

When Time Is of the Essence: Aquinas and the *Imago Dei*

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There are probably few theological categories more contested than the image of God. The reasons why are not hard to fathom. Though the priestly writer to whom we owe the phrase nowhere specifies in what this image consists, theologians since Irenaeus have seen in it the key to understanding human distinctiveness. Though Irenaeus' own interpretation of the *imago Dei* is remarkably holistic,¹ the phrase has more often been understood in narrowly cognitive terms.² And while the faculties cited as the seat of the divine image have generally been viewed as widely inclusive of all human beings, those in power have proved all too willing to question the humanity of those whose cognitive abilities they have judged somehow deficient.³

Partly as a protest against narrowly cognitive interpretations of human distinctiveness, the last century has seen an increasing emphasis on the capacity for relationships with others as the defining feature of the divine image in human beings.⁴ Insofar as such capacity is also subject to variation among individuals, however, relational criteria seem as open to exclusive interpretation as those pertaining to the use of reason or will.⁵ In both cases, an essentialist interpretation of the *imago Dei* threatens to result in the boundaries of the human being drawn too narrowly.

In an effort to address this risk, Mary McClintock Fulkerson has recently proposed eschewing positive definitions of the *imago Dei* altogether in favour of provisional negative definitions that are limited to providing timely reminders of what the divine image is not. Fulkerson contends that only such a strategy is capable of checking the implicit exclusion of various categories of people from normative humanity and thereby safeguarding the open-endedness of the human story before God.⁶

At first glance Thomas Aquinas might seem to exemplify the kind of essentialist understanding of the *imago Dei* against which Fulkerson protests. In his discussion of the topic in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, his judgment that angels possess the divine image to a greater degree than human beings (1.93.3) seems to be related to its

characterization as a "natural aptitude" that "lies in the very nature of the mind" (1.93.4).⁷ Although Thomas does allow that the divine image is found in all human beings, he admits that it may be possessed in different degrees, with the result that the *imago* is said to be present in men in a way that it is not in women (1.93.4.1). In light of such language, it seems only natural to conclude that Thomas views the *imago Dei* as an inherent property or quality of the intellect.⁸

Without wanting to deny the strong correlation between the *imago Dei* and cognition in Thomas's thought, I would claim that his perspective on the divine image is more open to the ongoing character of the human project than the above citations might suggest. Given his commitment to the principle that the end of human beings is consistent with their created nature, it is hardly surprising that Thomas' discussion of the *imago Dei* is marked by essentialist language. Yet his analysis also includes other features that preclude a straightforward equation of the divine image with a readily definable property of human being. Specifically, Thomas suggests that the *imago Dei* is as much a matter of divine grace as of human potential in a way that casts doubt on the effort to interpret his position in purely essentialist terms.

I will argue that Thomas' remarks on the image of God presuppose a narrative context that has as its central plot-line the act of God in Christ calling human beings to participation in the life of the Trinity. Because it is embedded in this as yet incomplete narrative framework, the content of the *imago* remains open-ended. This assessment of Thomas is supported especially by his insistence that the divine image should be understood as a state that is realized in the concrete act of knowing and loving God rather than as a passive capacity of human nature. This contention draws attention to the temporal character of human knowing in a way that helps to situate the *imago Dei* firmly within the narrative matrix of God's claiming us in Christ. As such, it cuts against the grain of a pure essentialism: because for Thomas time is of the essence when it comes to understanding human being, his account of the image of God continues to be relevant to contemporary theological anthropology.

I. The *Imago Dei* and Human Nature

This assessment of Thomas' interpretation of the *imago Dei* can be sustained only if it can be shown that Thomas consistently steers clear of any reduction of the *imago* to human nature's natural capacities. Given that he explicitly locates the divine image in the mind (1.88.3) and, more specifically, relates it to humanity's "intellectual nature" (1.93.3; 1.93.4.1), the prospects of succeeding in this task might appear

dim at first. And yet Aquinas does explicitly deny that human beings are *imago Dei* essentially (1.93.6.1), arguing instead that the image has been stamped on our minds in the same way that a king's image is stamped on to the metal of a coin (see also 1.35.2.3; 1.93.1.2).

In one respect the significance of this simile is minor. In comparing the divine image in human beings to a king's image on a coin, Thomas seeks to remind his readers that the only true image of God is the second person of the Trinity. The Son is an image of God who is also God (*in re eiusdem naturae secundum speciem*). Human beings bear the image as creatures who do not share the divine nature (*in re alterius naturae*, 1.35.2.3).⁹ While this distinction is certainly important, it does not by itself speak against the claim that the *imago Dei* is intrinsic to human nature. As Thomas notes, it is entirely appropriate to use the language of image where two things have different natures, so long as they share some likeness with respect to a proper feature of their natures (*aliquod accidens proprium speciei*, 1.93.2). The fact that Thomas both explicitly correlates the *imago Dei* to the intellect and understands human beings as creatures with an intellectual nature would seem to support an essentialist interpretation of the *imago Dei* in human beings.

The situation is, however, complicated by the fact that Thomas distinguishes the proper features (*propria*) of a created nature from essence. Thus, although Thomas has no difficulty in describing human beings as having an intellectual nature, he denies that the intellect or understanding can be described as part of humanity's essence (1.79.1; cf. 1.77.1). The reason for this distinction lies in Thomas' understanding of essence as that which is at every moment characteristic of a being's actuality. In line with this perspective, the soul, as the form of the body, can be described as the essence of human being (1.76.1; cf. 1.76.6.1, 3). Powers of the soul like the intellect cannot be so characterized, because they alternate between potency and act. Because they are not constant features of creaturely existence, they must be categorized as accidents (1.77.1.5; cf. 1.77.1.4, 6–7). Only when constantly in act can the intellect or understanding be identified with essence, and for Thomas this is the case only with God.¹⁰

At the same time, however, the accidental character of the understanding does not mean that it is to be viewed as a fortuitous feature of human being, for it turns out that all accidents are not equal. Thomas admits of two different categories of the accidental, which have different implications for the extent to which a given attribute can be said to be "natural" to human beings. For Thomas the truly "accidental" refers solely to those properties (e.g., hair or skin colour)

which are not causally linked to essence (*id quod non causatur ex principiis essentialibus speciei*, 1.77.1.5). The intellect is not accidental in this sense, since it is an intrinsic feature of the human soul insofar as the latter is specifically distinguished as intellectual (1.76.1; cf. 1.76.3). It therefore falls into an intermediate category between essence and accident: it is a proper feature (*proprium*) of human nature, because though not humanity's essence, it is ontologically correlated with essence (*non est de essentia rei, sed ex principiis essentialibus specie causatur*, 1.77.1.5). On account of this close correlation between essence and power, Thomas is perfectly happy to describe the understanding (along with the soul's other powers) as "in a manner of speaking, natural properties of the soul" (*quasi proprietates animae naturales*, 1.77.2.5).¹¹

By contrast, it is not clear that the language Thomas uses to describe the *imago Dei* in human beings implies the same sort of ontological link with the soul characteristic of the intellect. For example, while Thomas has no difficulty speaking of the understanding as a capacity of the soul, he is more cautious in using such language when speaking of the divine image. While he does locate the image of God in the intellect, he adds that this association of the *imago Dei* with the power of understanding is true only in a secondary and derivative sense (*secundario et quasi ex consequenti*, 1.93.7). The reason for this qualification lies in Thomas' understanding of the degree of likeness that must obtain between creature and Creator before the human soul can properly be said to be in God's image. Here it is not sufficient to speak of intellectual potency, even if such potency is the necessary condition for the realization of the *imago Dei* in human beings. Rather, the image of God is fully in the mind only when the intellect is in act (1.93.7).¹²

This claim is rooted in Thomas' conviction that the image of a God who is triune necessarily takes trinitarian form (1.93.5). Here Thomas follows Augustine in conceding that any number of trinities can be found in human being, while arguing that the majority fall short of constituting a genuine image of God. There are at least two reasons for this. First, no act of the soul, however superficially trinitarian its structure, can be said to reflect the self-sufficient character of the divine life in a way that justifies its being described as an image of God if it requires or presupposes the introduction of an object from outside the soul (as in, e.g., the operations of physical and imaginative seeing cited in 1.93.6.4; cf. 1.93.8.2). Thomas therefore concurs with Augustine that the human intellect is genuinely an image of God only in the act of thinking, since in thought the mind itself generates an inner word in a

way that is analogous to the Father's generation of the divine Word. In short, the human understanding truly images a God who is always in act only insofar as it, too, is in act (1.93.7).

To stop at this point, however, is still to view the *imago Dei* more abstractly than Thomas is inclined to do. Important as the human intellect's structural correspondence to the divine life is for making sense of the *imago*, it does not by itself suffice to distinguish the divine image in human beings from the "natural property" of intellection. Thomas therefore provides a second reason why not just any trinitarian structure in the soul can be identified with the image of God: for the created intellect to be sufficiently like its divine prototype to justify being characterized as *imago Dei*, it needs to resemble God in content as well as in form, by having God as the object of understanding (1.93.8.1).¹³ Now this degree of resemblance is impossible for the created intellect to achieve on its own, because knowledge of the Trinity is beyond the soul's natural powers. It can be realized only as and when God gives the divine Word to be known. In other words, while the understanding's correspondence to the *form* of the divine life is in some sense "natural" for Thomas, the *content* of the understanding only corresponds to God through a supernatural gift of grace in which God allows the inner word of human understanding to echo the eternal Word.

This series of qualifications establishes the *imago Dei* as an ontologically odd category within Thomistic anthropology. As a function of the understanding, it cannot be ascribed to the essence of human being any more than understanding itself; but neither can it be viewed as proper to human nature in the way that understanding and the soul's other powers are. For Thomas a quality is proper to the soul only if it is ontologically linked to it as a manifestation of its essential principles (1.77.1.5). Insofar as it is capable of being realized only through the gift of grace, however, the *imago Dei* appears to stand at a further remove from the soul than powers like the understanding. At the same time, however, Thomas' characterization of the divine image also speaks against its being categorized as a pure accident; for even though its realization lies beyond the capacities of human nature, it is nevertheless that nature's appointed end.¹⁴

II. An Angelological Aside

At this point the objection naturally arises that if the realization of the divine image in human beings is restricted to those occasions where the understanding perceives and echoes the divine Word, then it seemingly limited to Christians, and, even more narrowly, to the members of the

church triumphant. Such an equation of the *imago Dei* with the beatific vision hardly seems to square with Thomas' insistence elsewhere that the fact of being created in the divine image is what gives humankind the capacity for that vision (see, e.g., 3.9.2), not to mention his explicit insistence that the image is every human being (1.93.4).

The key to resolving this apparent inconsistency lies in Thomas' contention that the image of God is present in human beings in three degrees: first, that natural aptitude for knowing God that lies in the nature of the intellectual soul (*in ipsa natura mentis*); second, the genuine, if imperfect, knowledge which the faithful receive through the gift of grace (*per conformitatem gratiae*); and third, the perfected knowledge enjoyed by the saints in glory (*secundum similitudinem gloriae*, 1.93.4). The first of these corresponds to the derivative sense in which the *imago Dei* can be identified with humanity's cognitive powers insofar as their realization can be said already to be present in those powers virtually (1.93.7). Speaking from this perspective, it is possible to affirm the presence of the divine image even in those who do not have the use of reason (1.93.8.3).

As important as this virtual ascription of the *imago Dei* to the understanding is to affirming the ontological continuity between humanity as created and glorified, however, it does not override the importance of the distinctions between the three stages of its realization in human beings. Although the full realization of the *imago* in the beatific vision is humanity's appointed end, this end lies infinitely beyond humanity's own powers and is possible only through the gift of grace. In this way, the legitimacy of attributing the divine image to human beings outside the state of glory depends on viewing their created natures from an eschatological perspective. In other words, the designation of human beings as creatures made in the image of God is every bit as much a function of what they will become as of what they are now. It would therefore seem to follow that where an intellectual soul has no future with God, it cannot be regarded as possessing the *imago Dei*, however great its intellectual powers may be.

Though Thomas nowhere explicitly draws this last conclusion, the importance of the temporal structure of human existence for the claim that all human beings are made in God's image can be seen when the human situation is compared with that of angels. Both angels and humankind possess the image of God by virtue of their having intellectual natures. Because their intellects operate differently, however, angelic and human natures possess the divine image in different ways. The ideas through which the angels understand are intrinsic (*connaturales*) to their being. By contrast, human beings

acquire ideas in time (*successive*), since human understanding is rooted in a temporally extended experience of material things (1.55.2; cf. 1.60.2). In this way, human life is temporally indexed in a way that angelic existence is not.

The lack of a temporal component to angelic existence does not mean that angels lack history. Indeed, the ascription of a sort of non-temporality to angels follows from Thomas' understanding of the character of creaturely knowledge of God. The *imago Dei* is fully realized for angels and human beings alike only in the beatific vision, and the supernatural character of this vision means that it transcends the inherent capacity of even the most exalted created nature (1.62.1; cf. 1.12.4). Angels therefore need the gift of grace to realize the *imago Dei* no less than human beings do. Consequently, Thomas can speak of a series of events involving the perfecting of angelic natures that corresponds to the threefold structure of human progression toward God: first there is the act of God by which the creature is prepared for grace, then the "habitual grace" that merits beatitude, and finally the "consummate grace" that makes possible the perfect love of God in glory (1.62.2). Thus, while angels do not progress to a state of glory through time, there is nevertheless a definite sequence of acts that marks their transition from creation to beatitude (1.62.5.2).

The crucial point for the present argument is that whatever history the angels have is now over. This conclusion follows partly from the fact that the sequence of acts that constitute angelic "history" takes no time (1.63.6),¹⁵ but it is also a function of the fact that these acts are for Thomas irreversible. Because the ideas by which an angelic nature knows are intrinsic to it, its intellectual apprehension is both instantaneous and incapable of alteration or development over time. Moreover, since for Thomas the will is necessarily directed to that which is apprehended by the intellect, angels, unlike human beings, have no possibility of changing their minds: once they have chosen, they are permanently confirmed in that choice, whether for good or evil.¹⁶

Because angelic history lacks the temporal character of its human equivalent, there can be no distinction between their eschatological future and their present status of the sort that marks Thomas' discussion of the *imago Dei* in human beings. The angels' capacities are either realized or not immediately upon their creation. Therefore, while it seems necessary to assume (on the basis of 1.63.4–5 and 1.93.3) that all the angels were created in God's image, it seems equally necessary to conclude only the good angels ever have realized (and, therefore, ever will realize) that image, since only they perceive the divine mysteries

in the divine Word (1.64.1; cf. 1.93.8.4). Because the demons have no future with God, they cannot be said to be in God's image.

For Thomas the image of God is realized in creatures as they come to participate in God's own self-knowledge. Though such participation is by definition beyond the natural capacity of any creature, it is nevertheless possible (in line with 2–2.175.1.2 and 3.9.3; cf. 1–2.110.3) to speak of a creature being made in God's image insofar as such participation is its end. Because the *imago Dei* is defined by knowledge of God, it can only be an end for creatures whose possession of an intellectual nature makes it possible for them to know God, and even here the realization of this end can be thwarted by the creature's sinful blocking the gift of grace necessary for even the most refined creaturely intellect to ascend to the divine (1.63.6). Where this rejection of grace is final, it is no longer possible on Thomas' own terms to speak of an image of God in the creature. Because the demons' rejection of God's grace is necessarily final and irreversible, it follows (though Thomas does not say so explicitly) that they constitute examples of intellectual natures in which the image of God is not found.¹⁷

III. The *Imago Dei* and the Body of Christ

To the extent that the example of the demons shows that a created nature does not necessarily instantiate the *imago Dei* by the mere fact of being intellectual, it undermines a purely essentialist identification of the divine image with any creaturely capacity. The logic of this position is consistent with Thomas' comparison of the *imago Dei* with the image of a king on a coin: while intellectual natures can receive the stamp of the divine image, there is no more reason to conclude that they will receive it than to suppose that the malleability of metal will necessarily result in its being coined as money. Rather, in the same way that metal acquires monetary value only when assigned value by an external authority, so an intellectual nature's realization of the *imago Dei* depends ultimately on the grace of God.¹⁸

To end the argument at this point, however, would clear Thomas of a narrow essentialism only at the price of portraying him as a constructivist in a quasi-Hegelian mode, for whom human beings only finally become human with the *eschaton*. But such a conclusion does not square with Thomas' own insistence on the fact that human beings are the image of God now:

Therefore the divine image is found in a human being when a word is conceived [*in her*] on the basis of a knowledge of God, and when love is kindled by this concept. And so the image of God is found in the soul when it is focused [*fertur*], or created in such a way as to be focused [*nata est ferri*], on God (1.93.8)

The different modes of creaturely realization of the image of God are clearly evident in the distinction drawn between act by which God is known (*fertur*) and potential for such knowledge (*nata est ferri*). Yet the language used does not suggest any subordination of one to the other, as though the second were somehow only a deficient or inchoate form of the first. On the contrary, the text places the two in parallel: the *imago Dei* is equally characteristic of both conditions.

And yet the fact that Thomas bothers to make such a distinction at all indicates that it is not possible simply to reduce the divine image to a capacity, since in that case there would be no need to refer to the act of focusing on God as a distinct aspect of the *imago Dei*. As already noted, the postulation of distinct modes of the divine image in human beings is best explained as a function of the temporal character of human existence. Thus while strictly speaking the divine image in human beings is realized only when the mind is definitively fixed on God in the state of glory, this eschatological reality casts its light backwards on to the whole of human existence in time in such a way that the *imago Dei* can be said to be virtually present in the understanding from the moment of creation.

Though the language of "virtual" existence is Thomas' own (1.93.7), it would be a mistake to understand him to mean that the presence of the *imago Dei* in humanity is purely notional prior to the *eschaton*. The point is not that the divine image cannot be applied to human beings outside the state of glory, but that it applies to them—in glory no less than outside it—extrinsically. In this context, it is important to remember that for Thomas the *imago Dei* is first and foremost a christological category. Only the divine Word is truly the image of God. Humankind is a created echo of this divine self-imaging, and so is said to be "in" or (to exploit the more eschatological nuance of Thomas' Vulgate text) "toward" that image. As God images God in the eternal conception of the Word in the bosom of the Father, so we participate in the image as our minds are informed by this same Word by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Since this conforming of our minds to God's Word occurs only when and as that Word encounters us in Christ, for us to be "in" the image of God depends finally upon our being "in" Christ as the one Word who gives the divine image definite content.

As has already been noted, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that Thomas limits the *imago Dei* to Christians. Yet the fact that Thomas is ready to affirm the presence of the divine image in non-Christians by citing their capacity for a natural knowledge of God (1.93.8) should not be taken as a weakening of the christological framework within which he situates the *imago Dei*. Thomas' position is

simply that the temporal character of human existence precludes any direct correlation between an individual's present confessional status and her (ultimate) relationship with Christ. On the contrary, because our status as human beings is defined with respect to our end, no attempt to characterize humanity can be accurate that fails to take that end into account.

This point comes to the fore when Thomas reflects on the Pauline description of Christ as head of the body of the church in the third part of the *Summa*. Though equating the body of Christ with the church would seem to place non-Christians firmly outside of Christ, Thomas insists that Christ, as the ultimate source of the grace by which people are saved, is the head of all human beings, including unbelievers. He defends this assertion precisely by reference to the temporality of human being. Because human existence in both its individual and corporate dimensions is extended over time, the members of Christ's body do not appear all together at once within the bounds of history. Consequently, Christ may be considered their head in different degrees (*secundum diversos gradus*, 3.8.3), which parallel the sequence of nature, grace, and glory that we have already seen in Thomas' discussion of the different modes in which human beings have the image of God.

Because incorporation into the body of Christ is only fully realized in the state of glory, Thomas affirms that Christ is properly (*primo ... et principaliter*) head only of the saints in heaven. The state of Christians within the realm of space and time is treated in two subdivisions: on the one hand, those who are now actually (*actu*) united with Christ in love; on the other, those united to him by faith not yet formed by love. Finally (and corresponding to the "natural" stage of the *imago Dei* discussed in 1.93.4), there are those who are united with Christ only potentially (*in potentia*). This category, too, is subdivided into two groups: those for whom that potency will some day be activated, and those for whom it will not (3.8.3).

Thomas himself does not explicitly highlight this parallelism between human beings' possession of the image of God and their incorporation into Christ's body, but the structural correspondence between them suggests a means of clarifying the relationship potency and act that marks his discussion of the *imago Dei*. Although all human beings can be described as part of Christ's body because all are at least potentially members, this potency is not equated with some structural feature of human nature, but simply described in terms of the temporally open character of human existence. The possibility of incorporation into Christ's body ends only when human beings run out

of time. At that point, there is simply no further opportunity for the transition from potency to act, with the result that those who have not by then been united with Christ cease to be members of Christ's body.

If the *imago Dei* is analyzed in light of this conceptual framework, then humanity's creation in the divine image would refer primarily to its potential realization of that image in glory. It would then be possible to affirm that all human beings possess the *imago* by virtue of their potential to realize this image, without the need to equate the *imago* directly with any inherent human capacity. It would, of course, remain both possible and necessary to affirm that the realization of the *imago Dei* presupposes certain capacities (viz., the understanding), but it would be understood that those capacities could not themselves be identified as the divine image except in the secondary sense outlined in 1.93.7.

Here, too, Thomas' treatment of angelic natures provides an indirect confirmation of the correlation between the categories of participation in the body of Christ and the creaturely realization of the *imago Dei*. Thus, while Thomas includes angels in the body of Christ in the same way that he argues that they possess the *imago Dei* (3.8.4; cf. 1.93.3), in neither case does he recognize degrees of angelic participation. Given that the different modes of human participation in the *imago Dei* and the body of Christ alike reflect the specifically temporal character of human existence, it is understandable that such stages should be absent in the case of intelligences which do not operate in time.¹⁹ In the same vein, though Thomas does not explicitly state that the demons are cut off from the body of Christ any more than he explicitly denies that they possess the *imago Dei*, their exclusion is implicit in his description of a separate "body" of the wicked, with the devil at its head (3.8.7).

There are also further christological reasons for correlating possession of the *imago Dei* with membership in Christ's body. Thomas makes a point of noting that human incorporation into the body of Christ is an act of grace that comes solely and entirely from Christ himself. Christ is able to give this grace because he possesses it to the maximum degree that it can be possessed by a creature (3.7.10). Thomas concludes that the grace that determines Christ's place in the body as head is one with that of his person (3.8.5). Because this latter, personal grace includes his having the knowledge of God characteristic of those in glory (3.9.2), and because this knowledge takes place by the intellect's being conformed to the Word that defines the realization of the image of God in human beings, it follows that the fullness of personal grace whereby Christ is head is identical with that by which

the image of God is perfectly realized in him.

Now if it is true for Jesus that the grace by which he possesses the *imago Dei* is identical with that by which he is head of the body, and if Jesus is confessed with Chalcedon as fully human, then it must be true for every human being that their possession of the *imago Dei* corresponds to their membership in the body of Christ. This is not to argue that the two forms of grace are indistinguishable. Thomas himself suggests that they correspond to different aspects of the economy of salvation when he affirms that Christ is himself justified by his personal grace, but justifies others by his grace as head (3.8.5). In either case, however, the point remains that creaturely participation in the life of God is a matter of grace rather than nature.³⁰ Though this grace operates on and through particular capacities that inhere in human nature, it comes upon us only through the personal action of God in Christ and not through any natural process (3.8.5.1). The logic of Thomas' position therefore dictates that it is fundamentally impossible to speak of the image of God in human beings without reference to the grace given us in and through Christ, even if it remains possible to affirm the *imago Dei* in all human beings, irrespective of their present confessional status.

V. Conclusions

What is gained by pressing Thomas on his claim that the *imago Dei* is realized only in act and perfected only in glory? So long as the *imago Dei* is understood as a creaturely capacity, no amount of insistence on its universality will answer the question of its status among those whose possession of this capacity is judged marginal. While Thomas himself affirms that the *imago* is present even among those who lack the use of reason, it is hard to know what this claim can possibly mean if the *imago* is identified in purely essentialist fashion with some set of cognitive abilities. Thomas himself allows that men possess the *imago* in a way women do not (1.93.5.1), and while he does not argue for this point on the basis of claims about intelligence, it is hard not to connect his position with his earlier affirmation that men's rational powers are superior to women's (1.92.1.2).

If the reading offered here is plausible, however, Thomas' own stress on the christological and eschatological shaping of human being may provide conceptual resources for checking the temptation to assess the degree to which particular individuals do or do not instantiate the *imago Dei*. If the divine image is interpreted as a conformity of the human mind with God that is perfected only in glory—and thus finally as the result of divine rather than human power—then its ascription to

any individual or class of human beings no longer depends on our (invariably fallible) judgments regarding their possession of particular capacities. The *imago Dei* will be attributed to all human beings in the same way that membership in the body of Christ is: as a fact of grace whose precise content will be revealed in God's good time. While it may be the case that some human beings will reject this grace, we have no way of knowing who they may be, and—in light of the universal scope of God's claim in Christ—no basis for questioning their destiny as persons created *ad imaginem Dei*.²¹ Even the association of the *imago Dei* with the activity of particular structures of the mind provides no dependable clues regarding any given mind's conformity with the divine image, since we simply lack the resources to extrapolate from the mind's cognition of created realities to its cognition of God.²² Since creaturely knowing of God depends entirely on God's giving the divine self to be known in grace, it is not commensurable with creaturely capacities except in the most formal sense.²³

In Christ himself we can identify one human being who realizes the *imago Dei* fully in this life.²⁴ But his very uniqueness renders problematic any attempt to use him as a basis for equating the *imago Dei* with the presence of particular capacities—especially given his own commitment to those who in the eyes of his contemporaries seemed particularly unlikely candidates for realizing the divine image. In this way, the particular features of Jesus' own life provide a concrete reminder of the open-endedness implicit in so much of Thomas' own analysis of the *imago Dei*. As Thomas argues, we are not the image of God as such. It is not part of our essence. But we are created in or, more accurately, toward it. It therefore refers neither to something we are in ourselves nor to something we are made, but rather to how we are seen by God and thus to how we hope some day to appear even to ourselves.²⁵

The *imago Dei* thus emerges as an ontologically odd category. On the one hand, it is not part of or even proper to our essence as human beings. On the other, we are not properly understood as human beings without reference to the divine image in us, since our being as creatures created toward the *imago* cannot consist in anything less than its realization—even though the fact of that realization lies beyond our creaturely abilities even as its final form lies beyond our creaturely knowledge. All of which serves to remind us that if we want to know what the *imago* is, we cannot proceed by looking within ourselves, but only by looking without, toward the God whom we cannot see clearly unless it is first granted that we should see.

To understand the logic of the *imago Dei* in Thomas' thought we

must finally look to Christ. This is not because Christ allows us to come up with a superior criteriology of the divine image against which we might try to measure others, but precisely because he challenges such attempts by reminding us that the content of the divine image is something none of us realizes fully in this life. In telling his story, we are therefore reminded that the reality of the *imago* lies before us in a way that undermines the attempt to equate it with who we are and keeps us open to seeing it revealed in circumstances and in people we do not expect. It simply cannot be otherwise for creatures for whom time is of the essence.

- 1 While Irenaeus himself does not offer a formal definition of the image of God, he explicitly denies that it can be restricted to a part of human nature (e.g., the soul or spirit). See Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* V.vi 1 in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, American ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
- 2 The correlation of image with some property of the mind is already to be found in Philo (*De opificio mundi*, 69, in *Philo*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1929), and the same general trajectory is continued in the twentieth century in the work of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Karl Rahner, who all interpret human distinctiveness in terms of a basically cognitive capacity for self-transcendence.
- 3 See, for example, Ginés de Sepúlveda's argument for the subjugation of the Indians in his *Democrates alter* (available in a Spanish translation by Angel Losada as *Demócrates segundo o De las iustas causas de la guerra contra los indios* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1984)), as well as the numerous apologies for the enslavement of Africans offered by white Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- 4 See, e.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) and, more recently, Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theology of Individuals in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1990).
- 5 See Harriet A. Harris, "Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51:2 (1998), 214–234.
- 6 See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the Imago Dei," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 114.
- 7 In this article I follow the convention of citing the *Summa Theologiae* by means of Arabic numerals separated by periods. Thus, 1.93.4.1 refers to the response to the first objection in article 4, question 93 of the first part. The Latin text is from the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1964–1981). Translations are my own.
- 8 Gilson, for example, understands Thomas to affirm "that there is in man a

quality that makes him eminently similar to God, and it is understanding, or mind.... And that is what it means to be an image of God." Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Thomism* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1964), 36. Cf. his account in *Le Thomisme: Introduction à la philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1944), 480, where he argues, "Puisqu'elle [the *imago Dei*] ne fait qu'un avec la rationalité de sa nature, la qualité d'image de Dieu est coessentielle avec l'homme.... Il est aussi naturel à l'homme d'être image de Dieu que d'être un animal raisonnable, c'est-à-dire d'être homme."

- 9 Cf. 1.93.1.2, where Thomas also contrasts the relationship between the connatural character of the image in the Son with its presence in human beings.
- 10 "*Dei potentia, quae est operationis principium, est ipsa Dei essentia. Quod non potest esse verum neque in anima, neque in aliqua creatura...*" (1.77.1); cf. 1.79.1.
- 11 I differ here from Catherine Pickstock, who understands this intermediate category of "proper accidents" as constituting something that is at once "essential" and "super-essential" (Catherine Pickstock, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediations of Time," in *Radical Orthodoxy? —A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 71). As noted in the text, while Thomas denies that the understanding is "essential" to human being, it is not clear that the status he gives it is helpfully characterized as "super-essential". His point is simply that the soul has powers (including, but not limited to the intellect) that cannot be equated with its essence, but which nevertheless are ontologically linked to it. As explained below, it seems to me that the ontologically odd status that Pickstock wishes to ascribe to the understanding is more accurately associated with the *imago Dei*.
- 12 The point is made explicitly in the Responsio: "*Si ergo imago Trinitatis divinae debet accipi in anima, oportet illud quod secundum principaliter attendatur quod maxime accedit, prout possibile est, ad repraesentandum speciem divinarum personarum. Divinae autem personae distinguuntur secundum [actualement] processionem verbi a dicente et amoris connectentis utrumque.*"
- 13 In *De Veritate* 10.7 Thomas makes a similar point, distinguishing a purely structural image of God by analogy from an image by conformity.
- 14 In 1.35.2.3 Thomas speaks of the image of God in human beings as referring to a type of process or movement tending toward a particular goal (*motus quidam tendentis in perfectionem*); cf. 2–2.175.1.2 where this goal is identified with the beatific vision, which Thomas describes as being above, but not contrary to human nature (*non est contra naturam, sed supra facultatem naturae*).
- 15 See especially 1.63.6.4: *Sed tamen in angelis...tempus accipitur pro ipsa successione operationum intellectus, vel etiam affectus.*
- 16 *Et ideo. . .liberum arbitrium hominis flexibile est ad oppositum et ante electionem, et post: liberum autem arbitrium angeli est flexibile.. ante electionem, sed non post* (1.64.2; cf. 1.63.6.3). It is on this account that

- Thomas will later argue that angels are incapable of sinning venially (1–2.89.4).
- 17 In this context, it is, of course, important to remember Thomas' insistence that the demons' intellectual nature is preserved even after their fall: "...*etiam in daemonibus data naturalia post peccatum permanserint*" (1.95.1; cf. 1.64.1). For a fuller discussion of the effects of sin on the good of created nature, see 1–2.85.1.
 - 18 It is axiomatic for Thomas that God makes this grace available to all rational creatures. The point remains, however, that no creature could realize the image of God apart from God's prevenient offer of grace.
 - 19 To be sure, the fact that every angel is its own species implies that each realizes the *imago Dei* in a different way, corresponding to its own particular degree of intellectual perfection, but these differences have nothing to do with the movement from potency to act in time that is the source of the different modes of the *imago* within the one species of humankind.
 - 20 For the impossibility of a creature seeing God by its natural powers, see 1.12.4.
 - 21 See in this context, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 90–91.
 - 22 This point can be defended on the grounds that differences between objects that are known are reflected in differences in the internal words by which they are known in a way that disallows extrapolating from one object of knowledge to another (*diversitas obiectorum diversificat speciem verbi et amoris: non enim idem est specie in corde hominis verbum conceptum de lapide et de equo*, 1.93.8).
 - 23 Thus, it is possible to affirm that angels realize this image more perfectly than human beings by virtue of the fact that they understand by immediate intuition rather than through discursive rationality (1.93.3; cf. 1.58.3)—though even here it remains possible that human knowledge of God may be superior to that of angels in terms of its content, if not of the mode in which it is known (3.11.4).
 - 24 In addition to the references to Christ's particular graces already mentioned, see Thomas' remarks on the possibility of seeing God under the conditions of time and space in 1.12.11.
 - 25 Rogers summarizes this peculiar relationship between what we are by nature and what we will be by grace in Aquinas as follows: "1) the [graced] end is 'new' to nature... as elevating it, and yet it is or 'becomes' 2) internal to nature so as to elevate it as *itself*, that is, as an *inner* rather than a violent principle of change." Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 78. Cf. note 21 above.