanity toward his divinity, pointing "the minds of men upward, since to raise them up was the reason why he himself has come down."[34]

The theophanies, for Augustine, correspond to the anagogical aims of the Incarnation. Kari Kloos puts this well:

> The sights of Genesis and Exodus correspond to the Son's mission insofar as they are visible yet transcendent phenomena that communicate God's presence and enable people to sense more in faith than their eyes can see, and thus to rise above their sensory experience and return to God.... For Augustine, the theophanies' similarity to the incarnate Christ is expressed through how they visibly represent God's intention to enter into the world through the mediation of created things.[35]

The theological correspondence between the theophanies and the Incarnation in Augustine's mind is illustrated in his exegesis of God's response to Moses' request to see the face of God, of which we read in Exodus 33. Here, God says:

> You cannot see my face and live, for a man shall not see my face and live. And the Lord said Behold, there is a place beside me, and you shall stand upon the rock the moment my majesty passes, and I will set you at a look-out in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed, and I will take away my hand, and then you shall see my back; for my face shall not appear to you.
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> EXOD 33:20–23[36]

Augustine proceeds to delineate a theological allegory of this passage. He notes that he is heir to an earlier spiritual interpretation of the passage. He has learned that God's 'back' can be read as a reference to the flesh of Jesus Christ. Augustine immediately dispels any Homoian coloring of this exegesis: It is not

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33 Ayres explains that for Augustine "we touch in faith only in order to confess what lies beyond sight and touch. Christ teaches in the body in such a way that the body becomes the means of directing our attention away from itself.... Faith can only be formed when the heart of the one who believes moves away from the visible Christ toward the unity with the Father that he preached." Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 153.

34 *Trin*. 1.12.27 (CCSL 50 68): *recurrens ad deitatem sursum erigit corda hominum propter quae subleuanda descendit*.

35 Kloos, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God*, 151–52.

36 *Trin*. 2.17.28 (CCSL 50 117). Augustine's version of Exod 33:20–23 is quoted.

that the Father is invisible and the Son visible. Rather, the Son shares the substance and invisible nature of the Father. Christ, in the *forma dei*, is included in the face of God that cannot be seen. However, when Christ assumed the *forma servi*, God showed humanity his back.

Moses asked to see the substance of God ("show yourself to me openly"), and this request was denied, illustrating in the clearest way possible (*apertissime demonstretur*) that theophanies do not manifest what God is in himself (*ipsum quod deus est*), but are rather the requisitioning of created things to communicate the Creator (*creaturam deo seruientem*) (cf. Wis 16:24).[37] Moses' request to see God's face was not inappropriate—on the contrary, a more appropriate request is unthinkable. Augustine writes, "This is the sight which ravishes every rational soul with desire for it."[38] Nevertheless, it cannot be granted in this life, because while on pilgrimage one must be content with Christ's back (his human nature). Augustine comments: "All the surer is our love for the face of Christ [i.e., Christ's divinity] which we long to see, the more clearly we recognize in his back how much Christ first loved us."[39] Christ's back, that is his flesh (*caro*), is the training ground for the ascent to God's face.

Even seeing God's back (the flesh of Christ) is not simply a physical sight of Jesus' body. Rather, it is a seeing of Christ's flesh with the eyes of faith, notes Augustine. The rock on which Moses was placed so that he could see God's back references the "solid foundation of faith," from which one may see the flesh of Christ in its divine power. Seeing God's back, then, is not simply to know the historical Jesus, but to have faith that Jesus is God in human form. This reality can be known only after his resurrection, insists Augustine. This is why the disciples and others who physically saw Jesus before his resurrection did not "see his back," because they could not yet perceive the Christ of faith present in the Jesus of history. Jesus' own disciples had to wait to see his back until after his resurrection, after he had passed by in his *Pasch*. (*Pasch*, explains Augustine, "is a Hebrew word meaning passage or passing."[40]) The fact that Moses could not see God until after he had *passed by* illustrates for Augustine that the resurrection offers new eyes of faith to perceive God's back; the resurrection allows one to see God in human form.

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37 *Trin*. 2.16.27 (CCSL 50 116–117): *quis audeat dicere per similes formas quae huic quoque uisibiliter apparuerant non creaturam deo seruientem sed hoc ipsum quod deus est cuiusquam oculis apparuisse mortalium?*

38 *Trin*. 2.17.28 (CCSL 50 119): *Illa est ergo species quae rapit omnem animam rationalem desiderio sui.*

39 *Trin*. 2.17.28 (CCSL 50 119): *tanto enim certius diligimus quam uidere desideramus faciem christi quanto in posterioribus eius agnoscimus quantum nos prior dilexerit christus.*

40 *Trin*. 2.17.29 (CCSL 50 120).

Learning to see the back of God—that is, to know the incarnate and resurrected Christ—is an anagogical process. It means the believer comes to 'see' by faith the eternal God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The economy of the Incarnation is, then, the means whereby the believer is led to participate in the immanent Trinity. A parallel discussion to Moses' sight of God's back is presented in the first book of *De Trinitate*, in which Augustine considers Philip's request—"Lord, show us the Father and it suffices us" (John 14:8). As Moses' request is perfectly appropriate, so too is Philip's. To see the Father is the goal of the Christian pilgrimage—the end of all human desire: "This contemplation (*contemplatio*) is promised us as the end (*finis*) of all activities and eternal perfection of all joys."[41] Philip perceives clearly that the end (*finis*) of the journey of faith is the vision of God: "Nothing further than that delight will be sought; there will be nothing further to seek. Philip understood this well enough to say, *Lord, show us the Father and it suffices us*."[42] But what Philip did *not* understand was that to arrive at the vision of contemplation he needed to see by faith 'beyond' the human being standing before him.

As with God's response to Moses, so too Christ's response to Philip is illustrative of the manner in which the temporal and embodied Christ standing before him becomes the means of ascent to contemplate his eternal and immaterial divinity. While Philip rightly understood the end of human longing to be the vision of God, he did not yet understand the means, which is faith in the incarnate Christ. Augustine explains, "But he did not yet understand that he could just as well have said the same thing like this: 'Lord, show us yourself and it suffices us.'"[43] For this reason, Christ proceeds to explain that "whoever has seen me has seen the Father too" (John 14:9). The vision of God remains for now a vision seen in faith—faith in the embodied and resurrected Christ.[44] In a real way, then, Philip has seen the Father because of the Father and the Son's inseparability (*propter ipsam inseparabilitatem*).[45]

For both Moses and Philip there is a seeing and a not-seeing in their 'vision of God.' They do not yet have the vision of contemplation (*finis*), but their vision in faith of the 'back of God'—the incarnate Christ—is the means whereby

41 *Trin*. 1.8.17 (CCSL 50 50).

42 *Trin*. 1.8.17 (CCSL 50 51).

43 *Trin*. 1.8.17 (CCSL 50 51).

44 Ayres writes, "Neither the Old Testament theophanies nor the Incarnation itself make God available to sight; they enable a faith that knows it will become sight and knowledge only at the end." Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 144. Similarly, Kloos writes, "The theophanies prepare for the incarnation and work in concert with faith in the incarnate Word to purify to mind for contemplation." Kloos, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God*, 154.

45 *Trin*. 1.8.17 (CCSL 50 52).

they may come to see the eternal God. As such, there is continuity between the temporal sight of God in faith and the eternal sight of God in contemplation: "Contemplation in fact is the reward of faith."[46] However, there is also a profound discontinuity between these two visions—one is finite, temporal, and material, while the other is infinite, eternal, and immaterial. As such, the material vision can obstruct the ascent to an immaterial vision, for faith must see 'beyond' what is physically perceived. The vision of contemplation requires that Moses and Philip 'see' the incarnate Christ with eyes of faith. Lewis Ayres comments,

> The question of John 14:11 invites Philip to recognize that while he *should* believe he has 'seen' the Father, he believes correctly only when he understands that faith must stand in for sight until the unity of Christ in *forma Dei* with the Father is apparent. Augustine thus sees a direct link between accepting that contemplation of Father, Son and Spirit is the goal of the Christian life, and recognizing that faith entails a discipline in our seeing and imagining of the material (and of the material insinuations embedded in the language of faith), a discipline in which we learn not to take the material for that towards which it should draw us.[47]

Philip, like Moses, cannot see the Father (or the Son); for this vision Philip must follow Moses up by way of the *back*-ward route, namely, seeing the resurrected Christ in faith after his resurrection: "[Christ] wanted him to live by faith before he could see that … For, *as long as we are in the body we are abroad from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Cor 5:6)."[48]

Of course, Moses did not physically see God's back, insists Augustine, because there is no terrestrial place where God, who is spirit, may be seen. Rather, this passage in Exodus speaks prophetically, explains Augustine, to illustrate the spiritual "place beside him," where God reveals himself: "But evidently the place beside him where one may stand on the rock is to be understood as the Catholic church, from where the person who believes in [Christ's] resurrection may safely look upon the *pasch*—that is the death and

46 *Trin*. 1.8.17 (CCSL 50 51): *Contemplatio quippe merces est fidei*.

47 Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 151.

48 *Trin*. 1.8.17 (CCSL 50 51). I have suggested that the theophanies have a signatory character for Augustine in that they "point toward" a reality from which they themselves are distinct. However, one can also—more positively—say that the theophanies have a signatory quality in that they "draw one toward" (and, indeed, enable one to participate in) the reality from which they are distinct, yet inseparably related.

resurrection of the Lord."[49] The finite vision of God is a vision of faith, received in an ecclesial context, in which one may see God's back, that is to say, God as become incarnate in Jesus Christ.

The second book of *De Trinitate* asks what it means to 'see God'. Augustine's adaptation (and critique) of the theophanic exegetical tradition helps answer this question: the quest for the vision of God, vividly illustrated in Moses' request, animates the entire movement of *De Trinitate*. In the opening lines of Book II Augustine writes, "People who seek God (*deum quaerunt*) and stretch their minds (*animum intendunt*) as far as human weakness is able toward an understanding of the Trinity (*intellegentiam trinitatis*), must surely experience the strain of trying to fix their gaze on *light inaccessible* (1 Tim 6:16)."[50] This brief sentence gives expression to the thematic intention of the entire treatise. The aim of *De Trinitate*—to seek 'the substance of God' (*inquirendam substantiam dei*)—is something the patriarchs already shared, in their desire to see God. This human desire is an exercise that fails to reach its final goal—at least in this life—but, for Augustine, this does not mean that it is an exercise in futility.[51] *De Trinitate* is a summons to exercise (*exercitatio*), to train the eyes of the heart to see God. It may seem that this 'stretching' and 'straining' is a hopeless exercise; after all, the object of desire remains veiled. In this life the light remains 'inaccessible' and 'the substance of God' 'invisible.' Nevertheless, Augustine suggests that even in this life there is some 'payoff' for our training. Already today, faith gives, in some sense, a vision of God, albeit the back of God, seen in the manner of the pilgrim, that is, by faith. The theophanies of Genesis and Exodus, for Augustine, share in the anagogical intention of the Incarnation of training the eyes of faith to see the immaterial God.

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49 *Trin*. 2.17.30 (CCSL 50 120).

50 *Trin*. 2.1 (CCSL 50 80).

51 John Cavadini argues that the entire *De Trinitate* serves precisely as a fruitful failure: "*De Trinitate* uses the Neoplatonic soteriology of ascent only to impress it into the service of a thoroughgoing critique of its claim to raise the inductee to the contemplation of God, a critique which, more generally becomes a declaration of the futility of any attempt to come to any saving knowledge of God apart from Christ." Cavadini, "The Structure and Intention of Augustine's *De Trinitate*," *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992), 106.

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