

Mystical Theology in Aquinas and Maritain

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Recently, some Thomists have offered new understandings of “science” (*scientia*) and the relationship between philosophy and theology. John Jenkins, for example, offers a revisionary account of Aquinas’s conception of science, and provides us with a new understanding of revealed theology.¹ Despite these developments, however, there remains a rarely challenged view, namely that there are only *two* kinds of theology in Aquinas: natural theology and revealed theology. Is it possible that there is a third and higher kind of theology in St. Thomas Aquinas—a theology of mystical experience?

Prima facie, the answer seems to be “no” because the Common Doctor only speaks of two kinds of theology: natural and revealed.² The first Thomas calls *scientia divina*, taking his lead from Aristotle;³ it begins in sense knowledge and studies being as being (*ens commune*) using the natural light of reason. God is not the primary subject of this science, but this science studies God because God is the cause of the being of creatures. Thomas engages in natural theology when he proves things about God in the first three parts of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.⁴ The second kind of theology Thomas calls *sacra doctrina*; it begins in faith, proving things about God from principles that have been divinely revealed.

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¹ John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

² Aquinas, *Expositio super Librum Boethii de Trinitate*, Q. 2, a. 2, resp., trans. Armand A. Maurer in *Faith, reason and theology* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), p. 41; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 2, ad. 2.

³ In *Metaphysics*, VI, c. 1 (1026a19), Aristotle uses the term *theology*.

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c. 9, 3 and cf. IV, c.1, 9.

Not only does Thomas not discuss any other type of theological science,⁵ he says that revealed theology is the highest science there is⁶ and the highest wisdom.⁷ Even God's knowledge, although it is a higher form of knowledge, does not properly speaking constitute a science because it is not discursive. Moreover, Thomas says that the principles used in revealed theology come from God's very own knowledge which He shares with the blessed;⁸ as there is no higher knowledge than God's, what would a higher theology use as principles?

Despite these difficulties, and by relying on Thomas's own principles, I argue that another type of theology is implied by Thomas's views. I then briefly outline the nature of this science, which I propose to call "mystical theology," and discuss both how it is distinct from other sciences and what place it has among the other sciences. Jacques Maritain also discussed mystical theology drawing upon Aquinas, St. Teresa of Ávila, and St. John of the Cross, in his famous work *The Degrees of Knowledge*.⁹ Later on I evaluate Maritain's conception of mystical theology, discussing some of its merits and deficiencies.¹⁰

I

The traditional interpretation of Thomas's conception of science is that he followed Aristotle's lead both in regards to his understanding of the nature of a science and in how the sciences are distinguished from each other. (This view has been challenged by Jenkins, but his view does not jeopardize my conclusions.¹¹) Aristotle had listed several conditions of a science, some

⁵ Thomas does mention civil theology (*theologia civilis*) and mythical theology (*theologia fabularis*), when discussing the pagans (*Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 94, a. 1, resp.). He also discusses *theologia mystica* (*Expositio in Librum Dionysii de divinis nominibus*, 1, 3), but this is not considered by him to be a science separate from revealed theology.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 5, resp.

⁷ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 6, resp.

⁸ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, resp.

⁹ Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

¹⁰ It is important to note that Maritain discusses two types of mysticism, supernatural and natural, in *The Degrees of Knowledge*. Here I shall discuss his view of supernatural mysticism. For his views concerning natural mysticism see Curtis L. Hancock, "Maritain on Mystical Contemplation" in *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend* ed. Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 257-69. As Hancock notes, Maritain also discussed mysticism in some of his other works; for a list of these see *ibid.*, n. 1.

¹¹ *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, chaps. 2-3.

of which are: it must use demonstrative reasoning (i.e., valid, deductive, syllogistic reasoning, where the premises are known to be true); it must be of the universal; it must be knowledge of cause, and it must produce certain knowledge.¹² Thomas did not consider all of these necessary conditions, and considered the first and last to be necessary and sufficient. As a result, Thomas called revealed theology a science because it uses demonstrative reasoning, and because it produces certain knowledge. In the *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, he succinctly described the nature of science saying: “The nature of science consists in this, that from things already known conclusions about other matters follow of necessity.”¹³ This is the sense in which Thomas generally used the term *scientia*, although at times he did use *scientia* to refer to various types of non-scientific knowledge (e.g., the knowledge God has, and one of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit). Both natural and revealed theology are *scientiae* in the first sense, i.e., certain, demonstrative knowledge.

Science, strictly speaking, exists only in the mind of a knower. It is a certain quality of the intellect (*habitus*) that disposes a person to act in a certain way. Thomas separates the different sciences according to the formal objects they study.¹⁴ For example, in regard to the speculative sciences (metaphysics, mathematics, and physics), Thomas says: “Each [of the speculative] science[s] treats of one part of being in a special way distinct from that in which metaphysics treats of being.”¹⁵ It is the formal object that gives unity to a science and thus, with respect to revealed theology, Thomas says:

Holy Teaching [*sacra doctrina*] should be declared a single science. For you gauge the unity of a habit and its training by its object, and this should be taken precisely according to the formal interest engaged and not according to what is materially involved; for instance the object of the sense of sight is a thing as having colour, a formal quality exhibited by men, donkeys, and stones in common. Now since Holy Scripture looks at things in that they are divinely revealed, as already noted, all things whatsoever that can be divinely revealed share in the same formal objective meaning. On that account they are included under holy teaching as under a single science.¹⁶

Therefore, if we can discover a formal object that is not treated in the other sciences and from which certain knowledge can be acquired, we have another science. This is what I maintain occurs in mystical theology.

¹² Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I, cc. 2-14 (71b8-79a33), especially 71b17-73a32.

¹³ *Expositio super Librum Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 2, resp.

¹⁴ *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 54, a. 2, ad 1; cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 2.

¹⁵ *Expositio super Librum Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 1, ad. 6.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3, resp.

II

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas says that a person can know God in three ways:

There is...in man a threefold knowledge of things divine. Of these, the first is that in which man, by the natural light of reason, ascends to a knowledge of God through creatures. The second is that by which the divine truth—exceeding the human intellect—descends on us in the manner of revelation, not, however, as something made clear to be seen, but as something spoken in words to be believed. The third is by which the human mind will be elevated to gaze perfectly upon the things revealed.¹⁷

From this it seems that there are only three ways a person can know God, and that only two of them are available in this life. The formal object of the first way of knowing God is God as known through the being of creatures. Thomas is fond of quoting Paul, “[God’s] invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.”¹⁸ The formal object of the second way of knowing God is God as known through a proposition that is known to be divinely revealed.¹⁹ Hence, God as known by reason, arguing from sensible world, constitutes the formal object of *natural theology*, and God as known by faith constitutes the formal object of *revealed theology*. In the third way of knowing God, God is known through the light of glory, which occurs in the next life.²⁰

¹⁷ *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, c. 1, 5.

¹⁸ *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* 1:20.

¹⁹ In *Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 1, a. 1, Thomas distinguishes between the material object of faith, and the formal object of faith. The material object of faith concerns the content of faith (e.g., that God is triune). Concerning this distinction, Thomas notes that “First, from the perspective of the reality believed in, . . . the [Formal] object of faith is something non-composite, i.e., the very reality about which one has faith [i.e., God]. Second, from the perspective of the one believing, . . . the [Material] object of faith is something composite in the form of a proposition.” *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, resp. The formal object of faith is the First Truth (i.e., God), because we assent to an article of the faith “only because it has been revealed by God, and so faith rests upon the divine truth itself as the medium of its assent.” *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 1, resp. For a contemporary discussion concerning the material and formal objects of faith, with some discussion of Thomas, see Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 187-90.

²⁰ “Our intellect is not equipped by its nature with the ultimate disposition looking to that form which is truth; otherwise it would be in possession of truth from the beginning. Consequently, when it does finally attain to truth, it must be elevated by some disposition newly conferred on it. And this we call the *light of glory*, whereby our intellect is perfected by

So it seems there are only two kinds of theology, because even though, according to Thomas, we can know God in the Beatific vision, after this life, this is not discursive knowledge; rather it is a simple and immediate apprehension. The blessed in heaven cannot derive anything from this vision because everything they know is known through the simple apprehension of God face to face and not discursively. But science is discursive knowledge, and so it seems that there can only be two kinds of theology: natural and revealed.

Thomas does hold, however, that some persons (e.g., prophets such as Moses and St. Paul) have had a partial glimpse of God in this world.²¹ Moreover, in the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, he discusses another way we can know God in this life. There he writes about how the soul can be united to God in this life through the love of the Holy Spirit. He describes this as a kind of experiential knowledge of God (*quasi experimentalis*).²² Now this is different than knowing God in the three ways

God, who alone by His very nature has this form properly as His own.... Of course, we shall never comprehend Him as He comprehends Himself. This does not mean that we shall be unaware of some part of Him, for He has no parts. It means that we shall not know Him as perfectly as He can be known, since the capacity of our intellect for knowing cannot equal His truth and so cannot exhaust His knowability. God's knowability or truth is infinite, whereas our intellect is finite. But His intellect is infinite, just as His truth is; and so He alone knows Himself to the full extent that He is knowable." Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, I, cc. 105-6, trans. Cyril Vollert, *Light of Faith: the Compendium of theology* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1993), pp. 118-19; my emphasis.

²¹ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 174, a. 4, resp.; cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 175, a. 3, ad 3.

²² "[To the third (objection) it should be said that not any kind of knowledge suffices for the understanding of the mission, but only that which is received from some gift appropriate to the Person (of the Trinity), through which we are joined to God, according to the proper mode of that Person, namely through love, when the Holy Spirit is given (to someone). Whence that knowledge is, as it were, experiential] *Ad tertium dicendum, quod non qualiscumque cognitio sufficit ad rationem missionis, sed solum illa quae accipitur ex aliquo dono appropriato personae, per quod efficitur in nobis conjunctio ad Deum, secundum modum proprium illius personae, scilicet per amorem, quando Spiritus sanctus datur. Unde cognitio ista est quasi experimentalis....* [To the fifth (objection) it should be said that although knowledge is appropriate to the Son (i.e., Christ), nevertheless that gift from which experiential knowledge is had, which is necessary for the mission, is not necessarily appropriate to the Son, but sometimes (is appropriate) to the Holy Spirit as love] *Ad quintum dicendum, quod quamvis cognitio approprietur Filio, tamen donum illud ex quo sumitur experimentalis cognitio, quae necessaria est ad missionem, non necessario appropriatur Filio, sed quandoque Spiritui sancto, sicut amor.*" Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, I, 14, 2, a 2 ad 3 and 15, 2 ad 5, ed. P. Mandonnet and M. F. Moos, vol. 1. (Paris, 1929-1947), pp. 326 and 342; my translations. Like *ratio*, *missio* is difficult to translate by one word for all occasions. I have translated it by "mission" but this needs explanation. "*Missio*" for Aquinas is a rich term capturing several things at once. From one perspective it refers to Christ's being sent (*mitto*, *mittere*) to us to save us and to speak God the Father's truth to us. From another perspective it

enumerated above. The formal object of such an act of knowing is God as experienced by the person, though it is only a partial experience, as we shall clarify later.²³ This gives us insight into the formal object of a third and higher kind of theology, which I propose to call “mystical theology” because its formal object is God as experienced by the person in mystical union.²⁴

refers to the indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity within us through grace. And this is related to the mission of the Church, which is to preach the Gospel. For example, St. Paul was given that grace (that is, *missio*). For more on this see *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 43, and the two questions referred to above. Also note that Thomas uses the term “*cognitio*” above. Scott MacDonald warns us that we should not equate *cognitio* with knowledge since Aquinas says we can have false cognition. See his “Theory of Knowledge” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 162-63, 188 n13. However, the awareness of the presence of God through the love of the Holy Spirit (or through some other kind of intuition, for that matter) would be *cognitio* of a simple essence and hence not subject to error as Aquinas himself says in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 17, a. 3, resp.

²³ God as known in mystical experience is a direct, though partial, type of knowledge. For example, when a person is aware of the presence of God in mystical experience this is direct knowledge because God’s presence is not known through concepts or sense images. Because we are not aware of God’s presence all of the time He must give us a *special light* which allows us to be aware of His presence. (The possibility of such a light is left open in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 89, a. 1, ad. 3 where Thomas holds that when the soul is separated from the body it knows by sharing in a divine light just as other immaterial substances do, though in an inferior mode. If the soul has this potency in its nature then it is possible that even while it is joined to the body God can grant it that light it has when separated from the body.) Insofar as this light allows us to be aware of God’s presence, the knowledge we have is direct; insofar as this light is lesser than the light of glory, which we receive in the Beatific vision, the knowledge we have is partial (cf. n. 20 above). We are also aware of the changes God is effecting in us in mystical experience. And it is from these experiences (along with our awareness of His being present) that we derive the propositions that are used in mystical theology. Hence we have an insight of a different and deeper order into the fact that God is love when we experience the Love that He outpours to us in mystical experience, than when we simply assent to but do not experience that “God is love.” This should also prepare us to see that while the Beatific vision may be inarticulable because God is purely simple, discussing the effects God causes in us in mystical experience *are* articulable. That is, they, at the very least, admit of some explanation. This is why it is profitable to study what St. John of the Cross has to say about mystical experience of God—because we can gain some insight; if mystical experience were completely inarticulable such a study of St. John would be in vain.

²⁴ The term “mystical theology” comes from the title of a work written by the Pseudo-Dionysius. However, what the Pseudo-Dionysius meant by “mystical theology” was not what later Christians came to mean by it, as Paul Roemer explains: “Both *mystical* and *theology* need clarification. The traditional translation of *mustikos* [in the title of the Pseudo-Dionysius’ work] as *mystical* can be quite misleading if the connotations of later mysticism are read back into the Dionysian corpus and into this title. In the premedieval usage of Dionysius and other authors, the word does not mean the suprarational or emotional ecstasy of extraordinary and solitary individuals. It carries the simpler, less technical sense of something mysterious, something hidden to others but revealed to those initiated in the mysteries.” *Pseudo-*

Thus, just as natural theology differs from revealed theology in formal object, so does mystical theology differ from the other two in regard to formal object. In revealed theology God (and, more generally, the things that belong to Christianity) is considered from propositions known to have been divinely revealed. In mystical theology God (and indirectly His creation) is considered from the experience of God by the mystic.²⁵

It is important to understand the differences between reason, faith and mystical experience. For example, in metaphysics, we can know that God exists and that God is one through discursive reasoning. In this case, although the premises may be known to be true by us, the conclusions are inferred from them. In faith, we have some understanding of the articles of the faith and we assent to them—but we do not possess sight (excepting the *revelabilia* or preambles of the faith, which some can “see” mediately through reason).²⁶ Even in Jenkins’s supernatural externalist interpretation of faith, he admits that we do not experience what the articles of the faith refer to, but rather only know that they are revealed by God and we assent to them.²⁷ But in mystical experience we have more than just assent and understanding of an article of the faith; to borrow an analogy from St. John of the Cross, in

Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence, trans. Paul Rorem (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 183-84. An example which illustrates the shift in meaning of “mystical theology” from the time of Pseudo-Dionysius to the later middle ages is that of Jean le Charlier de Gerson (1363-1429), who defined “mystical theology” as: “experiential knowledge of God attained through the union of spiritual affection with Him.” *Selections from “A Deo exivit,” “Contra curiositatem studentium” and “De mystica theologia speculativa,”* trans. and ed. Steven Ozment (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), pp. 64-65. For a brief history of the word “mysticism” in the West (and some comments on “mystical theology”) see Harvey D. Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. xx-xxv and 1-16. For more contemporary treatments of mysticism which share, more or less, my understanding of “mystical experience” see: Dennis Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 5-26; D. L. Carmody and J. T. Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 3-26; Walter H. Principe, “Thomas Aquinas’ Spirituality” in *The Étienne Gilson Series 7* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), pp. 1-29.

²⁵ Of course we may also ask if the experience of angels falls under the formal object of mystical theology. Insofar as such experience gives insight to the nature of God, the answer seems to be yes. But this is a matter requiring more treatment than can be given here.

²⁶ Even the preambles of the faith (e.g., God exists) are not known like the first principles of metaphysics. Rather, God can be known to exist from knowledge about the sensible world through demonstration *quia*. But *what* God is remains unknown to us in this knowledge (cf. Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputate de Potentia Dei*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 1, and *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 3).

²⁷ *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 190-97.

mystical experience we “touch” God.²⁸ Thus we do not just understand and assent to the proposition “God is love”²⁹—we experience God loving us in our soul.³⁰ God acts upon the soul, which passively receives and is aware of His love and presence and through this a person gains some insight into the being of God. This awareness of His love and presence is direct since it is not known through concepts or sense images, but rather through a higher light. Nevertheless, God’s being is not fully disclosed in this light, and so this knowledge is indirect insofar as the light is lesser than the light of glory, which in the next life allows us to know God as much as our finite natures can. It is precisely because of this that mystical experience is a higher form of knowledge than faith or reason. Thus God as experienced by the person in mystical union is the formal object of this higher science. For easy comparison, I have outlined all three sciences below:

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY (*Theologia Mystica*)

SUBJECT: God (and indirectly His creation)
 FORMAL OBJECT: God as experienced by someone in mystical
 experience/union
 PRINCIPLES: Principles derived from mystical experience
 METHOD: Intuitive/Discursive
 AIM: Speculative and Practical

REVEALED THEOLOGY (*Sacra Doctrina*)

SUBJECT: God (and, more generally, the things that belong
 to Christianity)
 FORMAL OBJECT: God as known through propositions known to have
 been divinely revealed
 PRINCIPLES: Principles known by faith

²⁸ “The Lord grants these communications directly, [thus] they are wholly divine and sovereign. They are all substantial touches of divine union between God and the soul. In one of these touches, since this is the highest degree of prayer, the soul receives greater good than in all else.... Since a substantial touch is wrought in such close intimacy with God, for which the soul longs with so many yearnings, a person will esteem and covet a touch of the divinity more than all God’s other favors.” St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Book 2, chapter 23, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), pp. 453-54.

²⁹ *The First Epistle of St. John* 4:8.

³⁰ It should also be noted that, owing to Thomas’ doctrine of proper proportionality, God’s love is only *analogous* to human love. Hence, the experience of God’s love in someone’s soul, even though it is only a partial experience of God’s love, is like no other kind of love ever experienced.

METHOD:	Authoritative/Discursive
AIM:	Primarily Speculative, but Practical as well
NATURAL THEOLOGY (<i>Scientia Divina</i>)	
SUBJECT:	God ³¹
FORMAL OBJECT:	God insofar as He is the cause of the being of creatures ³²
PRINCIPLES:	Principles known by reason
METHOD:	Intuitive/Discursive
AIM:	Speculative

Note, too, that because the formal object of mystical theology is God as partially experienced, there can be no fourth theology. The only other way left to know God is as He is (i.e., in His essence), which occurs in the Beatific vision, and beyond which other knowledge is not possible.

III

I would like to reply briefly to some objections that can be raised against my view, and in doing so I hope to further clarify my position. The first objection is that mystical theology is a part of revealed theology and the latter is not compartmentalized for Thomas into mystical theology and revealed theology. Thomas Gilby voices this objection:

St. Thomas did not conceive of mystical theology as a special science, the study of rare and miraculous phenomena, but as that part of ordinary Christian theology

³¹ God, properly speaking, is not the subject of *scientia divina* (i.e., metaphysics) for Thomas. Metaphysics only studies God indirectly, as I have noted earlier. However, for the sake of comparing the three types of theological knowledge, we can limit our focus to the natural theology present in Thomas' metaphysics, which is what I have done diagrammatically above.

³² “[I]f a science considers a subject-genus, it must investigate the principles of that genus, since science is perfected only through knowledge of principles, as the Philosopher explains in the beginning of the *Physics*” Aquinas, *Expositio super Librum Boethii de Trinitate* Q. 5, a. 4, reply. Thomas then distinguishes between two sorts of principles: “Some are complete natures in themselves and nevertheless they are the principles of other things [e.g., God], . . . And for this reason they are considered not only in the science of the beings of which they are the principles, but also in a separate science. . . some principles, however. . . are not complete natures in themselves, but only the principles of natures, as unity is the principle of number, point the principle of line. . . . Principles of this sort, then, are investigated only in the science dealing with the things of which they are principles of all beings.” *Ibid.*

which treats of the fully grown-up condition of the new life that is born in baptism; he countenances no separation of mystical from ascetical theology, no separation of exegetical from moral theology, no separation of moral theology from dogmatic theology, no separation of dogmatic theology from the Scriptures. And so in the first question of the *Summa*, he describes theology as a function of being in love with God and therefore working through sympathy as well as science.³³

What Gilby says is generally true of Thomas, but in one respect, at least, Thomas's principles dictate otherwise. Since it is the formal object that specifies a science, different formal objects will bring about different sciences. Thus, although Thomas does not explicitly distinguish between mystical theology and revealed theology, his view implies a distinction. Now moral and dogmatic theology can all be treated under revealed theology insofar as moral truths and dogmatic truths can be demonstrated from principles that have been revealed to us by God. But moral and dogmatic theology can also be treated under mystical theology insofar as insofar as moral truths and dogmatic truths can be derived from mystical experience.

Just as the proposition "God loves us" can be known in natural theology, where it is inferred from other knowledge, and in revealed theology, where it is known that it is true and understood analogously through concepts, so too can it be known in a different and higher way in mystical theology, where it is experienced directly in the soul. Moreover, as we shall see below, we can derive other knowledge from the experience of God loving us in our soul. Therefore, to say that "Christian theology is not like mathematics which can be treated like a genus and divided into specifically different parts, e.g., arithmetic, geometry etc.," then, is incorrect.³⁴

A second objection points out that Thomas said, "All things whatsoever that can be divinely revealed [*revelabilia*] share in the same formal objective meaning. [And so,] on that account... are included under revealed theology as under a single science."³⁵ Moreover, it seems we can understand "revelation," in a broad sense, to include both faith and mystical experience; for both share the fact that God reveals something to persons, they differ only in the *way* in which something is revealed. Sometimes God reveals a message, as in the case of the prophets, other times God reveals Himself by allowing the soul to experience Him through His actions. In faith, that which is revealed is not experienced but is assented to and understood to some degree.

³³ See Thomas Gilby, "Appendix 6" in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1 (New York-London: McGraw-Hill, 1964-1969) p. 86. The exact passage that Gilby is referring to when he mentions the first question of the *Summa Theologiae* is I, q. 1, a. 6, ad. 3.

³⁴ Thomas Gilby, marginal note in *ibid.*, p. 14 note e.

³⁵ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3, a. 3, resp.

In mystical experience, that which is revealed is partially experienced. But if the formal object is the *revealable*, then perhaps Thomas was correct in holding that there is no separation of mystical theology from revealed theology. Indeed, in his commentary on Paul's *Second Letter to the Corinthians* he declares that prophetic visions (which are generally categorized as mystical experiences) fall under the category of revelation:

Revelation includes vision and not vice versa; for sometimes some things are seen, the understanding and meaning (*significatio*) of which is hidden from sight, and then it is vision alone, as [in the case of] the vision of the Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar...but when [along] with vision is had the meaning and understanding of those things which are seen, then it is revelation.³⁶

Hence those visions that are accompanied by understanding and signification—in short those visions accompanied by a message that can be transmitted to people—fall under the category of revelation. Indeed, when the message is lacking only the vision remains, which by itself is nothing more than a private mystical experience. But the experience of God *qua* the experience does not fall under the category of revelation. For revelation is the transmission of a truth or message that is not seen, and an experience *qua* the experience is non-propositional,³⁷ and thus not a message. Hence the articles of faith and the messages of prophetic visions, as preached and recorded in the canonical books of Holy Scripture, are used as premises in revealed theology. However, the experience of the vision in the prophet's mind is not contained under the formal object of revealed theology. Similarly, the experience of God in the soul of the mystic, is not contained under the formal object of revealed theology, but instead constitutes the formal object of mystical theology. Indeed, Thomas says: "In this life revelation does not tell us what God is, and thus joins us to him as to an unknown."³⁸ Hence, while revelation can communicate truths about God to us, it is different from an experience of God, which does give us a taste, however limited, of what God is.

³⁶ "Nam revelatio includit visionem, et non e converso. Nam aliquando videntur aliqua quorum intellectus et significatio est occulta videnti, et tunc est visio solum, sicut fuit visio Pharaonis et Nebuchodonsor; Dan., II, et Genes., XLI. Sed quando cum visione habetur significatio intellectus eorum quae videntur, tunc est revelatio." Aquinas, *In Epistolam II ad Corinthios*, XII, 1, in *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vivès, 1871-1880), vol. 21, p. 451; my translation.

³⁷ Our experience is always of individual things, and not universals. Therefore our experience of things *qua* experience of them is always non-propositional. It is through the mental acts of abstraction and judgment that we judge things to be members of a certain class of things (e.g., cats).

³⁸ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 13 ad 1.

The third objection is that mystical experience seems to be simple and non-propositional, thus while it may be a sort of knowledge—it can neither be scientific knowledge nor used as premises in scientific demonstration. There are many different kinds of mystical experience (e.g., visions, ecstasy, etc.), and while all of them as experiences are non-propositional, this does not prevent mystics from reflecting upon their mystical experiences and making judgments about them that will be used as premises in mystical theology. Indeed, many mystics throughout the ages have expressed the insights they have gained from mystical experiences in words and concepts even if words and concepts are only able to convey some understanding of the mystical experiences. Thus, I maintain that by reflecting on some of our mystical experiences we can make judgments that will be used in this science.³⁹ Such judgments are propositional and can be used in argumentations. Let me provide some examples to make this clear, though the examples are mine and not Thomas'.

Consider the person who has a mystical experience while in deep prayer and meditation. During this experience, the person becomes aware of the presence of God in his soul. The person feels at once joyous and at peace; all of this happens rapidly and is incommensurate to anything that the person could have effected. Yet the person knows that his actions did not merit this gift for he has sinned. From having had this wonderful experience of God loving him in his soul many things can be derived. For one, God is with us and therefore deist theology is wrong. Second, mystical knowledge is higher, clearer, and more certain than faith. This in no way denigrates faith, but means that mystical experience surpasses faith. It is a higher type of knowledge because unlike faith there is more than assent and partial understanding—there is an experience of God. It is clearer insofar as God is more clearly known through partial experience than in faith. It is more certain insofar as a higher experience of God moves the will more strongly than a lower one. Thus the blessed in heaven possess the highest certitude followed by those in mystical union with God, and then those who have faith. Third, it can be derived that the science of mystical experience is higher than revealed theology because it surpasses it both in certitude and in the kind of knowledge obtained. Thomas uses certitude and rank of subject-matter (*dignitas materiae*) to establish the position that revealed theology excels all other sciences.⁴⁰ Since the rank of the subject-matter is the same (i.e., God) and since both the certitude and the kind of knowledge obtained in mystical experience is greater, mystical

³⁹ For even if mystical experience is non-propositional we can still make judgments about it. Just as in the intuition (*cognitio*) of sensible things we do not have propositional knowledge but can abstract from and make judgments about that which we intuit, so too in mystical experience can we make judgments about that which we mystically experience.

⁴⁰ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 5, resp.

theology is a higher science than revealed theology. Moreover, since the judgement about the certitude of mystical knowledge can only be made by a mystic, the above proof cannot belong to revealed theology.

Finally, I want to point out that those who disagree with my view and hold that mystical theology is merely a part of revealed theology are in danger of embracing a nominalistic view of science. For unless they hold that mystical theology does not have a different formal object than revealed theology, which seems incorrect, or that the formal object is different but absolutely nothing can be derived from mystical experience, which also seems incorrect, they are guilty of nominalism—a view that sees science as an ordered system of concepts and propositions, rather than, as Thomas held, a single *habitus* that gets its unity from its formal object.⁴¹ By embracing such nominalism we are in danger of confusing distinct habits, for example the habit of metaphysics and the habit of revealed theology, with each other. Is this not what Ockham did when he claimed that the habit of demonstrating that God is one is neither theological nor metaphysical?⁴² And is there not the same danger, then, of confusing revealed theology with mystical theology? The point is that it does not matter if some of the conclusions of revealed theology and mystical theology are the same; what does matter is that the formal objects are different. For indeed, some of the conclusions of natural theology and revealed theology are the same but they are not one science. Therefore, once we admit that in mystical experience we know God in a different way than through faith, and that from mystical experience at least some knowledge is derivable,⁴³ we must, at the very least, admit that mysti-

⁴¹ For more on the historical difference between Thomas' conception of science and nominalism, see Armand A. Maurer, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists," in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1224-1274. Commemorative Studies*, ed. Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 269-91. Of course, concerning habits, one could argue that mystical theology cannot be a science because it relies on God's grace, and therefore cannot be a steady habit. Indeed, Thomas himself, in *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 171, a. 2, resp, held that mystical experience was not a steady habit: "On the other hand, a steady disposition, *habitus*, is that by which a person acts when he wishes to as Averroes says. Now none can take to prophecy when he wills, as is clear from the story of Elisha... Thus prophecy is not a lasting disposition." Although Thomas only speaks of prophecy here, what he says should hold for other kinds of mystical experiences; for since such experiences are gifts from God, and thus not in the power of the human agent to elicit, mystical experiences are not stable habits. However, this objection can be answered by pointing out that Thomas does not discuss the fact that God can freely choose to give many such experiences to a person who is willing to accept them, and thereby the *habitus* can be steady and persist over a considerable span of time.

⁴² William of Ockham, *Scriptum in Libros Sententiarum*, I, Prol., q. 1.

⁴³ At the very least it seems some things concerning mystical union and its relation to our spiritual life can be derived.

cal theology is a third type of theology. Whether or not it is higher or subordinate to revealed theology would still be debatable, but I have already advanced arguments for the former conclusion.

Of course we have not covered all the important issues concerning mystical theology that should be covered in order to have a complete understanding of it. For example, we have not covered issues concerning the verification of authentic and inauthentic mystical experience, but these and other issues go beyond our present scope and shall have to be treated elsewhere. For now, we move to Maritain.

IV

While many Thomists in this century have focused upon Thomas's metaphysics, or the theology of the *Summa theologiae*, Jacques Maritain should be commended for doing important work concerning mystical theology. Using his own creative genius and drawing from the wisdom of Aquinas, John of the Cross, and Theresa of Ávila, he discussed the nature of mystical theology in *The Degrees of Knowledge*. In that work, he describes the formal object of this science in the following way:

Mystical theology...consists in knowing the essentially supernatural object of faith and theology—Deity as such—*according to a mode that is suprahuman and supernatural....* It is no longer a question of merely learning, but rather of suffering divine things. It is a matter of knowing God by experience in the silence of every creature and of any representation, in accordance with a *manner* of knowing, itself proportioned to the object known, insofar as that is possible here below.⁴⁴

He explains that in mystical experience we are elevated by grace to experience God's presence within us.⁴⁵ According to him, this is "a *real* and *physical* (ontological) presence of God in the very depths of our being...a fruitful, experimental knowledge and love which puts us in possession of God and unites us to Him not at a distance, but really."⁴⁶ Maritain rightly stresses the non-conceptuality of this knowledge, which he says is also a knowledge by connaturality,⁴⁷ since by charity, which presupposes sanctifying grace, we are made connatural to God, as far as that is possible.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 270.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 273-74.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

For Maritain knowing God in mystical union differs from knowing God through faith, since faith relies on concepts and analogy.⁴⁹ In contrast to faith, in mystical experience “the inspiration of the Holy Ghost uses the connaturality of charity to make us judge divine things under a higher rule, under a new formal *ratio*.”⁵⁰ So far much of this is similar to my view of mystical experience and mystical theology.

However, Maritain’s view has some inadequacies. First, Maritain remarks that the practical and speculative sides to mystical theology are actually part of the science of revealed theology taken in a general sense.⁵¹ For Maritain, this general sense of revealed theology means “The whole organism of our knowledge of the mysteries, faith itself, the theological discursus and the gifts of the knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.”⁵² But then he speaks of “speculatively practical mystical theology” (hereafter “SPMT”) and “practically practical mystical theology” (hereafter “PPMT”), separating the last, but not the former, from revealed theology taken in a strict sense (i.e., the science of the virtually revealed or what Thomas calls *sacra doctrina*).⁵³ In fact, Maritain should separate both from revealed theology in the strict sense since he holds that the formal object of both (i.e., SPMT and PPMT) is the same and also differs from the formal object of revealed theology in its strict sense. Yet he says that charity is necessary for the PPMT but is not necessary for SPMT.⁵⁴ It is unclear how the SPMT can still be a mystical theology if the connaturality of charity, which is its formal object, is lacking from it. Moreover, Maritain says that the SPMT and the PPMT are distinct but not specifically different habits.⁵⁵ But, again, if that’s the case, then either both are part of revealed theology or neither is.

Second, just as revealed theology for Thomas is one science involving both speculative and practical aspects, so I claim it is with mystical theology. There are not two mystical sciences born from the experience of God, but rather one science that has both speculative and practical sides. The experience of God has practical benefits for the person, and the person’s knowledge is increased by the experience—thus there is both a speculative and practical

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 276.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 279.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 337-38. The text does not read “revealed theology in a general sense.” First “sacred doctrine” is used and then “theology.” Maritain reminds us that “‘theology’ in the strict sense [is the] . . . science of the virtually revealed [see the chart on p. 269].” The science of the virtually revealed, for Maritain, is what Saint Thomas would call revealed theology.

⁵² Ibid., p. 337.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 335-37.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 337.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 338.

side to mystical theology. In short, Maritain's distinction between the speculatively practical mystical theology and the practically practical mystical theology is a misguided one.

Third, although Maritain did emphasize that mystical experience is the fruition of faith and the life of grace,⁵⁶ and that it is the closest taste we can have in this life of what is to come in the Beatific vision,⁵⁷ he does not emphasize the awesome potential of mystical experience, and the knowledge we can derive from it, to transcend our current metaphysical and theological knowledge of God and the creation. Instead, he stresses that "mystical wisdom...uncovers for us no object of knowledge which faith does not attain."⁵⁸ But given the infinitude of God, and the finitude of the deposit of faith, it seems unreasonable to put limits on the knowledge that lies in wait for those who are one with God in love. It is my hope that in the years ahead many more will follow Maritain's example by focusing upon mystical theology, and sharing its fruits with others. This is especially true for Thomists, for if it is true that mysticism is the maturity of the life of faith and grace, then any Thomism that excludes the study of mystical theology has not reached its maturity.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 275-76.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 341.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 281.

⁵⁹ I would like to thank Fr. Armand A. Maurer for his invaluable help and encouragement in undertaking this project. My gratitude also extends to Jorge J. E. Gracia, who read and provided very useful comments on an early draft of this paper. I also benefited from the insightful comments of John F. X. Knasas, William Sweet, James and Tyra Arraj, Curtis Hancock, Anne and Owen Smith, and Christian Brunelli. Charles Jones should also be acknowledged for his generous and kind support. *Et Deus meus, laudo te propter immensa indigno mihi praestita benefica.*