

Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition. By Hans Boersma. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018. Pp. 467. Price \$55 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-8028-7604-1.

For the past decade, Hans Boersma has been advocating the renewal of a ‘sacramental ontology’, and *Seeing God* demonstrates the power of his project both as a reading of the Christian past, and as capable of raising provoking, even surprising questions for theology in the present. With Boersma’s story of modernity and the eclipse of sacramentality told in *Heavenly Participation*, published in 2011, *Seeing God* turns to the question of the Beatific Vision in order to retrieve a doctrinal theme particularly apt for the sacramental and participatory reconnection of earth and heaven.

The journey through the doctrinal landscape has a familiar format. As in Boersma’s previous works, *Seeing God* involves a grand tour, this time taking in the monumental figures of the Christian tradition from Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, through eminent mediaevals of east and west, to John Calvin, English puritans, Dutch neo-Calvinists, and the great American Jonathan Edwards. The history embraces not only a remarkable variety of forms of Christian life and thought, but even roots beyond the church in Plato and Plotinus. The works of no fewer than seventeen major figures are canvassed in chronological order and in some detail, and there is perhaps a certain literary bent to the selection. Chapters contrasting Aquinas and Palamas or Symeon the New Theologian and John of the Cross receive about the same amount of space as exegeses of Dante’s *Paradiso* and John Donne’s *Anniversaries*. Vision of God is always the subject, but judgement is often given in terms of how well thinkers can be described as ‘sacramental’: a term which combines a (not always precisely defined) metaphysical tilt towards participation with a doctrinal emphasis on a theophanic understanding of vision of God as mediated through the humanity of Christ.

The central problem to which this vision is addressed is, as in Boersma's earlier works on participation, the de-sacramentalised world of modernity. Indeed, in his opposition to modern plausibility structures which sever the earthly from the transcendent, Boersma occasionally allows metaphysical terms of art ('nominalist', 'pure nature') to function almost as terms of abuse rather than analysis. Given the strength of the objection to modernity, then, it is interesting to note a secondary theme which rises over the course of the book. In doctrinal terms, Boersma expresses a similar opposition to what became the mainstream western account of the beatific vision: the (broadly) Thomist tradition of immediate intellectual vision of the divine essence. Indeed, the variety and heterogeneity of the figures surveyed is in itself an aspect of Boersma's argument against this tradition. While Boersma does detect in Thomas' spirituality 'the beginnings of a separation between this life and the next, and between the natural and the supernatural' (p. 133), however, it is only in the final ten pages of the book that the full significance of the objection becomes apparent, and that the objection to modernity and to Thomist spirituality are united in a deep metaphysical question concerning the status of the body.

Different understandings of having or being a body, of what it is to see a body, to see *as* a body, to see 'through' a body: these govern or underlie Boersma's theological decisions throughout the text. His concern for a historical understanding of participation as a pedagogical continuity between earth and heaven revolves around the status of the body, as does his concern that the divine nature must be mediated, even eschatologically, by Christ's humanity – implicitly Christ's embodied humanity, seen with transfigured bodily eyes.

That the metaphysical status of the body is a central question even where it is not explicitly addressed is evident from a close reading of what is the most metaphysically dense of Boersma's chapters, the contrast of Aquinas and Palamas on the subject of the Transfiguration. When dealing with Thomas in detail, Boersma is judicious and precise, but

when he comes to sum up the contrast in understandings of the light of the transfiguration, he finds that Gregory ‘displays a consistency of approach that in some ways is lacking in Thomas’ (p. 155). The difficulty is that Thomas insists that for divine *claritas* to be bodily at all must mean its being a created effect in the mode of creatureliness proper to the body, which is nonetheless the *proper* effect of reception of the uncreated light in the beatific vision of Christ’s soul. For Thomas, the participation of the lower in the higher *requires* the difference of modes: the distinction follows from what it means to be a body at all. From this, the bodily visibility of the Tabor light follows quite naturally. For Gregory, by contrast, the continuity of earthly life and eschatological glory requires a transfiguration of the body of the recipient, precisely because the uncreated energies could not be seen in the mode of embodiment which obtains for those not so transfigured.

A simple contrast of more and less ‘sacramental’ or ‘mediated’ is thus the surface layer of the text; the deeper question is what it means for the body *as a body* to mediate what is beyond the body. When it comes to his own proposals, Boersma’s claims are surprisingly radical. His ‘idealist view of matter’ (p. 427); his understanding of the body as ‘defined by its final cause as a convergence of intelligible properties conceived and perceived by God’s vision’ (p. 429); indeed, his reaching out to the eschatological promise of ‘the body as something rather ethereal, reconstituted in angelic form in the nongendered fullness of Christ’ (428): these claims enliven and give shape and energy to his analysis – but their full significance can be grasped only retrospectively. It is only at the close that we see that all polemic against ‘nominalistic’ metaphysics or the spectre of ‘pure nature’ reduces to this question of what, if anything, embodiment means in distinction from mentality and intellectuality.

This is a deep and fertile question, and Boersma’s suggestion that the views of Nyssen, Palamas, and Jonathan Edwards allow for an embodiment which can take Christ’s

humanity seriously as eschatological mediation of divinity is stimulating and provocative.

Seeing God leads us to this suggestion, but perhaps its greatest weakness is that its survey of the past leaves the work of developing it in metaphysical and doctrinal detail to another book in the future.

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