

Introduction

CHRIST THE LIGHT

Every year, Christians around the world gather to mark the Easter Vigil, the liturgical expression of Christ's death and resurrection. In Catholic parishes the liturgy begins with the *Lucernarium*, a liturgical exploration of light. The liturgy begins with the people in the dark, holding unlit candles. A priest then lights a fire, blesses it, takes the paschal candle, and inscribes a cross on it. Once the priest has prepared the candle, he lights it from the fire and says, "May the light of Christ rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds."¹ The priest and deacons use the paschal candle to light their own candles and then share their light with the remainder of the congregation. While this happens, a deacon processes the paschal candle around the people, singing, "the Light of Christ, the Light of Christ, the Light of Christ," as the people respond, "Thanks be to God."² What begins in darkness and silence ends in light and song, as the people sing the *Exsultet*, which includes lines referencing the light of Christ, such as "This is the night that with a pillar of fire banished the darkness of sin . . . this is the night of which it is written: the night shall be as bright as day, dazzling is the night for me, and full of gladness . . . Christ your Son, who coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity . . ."³

For those who have experienced it, this opening section of the Easter Vigil is one of the most beautiful and powerful expressions of Christian worship, and at the very heart of the *Lucernarium* is the claim that Christ is the Light. But what does the claim that Christ is the Light mean? Is light a dead metaphor that no longer has any meaning? Is light an empty symbol that points to ancient modes of thought that no longer have any relevance today? Or is there something to the claim that Christ is the Light that is central to the Christian understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what he accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection? What might it mean to follow in the light of Christ? This book will investigate how one of the Church's most important theologians, Thomas Aquinas, used light language to answer those questions

1. U. S. C. C. B., *The Roman Missal, 3rd Altar Edition* (Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 2011), 200.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 207–9.

by exploring and explaining the mission of the Son, the second person of the Trinity. In explicating Aquinas's thoughts on the theology of light we will see how light appears consistently in his writings across all of his theology; to explore Aquinas's theology of light is to explore the whole of his theology.

It should be no surprise if the theological language of light is mostly a dead metaphor in contemporary Christianity, unable to stir our minds to contemplate the connections between God and light. If Christians are unable to stand in awe of how Christ the Light illumines our minds by teaching us who God is, of how we are to love God, and of how we are to live with respect to God, it is because we have become unable to see the light that is all around us.

At a sheer physical level, Thomas Edison's invention of the electric light bulb means that humans have been able to make light a commodity, something that we can easily produce so as to conquer the darkness on our own. Modern humans, especially those in the developed world, have no fear of the dark, and we rarely consider light with any awe and instead focus on light as something to be explored for instrumental purposes. As with much of the rest of the natural world that humans have conquered, light no longer captures a special place in our imaginations, no longer points to a reality beyond our own, and no longer sets the boundaries on human interaction.

At a philosophical level, light and illumination began to disappear from the theological vocabulary in the late medieval period,⁴ but its real descent into theological oblivion began with the Enlightenment, which co-opted light language for its own rhetorical purposes and limited the idea of illumination to what humans could know only by thinking for themselves. Those who relied on revelation or authority were deemed to be in the dark, while those who lived by reason alone were the ones who were enlightened. Immanuel Kant's famous essay, "What Is Enlightenment?,"⁵ which made these arguments, signaled the end of light and illumination as meaningful and effective symbols in the Christian tradition.⁶ Now, when the *Lucernarium* is completed, we turn

4. Robert Pasnau, "Henry of Ghent and the Twilight of Divine Illumination," *Review of Metaphysics* 49, no. 1 (1995): 49–76; Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 181–216.

5. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *What Is Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58–64.

6. I find it interesting that Pope Francis's first papal encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, which does an outstanding job of reclaiming light imagery in the service of the church, places the blame for this at Nietzsche's feet, rather than Kant, who preceded Nietzsche. See *Lumen Fidei* sections 2–3.

the lights back on and ignore light with reference to God for another year, or at least until Epiphany, the other Christian feast of light.

In an attempt to recapture and explore the theological language of light in the Christian tradition, we will investigate how Thomas Aquinas uses light language throughout his theology. The goal is to use Aquinas's thought as a means of reopening and reengaging light language in the larger Christian tradition. Light language pervades all of Aquinas's work, yet it has been neglected as a means of entering into his thought.⁷

In looking at Aquinas's use of light I am attempting to meet two goals. First, light language can be found in every aspect of Aquinas's work, from his description of theology, to his understanding of God, to his discussion of angelic and human nature, to his treatment of morality, to his comprehensive Christology. By tracking the use of light language we can get a fairly comprehensive overview of Aquinas's systematic theology. By approaching Aquinas's theology through this key image, we get a broader view of his theology and so this book can serve as something of a partial introduction to his thought through the thematic exploration of light. The second goal of this book is to reinvigorate our understanding of light as a theologically rich image that speaks to the deep reality of the Christian experience of the revelation of God made through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While the first goal looks backward, it does so for the purpose of restoring to contemporary use the meaningful language that has in the past served the church so well; Aquinas can help make light theologically meaningful to us. The book will primarily focus on the first goal, but the constructive purpose found in the second goal is implicit in the whole work. Light language in the past is only interesting if we can reclaim it and use it with all of its theological richness in the future.

WHY AQUINAS?

For some it may seem strange to use Aquinas as a means to explore and reinvigorate light language in the Christian tradition. His contemporary, the great Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, is well known for his descriptions of illumination. Likewise, Aquinas's predecessors in the Patristic period deployed light language effectively throughout their work. Why Aquinas instead of one of his contemporaries or predecessors?

7. As Lydia Schumacher points out, there has been very little done to give a systematic account of Aquinas's theology of light and illumination. Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174.

Aquinas works well in this regard for several reasons. First, because Aquinas was deeply immersed in Patristic writings, he serves as an excellent example of someone who retrieved the light language from the past for the purposes that were required for his own time. His engagement with John Chrysostom, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and, above all, Pseudo-Dionysius, makes Aquinas an excellent mediator of light language to theologians of his own day and to ours. Second, the modern renewal of Thomistic studies that has emerged since Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* in 1879 (in section seventeen he even praises Aquinas using light language: “like the sun he heated the world with the warmth of his virtues and filled it with the splendor of his teaching”)⁸ has made Aquinas’s thought relevant to contemporary theologians as well. Aquinas remains an important theologian in our own time, and engaging with the fecundity of his thought continues to provide theologians with important theological and philosophical resources for their work. Aquinas, then, serves as a bridge that links Christian theology with the past and with the present, especially with regard to light. A third reason to approach an understanding of light through the thought of Aquinas is because he serves as an excellent model for the integration of scripture and theology. While he is best known for the *Summa Theologiae*, his main academic work was as a commentator on Christian scripture and his commentaries on scripture offer surprising insights into his understanding of light. Finally, Aquinas also serves as an excellent example of a theologian who used the best science available to him as a means of understanding God. While medieval understandings of light may seem antiquated to us, Aquinas’s methodology is still relevant, so by attending to how his understanding of light shapes his theology we might see how we can follow his method without having to embrace his medieval physics.

WHY LIGHT?

A second question that might arise is why we should focus on light in Aquinas’s thought. After all, Aquinas uses a variety of different images in his work that might be fruitfully explored instead of that of light. He often uses heat and health, to name just two frequent images, as explanatory models that help us understand his thought, so why choose light?

First, Aquinas considers corporeal light—the light made on the first day of creation—to be of a higher spiritual nature than any other created object.⁹

8. Pope Leo XIII, “Aeterni Patris,” August 4, 1879, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris_en.html.

Second, Aquinas makes a direct link between physical and spiritual light, where the light we see with our eyes is a “certain image” of spiritual light.¹⁰ Third, he goes even further and describes intelligible light as an attribute of God, and here he does not seem to be speaking metaphorically.¹¹ For Aquinas, light tells us something absolutely crucial about God.

Additionally, half a century ago M. D. Chenu spelled out the importance of investigating Aquinas’s light language. He describes the variety of images that Aquinas uses, and Chenu argues that of all of those images, “the image most frequently recurring, because the most spontaneously arising, is the analogy of light used in describing intelligence.”¹² Chenu goes on to describe the payoff and method for approaching the investigation of a particular image:

It has been justly observed that an attentive examination of the images employed by Saint Thomas would open the way to a genuine deeper penetration into the understanding of his thought. This is an indication, therefore, that these images should be reinvestigated, imagined anew, in line *with the outlook customary to the medieval mind*; that they should be followed up in their refined, supplied, interknit forms; that they should be freed from elements alien to what they would convey; that they be dematerialized.¹³

While Chenu pointed to the importance of Aquinas’s use of light imagery almost half a century ago, very little has been done since then to systematically investigate this image. There are two reasons for this neglect. First, Aquinas is typically understood to have rejected Augustine’s theory of divine illumination (TDI). The standard account of Augustine’s TDI understands Augustine to have argued that any act of human knowing requires a new divine illumination in order for the knowledge to be truthful; God acts extrinsically on the human in any act of truthful knowing.¹⁴ In an enormously influential article, Etienne Gilson described why Aquinas felt a need to criticize and amend Augustine’s

9. ST I 69.1.

10. *In Ioh.* 8.2 §1142.

11. DDN 4.3 §304.

12. Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1964), 171.

13. *Ibid.*, 172. My emphasis.

14. I am simplifying this summary a bit, as there is significant scholarly discussion on just what Augustine understood illumination to be. As Rudolph Allers pointed out in “St. Augustine’s Doctrine on Illumination,” *Franciscan Studies* 12 (1952): 27, “This lack of agreement is largely the result of the scant explanation St. Augustine himself gives of his idea.”

TDI.¹⁵ Gilson's argument has generally held sway, with the consequence that scholars have neglected Aquinas's understanding of illumination or have only treated it from a philosophical perspective.¹⁶ If Aquinas rejected Augustine's TDI, his theology of illumination, understood as operating intrinsically, is often taken as unimportant. The main exception to this neglect is the attention to Aquinas's description of the agent intellect, but this is rarely treated theologically, and usually understood as an adoption of Aristotle over Augustine and as a response to Avicennian ideas of an extrinsic agent intellect. Thirteenth-century Franciscan scholars, most especially Bonaventure, are usually understood as having more interesting things to say about illumination.

A second reason for this neglect is Aquinas's rejection of the light metaphysics of his time. Both Robert Grosseteste and Bonaventure had developed a light metaphysics that held light to be a substantial form. As we will see later, Aquinas rejects this position for several reasons in favor of a more restrained understanding of light. But, as with the case with Augustine's TDI, because Aquinas rejects this alternative, he is often seen as having nothing interesting to say about light. When we combine his rejection of Augustine's TDI with his rejection of the light metaphysics of the thirteenth century, we can begin to see why scholars have largely ignored his teachings on illumination, especially theologians; several of Aquinas's contemporaries would seem to provide more fruitful opportunities for engagement with a theology of light.

Yet, as Chenu argued, light is a pervasive theme across Aquinas's work. Aquinas may not have held Augustine's TDI and he may have rejected thirteenth-century light metaphysics, but this is not to say that Aquinas has nothing important to say about light and illumination. In fact, as I hope to show, Aquinas has many interesting things to say about light and illumination, especially when viewed theologically rather than philosophically. Light, then, provides important insights into Aquinas's theology because it appears across the whole of his theology and because it represents an important contact between the spiritual and material worlds. As Chenu points out, however, we

15. Étienne Gilson, "Pourquoi Saint Thomas a critiqué Saint Augustin," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge* 1 (1926–27): 5–127.

16. Thus Stephen Marrone, in his excellent two-volume study of illumination, *The Light of Thy Countenance: Science and Knowledge of God in the Thirteenth Century; Volume One, A Doctrine of Divine Illumination* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), which focuses on the Augustinian tradition of illumination in the thirteenth century, does not treat Aquinas's theory of divine illumination at all, though he does mention Aquinas. Even though he does not engage Aquinas directly, his study is enormously helpful for understanding the theological and philosophical issues that would have influenced Aquinas.

have to understand light on Aquinas's terms, not ours, in order to understand the full import of the image.

CENTRAL ARGUMENTS

The argument of this book revolves around three interlocking theses, which I will introduce here and develop over the course of the book. First, for Aquinas the proper understanding of illumination is that it "is the manifestation of truth with reference to God, who illumines every intellect."¹⁷ All too often discussions of illumination with regard to Aquinas focus on our ability to know objects and realities that are evident to our senses and fit with our natural abilities. Part of this focus on our natural light is a holdover from Augustine's theory of illumination, which seems to suggest that we need illumination to know any truth, for instance that I would need illumination to know that there is a tree outside of my window and illumination to know about the way the bark, roots, and leaves work together or any other of the natural features of that tree.¹⁸ For Aquinas, however, illumination properly understood provides us truths about those realities with reference to God. So while I can know those natural truths of the tree by the light of nature, illumination properly understood provides the knower with the idea that the tree was created by God, who serves as both its beginning and end, and that the tree was given by God for human flourishing. Illumination with respect to the tree might even extend further, teaching us that humans fell into sin by taking the fruit from a tree and that humans were restored to life by the death of the Incarnate Son on a tree. None of these theological truths can we know under our own power, without divine illumination.

This leads to the second thesis, which is that Aquinas posits three kinds of illumination, all of which find their origin in God's light: the light of nature, the light of faith or grace, and the light of glory.¹⁹ Philosophers and theologians have for the last century focused on the light of nature, particularly with regard to the idea of illumination, while generally neglecting the light of faith/grace and the light of glory. Much of this important philosophical and theological work finds its origin in an effort to find in earlier Christian

17. ST I 106.3 and I 107.2.

18. Lydia Schumacher has recently called this understanding of Augustine's theory of divine illumination into question, arguing that Augustine's TDI is intrinsic, and so Aquinas is the best interpreter of Augustine in this regard. Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*, 25–65.

19. ST I 106.1 ad 2.

sources philosophically and theologically acceptable ways to understand human knowing. These efforts to develop a robust Christian epistemology in the face of alternative modern and postmodern approaches have been helpful, but often neglect the larger role and understanding of illumination in Aquinas's theology; they only tell one-third of the story. One of the goals of this book is to show how the natural light of the intellect is only one aspect of human knowing and that for the human intellect to fulfill its purpose, which is to know and love God, it requires more than just the natural light, but also the light of grace and the light of glory. Aquinas does not so much have a theory of divine illumination as he has a theory of divine illuminations.

The third thesis builds on the previous two and is the most important of the three. The central idea in this book is that the illumination of our minds is primarily the mission of the Son,²⁰ who became incarnate for our sakes and who manifests the truth about God for our salvation. For Aquinas's theology of illumination to be properly Christian, it must be rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of the overemphasis on the natural light of the intellect among Thomistic philosophers, this key aspect of Aquinas's theology of illumination has been eclipsed. Yet when we attend to what Aquinas says in both the *Summa Theologiae* and his scriptural commentaries, we will find that illumination properly understood is not the product of a vaguely theistic God, but rather is found in the mission of the Son. Christ is the light.

This third thesis came as a complete surprise to me in the course of my research. I had originally planned to do one chapter on the illumination provided by Christ, but as my research proceeded it became obvious that it was the light of Christ which makes possible our ability to do theology, to know God, to live a moral life, and so on. Everywhere Aquinas touched on the theology of light with respect to humans, Christ was there providing the illumination we need. Theologians are beginning to pay attention to the Christological elements of illumination, in particular Lydia Schumacher, who has recently made the case that Augustinian illumination must be understood in its proper Trinitarian and Christological context, but for the most part the illumination provided by Christ has been neglected by contemporary theologians. This book is one attempt to rectify that oversight.

20. ST I 43.5 ad 2 and 3.

THE APPROACH

Let me briefly describe how we will engage these issues. For the most part we will follow the course of the *Summa Theologiae*, beginning with the illumination necessary for and provided by the practice of *sacra doctrina*, moving to the role of light in our theological language, in the life of God, in creation, in morality, and finally concluding with a discussion of some Christological elements of illumination. There will be two exceptions to following the plan of the *Summa*. First, after introducing the question of *sacra doctrina*, I will discuss the physics of light in Aquinas's thought, with the goal of understanding how Aquinas's medieval physics of light is different from modern physics, which will allow us to understand his use of light language more accurately. Second, while the book ends with a chapter on Christ the light, all of the other chapters, with the exception of the aforementioned chapter on physics, will also end with discussion of the Christological elements of light with regard to each particular chapter's concerns. The purpose in incorporating into each chapter the role of Christ in our illumination is to strengthen my overall case that Aquinas's theology of illumination is deeply Christological by showing the pervasive place of Christ in his theology of light. The Son gives us the light of nature in creation, we acquire the light of grace through his teaching and receive grace in the sacraments, and it is the Son who makes the light of glory possible for us and enables the beatific vision.

While the book will roughly follow the plan of the *Summa*, it does not rely only on the *Summa Theologiae* for its argument. For Aquinas, one of the ways that God's illumining self-knowledge is made available to humans is through the revelation of Christian scripture, and so, much of this book incorporates Aquinas's thought on the theology of light as described in his commentaries on scripture. For the larger part of the last century Aquinas's scriptural commentaries have been neglected as sources for understanding his theology; only recently have students of Aquinas begun to mine his commentaries for their rich theological descriptions of the Christian faith. That the genre of commentary seems less systematic than that of disputed questions does not mean that scriptural commentaries are any less relevant for those who are interested in exploring Aquinas's theology.²¹ In several cases we will see how Aquinas's scriptural commentaries allow us to understand from a different perspective a topic he takes up in the *Summa*. Of all of these commentaries

21. Though if we pay attention to the way that Aquinas organizes his scriptural commentaries and divides the texts, we can see that in many ways his scriptural commentaries are quite systematic. One wonders if the idea that scriptural commentaries are somehow nonsystematic is a modern conceit.

on scripture, the one that will come to the fore is his commentary on the Gospel of John, which was written roughly at the same time as the *Summa*. In his commentary on John's Gospel, which begins with a rich exploration of the *Logos* as light, Aquinas fully develops his Christology of light and does so in conversation with other important voices in the Christian tradition, most especially Augustine.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

The primary goal of this book is to provide systematic account of Aquinas's theology of light by roughly following the plan of the *Summa Theologiae* in conversation with his scriptural commentaries. This task is sufficiently complicated in itself because of its scope, so it necessitated making some choices about what not to include. First, as is not uncommon in the study of Aquinas, this book will focus on his later and more mature systematic work, the *Summa Theologiae*. There will be cases where some of his earlier works, such as his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, will be engaged because those earlier works provide a perspective that is lacking in a later work or because it clarifies a concept, but for the most part the emphasis will be on Aquinas's mature thought. Second, this book is meant to serve as a description of Aquinas's theology of light, so by choice I have limited my discussion about some of the more significant contemporary disputes about Aquinas in favor of describing Aquinas's understanding of light; the emphasis is primarily exegetical. In doing so I am under no illusion that my account is anything other than my own interpretation of Aquinas. My own questions and interests are always in the background and so shape this study. I wrote this because the topic is relevant and interesting both to specialists and nonspecialists in Aquinas, but I have intentionally focused on describing his theology of light.

Finally, one element that will seem to be missing from Aquinas's theology of light is the Holy Spirit. Aquinas has sometimes been accused of having a pneumatological deficit and of ignoring the important role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life; the virtual absence of the Holy Spirit in this book (with a rare exception in chapter 4) might feed into this perception. The absence of the Spirit, however, is because of the way that Aquinas understands the missions of the Son and the Spirit. While the mission of the Son, as I have already indicated, is to illumine our intellects, the mission of the Spirit is to inflame our affections with love for God.²² Whenever one sees Aquinas mention the role of inflaming

22. ST I 45.3 ad 2 and 3.

our affections for God, there the Spirit is. This book, then, only covers one of the two divine missions, and a book detailing the mission of the Spirit would be a nice companion to this one. For Aquinas, knowledge of God alone is not sufficient for our salvation, for we also need to love what we come to know about God. Nevertheless, the two missions are related and relevant to each other. As we come to know more about God we come to love God more, and as we come to love God more we want to know more about God.

So this book is written to help us know more about how Christ comes to give us knowledge about God, to make God more manifest to us. It will be up to the Holy Spirit to inflame our affections in response to this knowledge.