

Theophany and Indication: Reconciling Augustinian and Palamite Aesthetics¹

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In this paper I propose to examine a highly contentious point of disagreement between Western and Eastern theology, namely the character and the nature of the Old Testament theophanies. I will first present the reasons that elevate such a seemingly minor point into a major theological debate between the Augustine-influenced West and the Augustine-opposing East. Then, I will try to reconcile these two theories of signification: a modern theory of sign (anticipated by Augustine) and a pre-modern understanding of symbol (espoused by Orthodox theology). A scholar who has made some decisive contributions towards such a possible reconciliation is Hans Urs von Balthasar (in his *Herrlichkeit*²). He overcame the impasse of the pseudo-dilemma between Old Testament theophanies as either created or uncreated by developing a more nuanced theory of signification that accommodates and affirms that signs are visible manifestations of the invisible God (cf., Col. 1:15) in a way that re-interprets the meaning of a sign's dual character. In following his insights, I shall suggest that the problem of the experience of God be once again situated within the Christological context where it belongs.

What is at stake here is far more than a difference in Biblical hermeneutics. It is the very possibility of an experience of God that both interpretations seek to safeguard. Each side, however, accuses the other of denying the possibility of an experience of God. For St. Augustine an uncreated manifestation of God would have

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a panel organized by the Augustinian Studies Group at the AAR annual meeting in Washington, DC (2006).

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, VII volumes. Trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, Andrew Louth et al., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998. Hereafter referred to as *H*, followed by the roman numeral of the volume.

made little sense; as uncreated it would also have been imperceptible and that would have undermined the *reality* of the theophanic experience in his eyes. In the East, to describe theophanies as created meant that there are no longer about God but merely about creation. Furthermore, the distinction of essence/energies, central to the interpretation of the theophanic narrative promulgated by St. Gregory Palamas, grounds the entire theological character of the East, for it is upon this distinction that apophatic theology, the theology of icons and sacraments, and also the doctrine of *theosis* depend. Can these two views (and ultimately two different theologies of the experience of God) be reconciled?³

The Christian exegete of the Hebrew Scripture is confronted with a difficult problem in certain passages dealing with the manifestations of God: *who*—that is, which Person of the Holy Trinity—speaks and appears to Moses and Elijah on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19) or on Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3 and 33; 1 Kings, 19)? Closely related to this first question (the who-question) is another one: *how* does God appear in these manifestations, given the many Scriptural interdictions against such an immediate vision of God (in particular, Ex. 33:20)? What is at stake in those two questions is much more than a minor problem of scriptural hermeneutics—in fact, two theological

³ Admittedly, St. Augustine has recently become the “whipping boy” of Eastern Orthodox theologians who like to trace in him most of what they regard as problematic in the Western theological and philosophical tradition. The works of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras are good examples of such an attitude. St. Augustine’s reputation in Byzantine times was rather unquestionable. Photius cites him in his *Mystagogia* and attributes whatever errors are to be found in Augustine’s works to deliberate corruption of his manuscripts by the hand of his epigones (71-72, PG 102-352-53); Mark of Ephesus (Eugenikos) also used arguments by Augustine’s *Soliloquiorum* and *De Trinitate* during the deliberations of the council in Ferrara. For more, see George E. Demacopoulos’ and Aristotle Papanikolaou’s excellent introduction “Augustine and the Orthodox: The West in the East” in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), pp. 11-40. Finally, Reinhard Flogaus’ scholarship has established that St. Gregory Palamas was himself a reader of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* in the Greek translation of Maximus Planudes (c. 1255-1305), so much so as to incorporate Augustine’s analyses and language in certain passages of his *Capita 150*; see, Flogaus, R., “Palamas and Barlaam Revisited: A Reassessment of East and West in the Hesychast Controversy of 14th Century Byzantium” in *SVTQ* 42 (1998): 1-32 and his “Inspiration-Exploitation-Distortion” in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*.

principles of cardinal importance have come to depend upon the way we answer these questions. These principles, which, in my opinion, must be defended, are:

- i. God can be experienced by man; that experience is described as a theophany, and
- ii. Such theophanic experience must also involve the human body.⁴

Theological aesthetics of both Eastern and Western Christian traditions have always affirmed these two statements despite various Platonizing attempts to sell them short by emphasizing a more “spiritual” interpretation (e.g., Origen’s doctrine of the spiritual senses).

Under the light of the Incarnation the affirmation of such statements seems rather unproblematic. Once, however, we transpose this post-Incarnational understanding of revelation to a pre-Incarnational setting, like the one I have set to discuss here, then the difficulties, hermeneutical and theological, of the who- and the how-questions of the Old Testament theophanies become pressing.

The early Fathers of the third and fourth centuries have had what seemed to be a reasonable answer: they suggested that it was the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, who, on account of His future manifestation in the flesh, had also appeared in the Old Testament and spoke to and through the prophets.⁵ This opinion became normative for the first theologians until St. Augustine, in his *De Trinitate*, questioned it. St. Augustine’s break with the tradition was necessitated in order to defend the Logos’ divinity against such subordinationist theologies that would have been ready

⁴ These two points were at stake during the hesychast controversy of the fourteen century. See Panagiotis Christou’s introduction to St. Gregory Palamas’ *Triads in Defence of the Saintly Hesychasts* (in vol. I of St. Gregory Palamas’ *Συγγράμματα*, edited by P. Christou; Thessalonica: 1988, p. 321), hereafter referred to as *Triads*.

⁵ Kari Kloos, *Preparing for the Vision of God: Augustine’s Interpretation of the Biblical Theophany Narratives in Augustinian Studies*, vol. 36, n. 2 (2005), and Edmund Hill, O. P., trans. and ed., introduction to *The Trinity* by Saint Augustine, The Works of Saint Augustine Series (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press).

to demote the Logos precisely on account of His visibility. Invisibility was considered an essential characteristic of the divine nature to such an extent that if the Logos were said to be somehow the “visible God” then that meant, almost by definition, that He must be not fully divine. St. Augustine thinks that ultimately the who-question is not answerable and that we cannot know with certainty whether it was only one of the Persons of the Trinity manifested in these theophanies or the Trinity as a whole.⁶ This uncertainty notwithstanding, however, he decides in favor of a manifestation of God that takes place *through* created signs (“per formas,” “per creaturam,” “significative”). It is this latter assertion that would become rather controversial for the Eastern theologian who, in considering the very same scriptural passages, finds in them support for the distinction between the unknowable and incommunicable essence of God on the one hand, and His *uncreated* energies through which He makes Himself known and even participable on the other.

I. Two Questions, One Answer

As we have seen, there are two different questions regarding the Old Testament theophanies: *who* and *how*. For Christians, the theophanic accounts of the Old Testament pose a puzzling question: which of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity did appear to the prophets?⁷ For the early Fathers (Irenaeus, Justin the Martyr,

⁶ “Finally, to conclude: the first point we undertook to investigate in our threefold division of the field was whether it was the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit who appeared to the fathers in those various created forms; or whether it was sometimes the Father, sometimes the Son, sometimes the Holy Spirit; or whether it was simply the one and only God, that is the trinity itself, without any distinction of persons, as it is called. An examination of what seems a sufficient number of scriptural passages, and a modest and careful consideration of the divine symbols or ‘sacraments’ they contain, all served to teach us, I think, one lesson; that we should not be dogmatic in deciding which person of the tree appeared in any bodily form or likeness to this or that patriarch or prophet, unless the whole context of the narrative provides us with probable indications.” (*De Trinitate*, II, 18, 35, translation by E. Hill).

⁷ All of the Three Persons have served as possible answers to this question. Traditionally, the Father makes Himself known in the OT, for a number of fathers it is the Son who on account of His Incarnation makes Himself visible albeit in tentative form, in the Niceo-Constantinople Creed it is

Tertullian, Hilary and Ambrose) it was an obvious and unanimous decision: it was the Second Person, the Logos, who, on account of His final manifestation in flesh, appeared also in Old Testament. According to this hermeneutical principle, the Old Testament theophanies are precursors and adumbrations of the Incarnation.

St. Augustine avoided answering the *who*-question by focusing instead on the *how*. And for good reason. At his time, to say that the Second Person of the Trinity is somehow the “visible” hypostasis of God would run the serious risk of subordinationism, that is, of undermining His equality with a God whose invisibility was taken to be synonymous with His divinity.⁸ So Augustine focuses on the *how*-question (how did God make Himself manifest to the prophets?). His answer seems to imply that the divine manifestation took place by means of creaturely signs. In this, Augustine follows closely the scriptural accounts which, not only, insist in mentioning as a means of God’s manifestations what we would call “natural”

affirmed that the Holy Spirit “spoke through the Prophets”—does this also mean that He appear to them?

⁸ Cf. *De Trinitate*, II, 3, 15 (p. 107) and 4, 20 (p. 111). It is precisely such historical context that necessitates the theological development in Augustine’s thought, where the OT theophanies become more than Christophanies. Such development, however, cannot, in my opinion, be as overemphasized as to be made into a “revolution” comparable to that of the Reformation that would, in turn, make St. Augustine a proto-Luther of sorts. Therefore, I cannot agree with Michel René Barnes’ following conclusion: “[b]y the year 400 Augustine had come to understand that in this life we were incapable of a vision of God—that we were now incapable of direct knowledge of the truth. This discovery is, of course, dramatized in *Confessions*, and we would expect two works from the same few years in Augustine’s life to offer the same conclusion. Augustine had also come to understand something else about such visions: fundamentally, there was no virtue to them; there was no salvation through them. In short, Augustine had a new understanding not simply of the (im)possibility of a vision of God in this life, but of the significance of any such vision, whether complete or incomplete: whatever joy might be experienced from the sight (or even the near-sight), there was, nonetheless, no salvation in or from that vision. Salvation came from faith...” (“The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt 5:8 in Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology of 400” in *Modern Theology* 19 (2003):329-356, p. 342). If I am reading Barnes correctly, he seems to claim that Augustine denied the vision of God *in toto*, that is, not only with regards to God’s essence (since this would only state the obvious) but also regarding any (sensuous) experience of God. Such an accusation would put Augustine at odds with both the letter and spirit of the Scriptures. Furthermore, one seems to forget that St. Augustine was above all a bishop, i.e. the chief celebrant of the Eucharist and minister of the sacraments by means of which salvation is to be attained. His theology was motivated not by academic but by pastoral concerns, and therefore his remarks—pertinent today as ever—against those proud individuals “who think that they can purify themselves for contemplating God and cleaving to him by their own power and strength of character” (*De Trinitate*, IV, 4, 20 [p.167]) indeed denied any salvific efficiency to such individual visions. And rightly so, inasmuch as salvation remains a matter of participation to the Church’s sacramental life. See also note 13 below.

phenomena—such as earthquakes, fires, clouds and the like—but also affirm the reality of these manifestations. In other words, there were not “visions,” or imaginary apparitions, but real events with real effects, effects that were felt in the realm of our physical world.

This last point is where Augustine’s interpretation parts ways with the Eastern Fathers. The concern in the East was not so much to safeguard the reality of the Old Testament manifestations (which was never contested) but their validity as precisely *theophanic* revelations. The Eastern theologians sought to affirm that it was indeed God who appears to the prophets. That particular concern led them back to the who-question that Augustine had avoided answering. The answer that the East has to offer us, and especially in the context of Palamite theology and its subsequent reception, is quite unexpected. It is not God the Father that appears in the Old Testament theophanies, nor is it God the Son, nor is it God the Holy Spirit but rather the divine energies that manifest God. Now, the divine energies, being divine, are fundamentally uncreated. Here we can see the conflict between the Augustinian and Palamite theology taking shape: for Augustine the means of God’s manifestations is creation touched by God, for Palamas it is rather God appearing to creation. It is interesting to notice how Palamas’ suggested solution instead of solving the problem re-produces the old dichotomy (the root of the problem) between an invisible God and His visible manifestations, by transcribing it into a new modality that of the unknown divine essence and the knowable divine energies. By introducing the solution of divine energies the East too avoids answering the disputed who-question. Or to put it better, Palamas’ answer is not an answer. Here we begin to see how the two questions are interrelated and interwoven, so one cannot be answered without also answering the other. Either both are answered or none.

I would venture to suggest that there is only one answer for both questions. It is easier to start with the second question, the how-question. Both Eastern and Western theologies would agree that the means by which God manifests Himself are something more than the natural phenomena themselves. We often see written that Augustine takes these theophanies to have happened by means of merely created “signs” or “symbols”—that the theophanic events themselves were nothing more than modulations of creation; and it would seem so with good reason, for Augustine himself employs such a terminology.⁹

It seems, though, that part of the problem with Augustine’s exegesis is that his critics read into his texts *their* distinction of created/uncreated—for the Eastern Orthodox, indeed, the fundamental distinction in most theological discourse. In doing so, however, Augustine’s *creatura* becomes translated as “created.” I would like, however, to suggest that his concern might not have been that of clarifying whether the theophanies were created or uncreated at all, but rather of affirming their reality, therefore a translation of *creatura* that might be closer to the intentions of the Saint would be “real”; in other words, a palpable, experience-able event that was addressed to our physical being and not only *ad mente*.¹⁰ Read in this way, Palamas could not

⁹ See for example: “creaturae modos”; “per subjectam corpoream creaturam”; “per subjectam commutabilem et visibilem creaturam”; “per similes formas...creaturam”; “per creaturam commutabilem”; “per illas creaturae formas.”

¹⁰ This double distinction, between real and imaginary, on the one hand and real and physical on the other is not unknown to the Greek East. A sixth century defence of the saintly apparitions, written by a certain presbyter of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople by the name of Eustratius (Eustratii presbyteri Constantinopolitani, *De Statu Animarum Post Mortem*, edited by Peter Van Deun, Corpus Christianorum series Graeca vol. 60, Turnhout: Brepols, 2006) introduces the terminology of ἀληθινάς [true or real] manifestations as opposed to both φυσικάς [physical] and φανταστικάς [imaginary] (2005-2020). This is a useful distinction, I think, to which I intend to return below since both the concern of our discussion here and that Eustratius’ text is similar. It is characteristic, however, that although Eustratius is employing the terminology of *energeiai*, he avoids the classification of the saintly manifestations as either created or uncreated. On Eustratius’ text see, Nicholas Constatas, “An Apology for the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity: Eustratius Presbyter of Constantinople, *On the State of Souls after Death* (CPG 7522)” in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10:2 (2002), pp. 267-285.

agree more with Augustine. For it was precisely the reality of the theophanic experience that Barlaam had denied¹¹.

Furthermore, Augustine's insistence to write "*per creaturam*" indicates, I believe, his understanding of the character of the theophany not as created but *through* the created. Of course, whatever appears through the created order cannot be itself created. The light that passes through the glass of my window cannot be of the same nature as its medium because it could never be able to go through it. Similarly, the revelation granted by God appears through the created order precisely because it is not itself created.

Finally, what has not been emphasized sufficiently, I think, is a key term that Augustine uses at least once with regard to the theophanies: "*sacramenta*" (DT, II, 35). Under the influence of the theory of signs from *De Docta Christiana*, we often tend to take this discussion of the *De Trinitate* as also implying a similar signification theory. Are the earthquakes, the light, the fire, and the rest signs—that is, mere signifiers of God? Augustine's answer is clearly negative. They are more than signs. They are "sacraments." As neither the oil of unction nor the water of the holy water—not to mention the bread and the wine of the Eucharist—are mere "signs" or "symbols" of God but they effect God's grace, so too those theophanic phenomena of the Old Testament are neither mere signs nor symbols but efficacious *indications* in which He Who is indicated makes Himself present therein.

II. Indication

It is necessary, therefore, to begin our examination of these theophanies by distinguishing between two distinct forms of phenomenality: a) signification and b) indication. In signification, the sign or symbol is merely a *locum tenens* of what it

¹¹ Chiefly in his work *On Light* (Περί φωτός), see Christou's introduction on the *Triads*, pp. 321-3.

stands for: it is, in other words, nothing more than a *vestigium* or a trace of an absent referent. The formal relationship between signifier and signified—an arbitrary relation as de Saussure has shown—does not implicate the latter in the former. Indication, on the other hand, not only evokes what indicates but “entangles” (*Verflechtung*) what is indicated in such a way that the suprasensible is somehow embodied in the sensible and the transcendent in the immanent. This “entanglement” is properly speaking a chiasmus, a crisscrossed interlacing.

We attribute that nuanced understanding of indication to phenomenology, specifically to Husserl, who first analyzed the intricacies of indication in his *Logical Investigations*, and to Merleau-Ponty, who, in his unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*, showed us the far-reaching implications of such analysis. The phenomenological concept of indication (*Anzeige*) was introduced to theological discourse by von Balthasar, whose theological aesthetics presuppose it insofar as he distinguishes between two distinct modes of sensibility, one directed at the “idolatrous” sign and the other enabled by the iconic form. The latter, when applied specifically to the Old Testament manifestations, assumes the more precise appellation of “indication” (*Anzeige*, *H*, VI, 34-5). It is important to follow von Balthasar closer in these first pages of the six volume of his *magnus opus*, because it is there that he offer us most succinctly an answer to the how-question of the Old Testament theophanies. But first, the problem:

But suppose that these pious attempts of humanity to penetrate into the region of the inscrutable are all pushed aside by a contrary movement whereby the Abyss and Ocean of all reality, on its own initiative, presses in upon humanity in order to disclose itself, in order to reveal itself as ‘what’ it ‘is’: if this *could* happen, how *would it have* to happen? (*H* VI, 31, emphasis in the original)

The question seems to run into an impasse, for either such an experience would be possible, but as such it would have to take place within the limits of possibility (that

is, as something sensory), or it would have to surpass these limits (by remaining suprasensible) and thus be impossible and imperceptible. The either/or of the impasse is transformed into a both/and once the theophanic event is seen through the prism of indication:

The theophanies, of which the most important takes place on Sinai, are intended to be understood as overwhelming events in which the living God becomes present. On the one hand, they occur in such a way that the sensory sphere that belongs essentially to man is brought into play: an experience takes place whereby God is externally ‘seen’ and ‘heard’. On the other hand, however, the person involved clearly understands that the sensory manifestation is the *indication*, as it were a signal or a symbol, for the fact that the absolute, spiritual and invisible Mightiness is here present, comparable to the way a person catches his interlocutor’s attention before he begins to speak with him. (*H VI*, 34)

God’s self-revelation neither scorns the physical world nor shatters the human senses; indeed, His revelation must involve the human body and its senses. On the other hand, what the senses experience is by no means exhausted by them but it remains inexhaustible, excessive, saturated with intuition; thus man knows that he is in the presence of Him who is beyond experience and comprehension and whose sole experience is precisely the realization that one is not comprehending, but rather comprehended by what seeks to comprehend (cf. Philippians, 3:12). It is the experience of an endless indication, that experience itself—the experience of a counter-experience—is the only indication of God, and it is made possible as experience only insofar as it is thus indicated.¹²

When God reveals Himself to man, when the uncreated enters into contact with the created, that encounter can leave neither the Creator nor creation unaffected. In each case a change has taken place. This change is viewed differently from each of the two “sides,” so to speak, of the point of contact. From the side of God, what is

¹² See Kevin Hart’s introduction in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, edited by Kevin Hart (University of Notre Dame, 2007).

revealed and communicated is indeed God and thus uncreated, but from the side of the creation, this same revelation is manifested through and by means of the physical and the material. Every revelation, from the manifestations to the patriarchs and the prophets in the Old Testament, to the Trinitarian theophanies of the New, to the sacraments of the Church, takes place according to a Chalcedonian duality that needs, by all means and regardless of its paradoxical and antinomian character, to be maintained and upheld. Every revelation involves both orders, created and uncreated, for no revelatory event and no divine manifestation could ever surpass or overcome the Incarnation. To say anything less would be a form of phenomenological Arianism and thus the revelation in question would not be worth its name. On the other hand, to say anything more would amount to espousing some sort of a phenomenological monophysitism.

Does this, then, mean that, following Barlaam, we reject the uncreated nature of the light that the hesychasts of the controversy by the same name had claimed to see? As St. Gregory Palamas rightly realized, Barlaam's refusal to recognize the light of mystical experience as uncreated amounts to a denial of all mystical experience *in toto*, and thus ultimately his position is a form of Arianism. On the other hand, such a mystical experience can never become completely disassociated from a physical locus, be it in the form of the medium through which the uncreated manifests itself, or through the locale at which the manifestation takes place, or the channel through which the manifestation is received. I do not know of any passage in St. Gregory's corpus where he speaks of an "uncreated" earthquake or an "uncreated" thunder with regard to the Old Testament theophanies. Instead, it is certain Neopalamite theologians who are willing to radicalize St. Gregory's theology of the uncreated

energies by pushing it to the other extreme of the theological spectrum, that of a Eucharistic monism that ultimately dispenses with both Christ and Church.¹³

In another sense, St. Gregory seems to go too far, when, for example, he denies that the light of the Transfiguration—his favorite Scriptural narrative—is not sensible.

Were an irrational animal happened to be present on the mountain [Tabor] would it have sensed that light brighter than the sun? I don't think so. For nor the glory of the Lord that shone upon the shepherds at the nativity of Christ was written to have been perceived by the flocks. How is then possible that a sensible light is not seen by the eyes of those animals that can see the sensible? If the light [on Mt. Tabor] was seen by the human sensible eyes it was seen insofar as they exceed those of the animals. In which way do they exceed them? In what other way than by the fact that through the human eyes it is the mind that sees? If not by the sensible capacity—for then even the animals would have been able to see it—then by the intelligible capacity that comprehends through the senses; or rather not even that, for every eye, particular those nearby, would have seen the light that was brighter than the sun. If, then, it was not seen not even through the intelligible capacity, then that light is not strictly speaking sensible. And if it is not sensible, it is eternal; for the divine light, which is also called in many passages “the glory of God,” is without beginning or end. Therefore, it is not sensible [αἰσθητόν]. (*Triads*, 1, 3, 27)

We have to ask ourselves what is the spirit of a passage like this: does Palamas mean to say that the light of the Transfiguration was imperceptible altogether and thus deny the fact that Peter, James and John had an experience of it or rather is he keen to show that the light that shone through Christ was not a *physical* light like that of the sun and thus uncreated? In our opinion it is rather to the physical (i.e., natural) character of that light that Palamas objects and not to its sensibility per se. Indeed, Eustratius' reading of the same passage affirms the reality of Christ's transformation as well as

¹³ This is also John D. Zizioulas's assessment. For example: “It is at this point that I disagree with Lossky and the Neopalmites, who tend to exhaust God's soteriological work with the divine energies and undermine the involvement of the *divine persons* in salvation. Consequently, I disagree also with anyone who would interpret the Cappadocians and Palamas in the same way and draw conclusions from such an interpretation.” (*Communion and Otherness*, [London: T&T Clark, 2006] p. 139, n. 80). Every experience of God that might fall under the category of theophany or epiphany does not constitute a parallel option alongside the sacraments of the Church but rather it is subordinated to them as an effect to its cause.

the apparition of Moses and Elijah so strongly that he even advises against an “allegorical” reading of the passage in question.¹⁴

One might ask: isn't the sensible also therefore the physical and thus by rejecting the latter, the former is also rejected? To see why this need not be the case, let us ask what do we see when we see a painting by van Gogh? First and foremost we see van Gogh's style, that is, we recognize that painting as van Gogh's work, which means that what is most visible is precisely the invisible (or the non-physical), for the style of a painting is not itself something physical. Style—that uniqueness through which the painting presents itself—is neither the theme nor the color. It is not the brushstrokes or the lines, but something that exceeds the physical dimension of the work altogether. In fact, were we to look only at the painting as a physical object (the wood of the frame, the cloth of the canvas smeared with colors, etc) we would render the painting as painting invisible. Let us ask by employing Palamas' terminology: is style created or uncreated?

The example of the painting showed us that the phenomenon is not a thing, it is much more than a thing. But, against a Kantian understanding that would make the phenomenon a limiting and limited experience of the thing (since things have always a noumenal, that is, an unrevealed and hidden side), phenomenology believes that things do not reserve themselves but show themselves fully—indeed in such a way that their appearance could exceed the limits of the created.

That said, as the style of a painting is not identifiable with the painting qua object, similarly, style cannot exist apart from the physical dimension of the painting. Thus, a revelation, even a divine revelation, cannot bypass the sensible. It makes no sense to suppose that the Creator wills to manifest Himself to His creation by

¹⁴ *De Statu Animarum Post Mortem*, 507-537 (see note 10 above).

disregarding that very creation to which He wishes to reveal Himself. If the ultimate revelation of God in Christ conceded so much so as to assume a human body, what gives us the right to entertain the possibility of a revelation that would dispense with the sensible altogether? Neither in the present age of *homo viator*, nor even in the *eschata* would God surpass the revelation of the Incarnation:

The Biblical experience of God in both the Old and the New Testaments is characterized as a whole by the fact that the essentially “invisible” (Jn. 1:18) and “unapproachable” (1 Tim. 6:16) God enters the sphere of creaturely visibility, not by means of intermediary beings, but in himself. (...) This structure of Biblical revelation should neither be sold short nor overplayed. (...) [I]t could be overplayed by the view that all that God has instituted for our salvation, culminating in his Incarnation, is in the end only something preliminary which must finally be transcended by either a mystical or an eschatologico-celestial immediacy that would surpass and make superfluous the form of salvation, or, put concretely, the humanity of Jesus Christ. This last danger is not so far removed from the Platonising currents of Christian spirituality as one would hope or want to believe: the impulsive search for an immediate vision of God that would no longer be mediated by the Son of Man, that is, by the whole of God’s form in the world is the conscious or unconscious basis for many eschatological speculations. (...) The Incarnation *is* the eschaton and, as such, is unsurpassable. (*HI*, 301-2)

III. Tabor: Between Sinai and Horeb

In the foregoing discussion I attempted to show how the dual character of indication answers the how-question concerning the mode of the theophanies. We need to turn now to the correlate who-question and see in which way indication helps us to answer the identity of the Person thereby revealed.

“Now, every person who reveals himself” von Balthasar writes “by speaking and acting necessarily discloses as well something about his *nature*” (*H*, VI, 53-4, emphasis in the original). Like a painting, for example, which we recognize as by van Gogh or by Rembrandt not because we *see* in it the painter’s essence but “something about his nature” in particular the “how” of his nature, similarly a theophany does not communicate God’s essence or being but the “how” of His existence. Notice how von

Balthasar grounds the act of self-revelation on one condition: personhood. “Every person” he writes, for it is only a person that can reveal himself. Self-revelation is personal, that is, it cannot be initiated except by presupposing a free agent who wills to make himself known and secondly, it cannot be materialized unless in such a way that reveals the personal mode of being of that agent. Indeed, when God reveals Himself He first and foremost reveals His personhood, that is, He reveals that He is a personal being who wills to make Himself known but He also reveals “something about his nature:” not the whatness (essence) but the howness (existence), as a Trinity of Persons.

However, this also lies at the root of our problem. It is precisely because God reveals Himself as a community of three Persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—that his theophanic manifestations in the Old Testament pose to us the question: which person of the Holy Trinity does appear to Moses and Elijah?¹⁵

The answer, in my view, is to be found in a later episode from the narrative of the New Testament, and in particular in the story of Christ’s transfiguration—in many ways a canonical text for the Christian understanding of theophanies. The episode, as recorded by the synoptics (Matt. 17; Mark 9; Luke 9), presents itself not only as a parallel to those theophanies in the Old Testament that we have been examining but as their summit and culmination. Between Mount Sinai and Mount Horeb, the evangelists of the New Covenant seem to claim, stands Mount Tabor.

Christ’s Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is a “biblical” theophany, a revelation within the revelation, so to speak, where Christ the revealer reveals Himself

¹⁵ I leave aside the manifestation to Abraham (Genesis 18) for two reasons: a) in that instance the theophany does not employ some “natural” phenomena (such as earthquakes, thunders, light and the like) and b) the question of identity would seem rather unproblematic in that instance, given that Abraham sees “three men” (18:2) whom he addresses as “my Lord” in the singular, and thus Patristic exegesis has reasonably identified as the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity (Augustine agrees here with his predecessors, *De Trinitate*, II, 4, 19-22 (pp. 111-3)).

by revealing His Father and His Holy Spirit. The “folly” of the incarnation, that is, the flesh of the Nazarene man ceases for a moment its double effect of revealing while hiding and of hiding while revealing and simply radiates with divinity. The event takes place on a mountain and thus it is made to parallel, as a *typos*, the previous theophanies on Horeb and Sinai.¹⁶ In addition, Moses and Elijah appear offering their witness as to the identity of the One revealed: this is the same God who appeared to the Prophets and the Fathers of the Old Covenant. The visible presence of Moses and Elijah is also indicative of Mt Sinai (associated with Moses) and Mt Carmel (associated with Elijah). Indeed, there was a Haggadic interpretation of Isaiah where it is said that the Messiah will come when God brings together three mountains that demarcate not only Israel’s geography but also its history: Sinai, Carmel, Tabor (*Yalkut Shimoni* on Isaiah, 391). However, Tabor reveals not only the Messiah but God himself: God the Father (in the thunderous voice), God the Son (by the unbearable light), God the Holy Spirit (in the luminous cloud). Each of the Persons of the Holy Trinity manifests Himself in a synecdochal way, or to use a properly Trinitarian term, perichoretically. That means that the Father and the Holy Spirit appear by means of the transformation of the Son but the sonship of the Son is witnessed by the voice of the Father and the “glory” (the cloud) of the Holy Spirit. Father and Spirit are indicated in Christ and the true identity of Christ indicated by Them. One Person appears (in this case the Son) but He appears in such a way that the other two Persons are indicated in Him. It is a special mode of appearance, for the Person Who appears does so not only as Himself but also as an indication for the

¹⁶ Other structural details follow suit: only selected few ascend the mountain (Ex.24:13-14); on their descent are met with a crowd (Ex.32:17); the cloud and the voice through the cloud (Ex. 24:16, 40:34). Peter seems to have understood the event precisely in terms of Exodus, hence his response to “make three tabernacles” [σκηναί], the very term used in LXX translation of Exodus 25:9.

Persons who do not, strictly speaking, appear (not directly at least) and whose appearance is indicated by the revealer.

Therefore, both the “how” and the “who” questions can be answered by one and the same answer summarized under the concept of indication. To the question that asks in what way does God appear in the theophanies of Old and New Testaments, we answer as an indication, in the very sense that we have explained at some length above. To the question that asks which of the Persons of the Holy Trinity appears in such divine manifestations, we answer that all Three appear by means of indication, and insofar as each of Them is indicated by the other.

To say that all Three persons of the Holy Trinity appeared in the one who is both revealed and revealer (the incarnate Son) through being indicated by Him does not mean that their hypostatic distinctions are somehow mitigated or conflated. On the contrary: indication preserves the distinct hypostases of the Trinity for only if the Father is not the Son can the Son indicate the Father. Revelation cannot be ascribed as the work or the activity of one particular Person for then only that Person would be revealed and therefore we could not any more speak properly of a divine revelation.¹⁷

¹⁷ In many instances throughout *De Trinitate* St. Augustine affirms that the theophanies (both in the Old and in the New Testaments) are the inseparable work of all three Persons. See for example, Book I, 7 and Book II, 18 (both passages made a direct reference to the Transfiguration). The most decisive text, however, is to be found at the end of Book IV (30) where St. Augustine writes “I will say however with absolute confidence that Father and Son and Holy Spirit, God the creator, of one and the same substance, the almighty three, act inseparably.” Then, he goes on explaining that if their manifestation seems distinguishable to us this is only because of our temporal existence (“just as our words which consist of material sounds can only name Father and Son and Holy Spirit, with their own proper intervals of time, which the syllable of each word take up, spaced off from each other by a definite separation.”) Apart from linguistic examples, St. Augustine brings his favorite example of the trichotomy between memory, understanding and will to show that, although each appears distinct, each one involves all three. St. Gregory Palamas, as well, attributes every divine activity (and revelation is such) to all three Persons of the Trinity in common: “each and every of these activities is common [κοινῆ] to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit and in every of these good and divine volitions it is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit who is the essential, and life-giving and illuminating activity and power” (*One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 91, Christou ed., vol. V, p. 88).

IV. Eschatology

An aspect of this debate that has been little accounted for, if not completely overlooked is eschatology. For Palamas the light that shone on Mt Tabor, the mystical experiences of the saints throughout the history of the Church and the beatific vision of God at the eschaton is one and the same event (ἐν καὶ τὸ αὐτό, *Triads*, 1, 3, 43). Eschatology is implicated in the theophanous events in a two-fold way: *proleptically* and *retrospectively*.

Our enjoyment of God's vision is a demand that both Scripture and tradition make upon theology. It is indeed our hope that at the end of times we shall see God "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12) and "as He is" (1 John 3:2); and we confess that this will happen by means of our bodies (on account of the resurrection of the bodies). One could object that the state of the resurrected bodies will be different from our bodies as we know them in the present.¹⁸ Perhaps. Nevertheless, the transfigured human body, by being akin to the resurrected body, can experience and indeed *has* experienced proleptically and also in all reality that eschatological glory.¹⁹ Thus Palamas' reply that the hesychasts, through their ascesis, have strived to accomplish precisely this: the overcoming of the present limitations of the body as to experience, as if in preview, the eschatological vision.

However, such *pre*-eschatological vision of God is precisely made possible only retrospectively by eschaton itself—that is by the kingdom—which is to come and yet always coming, flowing, as it were, into history. At the moment of Christ's Transfiguration the eschaton is not anticipated, if by this we mean simply "expected," but rather must be revealed—as if the veil of time is momentarily lifted so as to allow

¹⁸ See St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XXII, 29.

¹⁹ Kalistos Timothy Ware, "The Transfiguration of the Body" in *Sacrament and Image*, A.M Allchin, ed., (London: The Fellowship of S. Alban And S. Sergius, 1967).

us to take a peek at the kingdom behind it, which we, from this side of the veil still await, but which itself already exists and unfolds. Furthermore, this already unfolding kingdom is a reality active in our historical reality insofar as it manifests itself in such moments as the Transfiguration on Mt Tabor. Similarly, the Transfiguration, in its turn, was itself retroactively reaching back in history to those Old Testament theophanies. Palamas clearly reads in the Old Testament theophanies the *results* of Christ's transfiguration on Mt Tabor and he considers the latter, in turn, as the result of the final and eschatological vision (*Triad* I, 3, 38, p. 449). We need to remind ourselves here of the retrospective effects of the Incarnation that the Fathers of the second and third centuries took as the basis of their exegesis. In assuming our nature, Christ also gave us the potential of participating in His.

This holds, then, as a general principle of any theological aesthetics, of which the Old Testament theophanies cannot be an exemption: there is no revelation without a transfigurative sanctification (deification) and there is no deification without revelation.²⁰ The revealer always gives something of Himself (more accurately: He gives Himself) to those whom He reveals Himself. The result is an exchange of capacities (ἀντίδοσις). That was all too well known to St. Augustine, who in narrating his ecstatic *Himmelflug* in the garden of Ostia—the third and last garden that would play an eminent and highly symbolic role in his *Confessions*—describes how, ascending from “the bodily pleasure” to “the whole compass of material things in their various degrees” and from there to “the heavens” and the planets until, moving ever higher, he passed from the meditation of “our own souls” to the contemplation of “that Wisdom by which all these things that we know are made, all things that ever

²⁰ “The doctrine of the beholding and perceiving (*Wahrnehmen*) of the beautiful (‘aesthetics’ in the sense of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) and the doctrine of the enrapturing power of the beautiful are complementarily structured, since no one can really behold who has not also already been enraptured, and no one can be enraptured who has not already perceived.” *HI*, p. 10; see also p. 125.

have been and all that are yet to be.” Then, suddenly, “and while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it.”²¹

²¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, IX