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Seeing God:

Thomas Aquinas on Divine Presence in the World¹

Gledati Boga:

Tomaž Akvinski o Božji navzočnosti v svetu

Abstract: How to recognize the presence of God in the world? Thomas Aquinas' proposition, based on the efficient, exemplary and intentional causality, including both the natural level and grace, avoids several simplifications, the consequence of which is transcendent blindness. On the one hand, it does not allow to fall into a pantheistic reductionism involving God into the game of His variability in relation to the changing world. The sensitivity of Thomas in interpreting a real existing world makes it impossible to close the subject in the "house without windows", from where God can only be presumed. On the other hand, the proposal of Aquinas avoids the radical transcendence of God, according to which He has nothing to do with the world.

Keywords: transcendence, Thomas Aquinas, First Cause, Pantheism, Post-theism

Povzetek: Kako prepoznati Božjo navzočnost v svetu? Predpostavka Tomaža Akvinskega, ki temelji na vzročnosti učinka, primera in namena ter vključuje tako raven narave kot milosti, se izogne vrsti poenostavitve, katerih posledica je slepota za transcendentno. Po eni strani Tomaževa predpostavka ne dovoljuje, da bi zapadli v pantheistično redukcijo, ki Boga potiska v igro njegove spremenljivosti v razmerju do spreminjajočega se sveta. Tomaževa občutljivost za interpretacijo stvarno obstoječega sveta preprečuje, da bi subjekt zaprl v »hišo brez oken«, od koder bi o Bogu lahko zgolj domnevali. Po drugi strani pa Tomaževa predpostavka preprečuje radikalno transcendentno Boga, v skladu s katero Bog nima s svetom nič opraviti.

Ključne besede: transcendenca, Tomaž Akvinski, prvi vzrok, panenteizem, postteizem

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The expression of Saint Paul from the First Letter to the Corinthians – »For now we see only the reflection as in a mirror« (1 Cor 13:12) – may be astonishing. The Apostle simply says that we know God *in aenigmate* living in a world. We resemble a man who is looking at himself in the Greek mirror. This type of mirror was not made by silver glass, as nowadays, but it was a polished metal which did not reflect all shapes clearly. With this metaphor, St. Paul assumes that there is some way to know God, which ends with being known by God and what Thomas Aquinas calls *visio Dei beatifica* (Blond 2009, 185). It is not staring at the image, which the term *visio* may suggest, but taking part and sharing the object that we are looking at (Zembrzuski 2019).

This article will focus on Aquinas' doctrine about the presence of God in the world. In particular, it is about understanding God's transcendence and immanence which the result of creation is. At the same time, it deals with the post-theistic and panentheistic approach to divine action in the world.

1. Contemporary philosophical contexts: panentheism and post-theism

Since St. Thomas Aquinas always thought in confrontation with the opposite views, he would have to face at least two objections nowadays.

First, the so-called panentheism raises the question about the presence of God in the world strongly (Wojtysiak 2017; Dorocki 2015). It encounters the difficulty in placing God within the world at a particular point of it, and therefore presents Him as the idea of the divine which pervades and interpenetrates every part of the universe. Panentheistic vision should be a »golden mean« between traditional theism, which stresses the plurality of accidental beings and divine transcendence, and pantheism, which emphasizes, like Spinoza, monism and the immanence of God in the world. So, it is not pantheism, where God is identical with the nature (*Deus sive natura*), but that the world is like a body of God or a sponge, soaked in God (Gasser 2018).

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines panentheism as the concept according to which the relationship between God and the world is such that God is in the world and the world is in God. However, panentheism is not a monolithic system. It could be defined as a heterogeneous collection of theories and concepts about God and His relation to the world, in which there are some common features. Michael Brierley (2004) distinguishes several basic elements of panentheism: (1) the cosmos as God's body, (2) the cosmos as sacrament, (3) God's dependence on the world, (4) inextricable intertwining of God and cosmos, (5) divine possibility.

Panentheistic concepts also include the so-called post-theism. This concept defines God and His presence in the world from the perspective of His creativity and the denial of interventionism and the supernatural vision of divine action.

Post-theism postulates the transition from classical theism to create a »theological ontology which examines the meaning and credibility of the concept of divine action in the world and divine self-manifestation through events in the world«. (Gilkey 1961) Thus, it leads to the rejection of two basic assumptions of classical theism: (1) the existence of God and His absolute freedom towards creation, in other words, post-theism tries to reject the thesis of classical theism that the act of creation does not define the essence of God; and (2) the rejection of the claim that God's relationship to creation is not necessary. According to the claims of post-theism, God's relation to the world is »necessary« so that He can define Himself as creative love. Thus, »God and creation must be included in a higher form of ontological unity, which is based on the creative freedom of God, a pure act of love« (Gamberini 2018, 394).

Interestingly, the concept of post-theism often refers to Thomas Aquinas to support its detailed theses, treating him as its precursor. However, it is done in a completely unauthorized way, engaging Thomas in a game, which he surely would not accept.

Nevertheless, the advocates of post-theism emphasize the immutability of God referring to St. Thomas: »Every relation which we consider between God and the creature, by whose change the relation is brought into being; whereas it is not really in God, but only in our way of thinking, since it does not arise from any change in God.« (S. Th III, q. 2, a 7) They justify it by the necessity of departure from the anthropomorphic-mythical vision of God, according to which, God, endowed with perfect personal qualities, acts in an extraordinary way in the world. The Augustine theology, and the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas in particular, influenced this change of the paradigm of the understanding of God. Following Thomas' thought, the promoters of post-theism claim that the relationship between God and creation is *relatio non ex aequo* (S. Th I, q. 13, a 7) – only on the part of creatures there is a substantive relation to God (*creaturae realiter referentur ad ipsum Deum*) and on the part of God there is no real relationship to the world, only the relationship based on thought if the creatures refer to God (*secundum rationem tantum*).

However, post-theism claims that God is not only *actus purus* – which would be following Thomas' thought – but adds that God is the Pure Creative Act of Being. The conclusion of post-theism is that »the essence of God is fundamentally and eternally connected with creation«. (Gamberini 2018, 402)

The advocates of post-theism use a symbolic equation to explain the relationship between God and creation: »let us assume that x is God and y is the created being. In stating that $x = x + y$ we say that the essence of God (x) is (=) nothing but His relation to man ($x + y$). That means that the relation between God and creation /... / is internal and essential because 'God is God' in His relatedness.« (Gamberini 2018, 402) Ultimately, the presence of God in the world is not subject to perception among many other objects which human beings experience every day, but the divine presence is given to man as »experiencing oneself in the unity,

wholeness and orientation towards the incomprehensible mystery that we call God; this is the word of God that we are and are told that it is so« (179).

Considering the above, post-theistic thought is a form of »naturalization« of God and an attempt to »imprison« Him in the order of nature. Making Aquinas the precursor of this approach is a complete misunderstanding and resembles the interpretation of the thought of the Angelic Doctor in the paradigm of Hegel's philosophy. According to Thomas' thought, God is *actus purus* and *suum esse*; essence and existence are identical in Him. As *suum esse*, He is the first, simple being, there is no potential element in it. (S.Th I, q. 4, a. 1) Since He is a pure act, He cannot perfect itself (S.Th q. 9), He is absolutely present, and therefore unchangeable. However, this immutability of God can never be understood as static perfection, which somehow must enter the world and act from outside. As Thomas argues – in the First Being there is the most perfect life: the life of the intellect which is always in the act. (S.Th I, q. 18, a 3) God is an acting being, but it is not an act of actualizing the acting – It is an act that is the very act and makes things happen. (S.Th I, q. 18, a. 1–2) As it appears – He Himself, not something outside of Him, is the reason or the goal of His creative dynamism: He creates because He wants beings to exist. (S.Th I, q. 44, a 4)

The second doubt is the question of how one can experience that something is necessary in contingent events. In the world where the accident rules, is there space for God for whom there are no accidental things? Is it possible to see God's presence as an object in the room? What kind of presence do we have in mind? Saint Paul, and Aquinas after him, stressed that there is some *enigma* in this knowledge of God, like entering the cloud, or to use a more modern comparison like turbulence during the flight.

Why then does this enigmatism appear? Thomas says that we do not know what it means that *God is* because his »being« is not identical with ours (Wood 2018). We know God *quoad nos*, as He appears to us, and not as He is in Himself. In modern physics, we also cannot recognize elementary particles. What is possible to observe is the interaction between them, the dynamism of action, the results. That is why Aquinas was convinced that the only way to know God is to know Him from His effects (Turner 2013). The famous Five Ways are precisely this: manners of recognizing God's presence through the effects of His action (Levering 2016).

God is not the object of science, so it means that science does not deal with Him directly but can speak about the effects of this belief or signs of God's activity in the world (Artigas 2000). However, it does not establish causal relations between the First Cause and secondary causes (Roszak 2017; Silva 2011). These questions are not the subject of science. When science observes a tree, it does not see in it a wooden chair, which will be made of it later. We should not expect this kind of answers, because science is interested in establishing direct relations.

2. Seeing God after the Fall

The vision of God's presence by man has been disturbed by original sin: this is a theological answer. We have trouble with seeing God, because matter obscures Him for us; our reason and our will have been hurt (Platovnjak 2017). Adam and Eve saw God in paradise, because there, in original justice, the materiality did not obscure Him. But sin has changed it. This is like a man who loses his sense of smell or taste (*In Rom.*, cap. XII, lect. 1 (nr 967), but not entirely. God likes the method of signs, because it best expresses freedom – knowing *in enigmata* expresses a certain value which helps us to grow. (S. Th., I, q. 94 a. 1 ad 3) This is also »the good« that God does not want to waste. Is it easy for us to know the presence of God after original sin? What is the nature of this presence according to Aquinas?

2.1 The need of *deductio*

It is easier to understand the thought of Thomas Aquinas if we use a metaphor from the world of sports. Aquinas did not play football (because it did not exist in the thirteenth century), but his ideas we can translate to very familiar image for many of us. Are we able to see the coach, if we are watching the players' strategy of the game, for example in their way of playing, passing the ball, how they run? They are independent, but they implement the strategy of the coach. He is not on the field physically, he is not one of the players. But he also »plays« in his own way: it is his idea of the match that players put into practice during a game. The camera does not show it, it focuses on the players, mainly on the one who has the ball (although the more important are those who do not possess the ball and create the situation, that is why it is not the same to watch the match on TV and live), but you can see that the running players do it according to a certain strategy. We may say I don't see a coach, he doesn't exist, and the players play as they want. But is it true?

Thomas was attracted to other kinds of examples:

»/... / an intimate and uniform procession by way of an intelligible act is included in the idea of a first principle. For when we call the architect the principle of the house, in the idea of such a principle is included that of his art. /... / God, Who is the first principle of all things, may be compared to things created as the architect is to things designed.« (S. Th., I, q.27, a. 1, ad 3)

Thomas juxtaposed the presence of God as the First Cause, incomparable to earthly causes, with the image of the architect and the house designed by him (Devan 2007). To see the coach or the architect, as Aquinas says, *deductio* is needed.

The temptation is, however, not to undertake specific *deductio* within the faith. The discovery of the discreet presence of God has been the subject of a philosophical "resistance movement". It includes Kant who did not deny the existence of God, but he limited the presence of God to His existence »away from home«, namely our world. Epistemic assumptions of Kant led him to the conviction that *noumena* (things-in-themselves) are not accessible to our experience and thus

cannot be known. If we do not know the world outside of immanence, says Kant, then any attempts of rational argumentation for the existence of God are only pseudo-arguments (Huzarek 2017). It is necessary to postulate God's presence, because of its practical (moral) significance. For Aquinas, however, it is different. God's presence in the world is the presence of a universal good which is realized in particular good. (Hirschfeld 2018; Roszak 2018)

2.2 The knowledge of the First Cause

Realizing the context of the difficulties which we face, it is necessary to explain how, according to Saint Thomas, we may come to know the presence of the First Cause. It is not about the fact that the »first« in the sequence is before the second and third (etc.) and that we reach them gradually, like from the last carriage of the train we can get to the locomotive. This is a different order: it is the First in the sense that the power of the First Cause manifests itself in every cause which does something good. (Silva 2015) This First Cause is not losing power, because to do something through »others« is the sign of greater power (McWhorter 2013).

3. Incomparable Divine Presence: Aquinas' twofold approach to the presence of God

Aquinas distinguishes three main ways of the presence of God in the world called *per essentiam*, *per potentiam* and *per praesentiam*. (S. Th., I, q.8, a.3c)

3.1 Three types of God's presence in nature

God is both transcendent and immanent in relation to the world. God's transcendence in relation to the world consists in the fact that He does not identify with the world and is radically different, because only the Absolute is *suum esse*, whereas the contingent beings of this world possess *esse*. (S. Th., I, q. 3, a 4) God's immanence in relation to the world consists in the causative, exemplary and purposeful presence of God in the world.

Only God is the agent of existence, and of the duration of all contingent beings. As Thomas observes

»the more remote a potency is from act, the greater must be the power that reduces it to act. But whatever distance may be imagined between potency and act, the distance will ever be still greater if the very potency itself is withdrawn. To create from nothing, then, requires infinite power. But God alone is infinite in power, since He alone is infinite in essence. Consequently God alone can create.«²

God is the source of the whole effect, not only of existence, but also of essence. Thomas explains it in the following way:

² Compendium Theologiae I, 70; see also ScG II, 21; S. Th I, q. 44, a. 1; S. Th I, q. 45, a. 5.

»Now it is clear that the things that come to exist naturally receive determinate forms. But the determinateness of the forms has to be traced back to God's wisdom as a first principle. /... / And so one should say that within God's wisdom there are concepts (*rationes*) of all things, which we called ideas (*ideae*) above, i.e., exemplary forms existing in God's mind. Even though these ideas are multiplied in relation to the things, they are in reality nothing other than God's essence insofar as a likeness of His essence can be participated in by diverse things in diverse ways. So, then, God Himself is the first exemplar of all things.« (S. Th I, q. 44, a. 3)

Finally, God is present in the world as the final cause. All actions of contingent beings (whether originating from intellectual, sensory cognition or without cognition) are done because of the goal, namely, good which can improve (fulfill) the acting agent. Beings are good because of their perfection, their timeliness: the more current something is, the more similar to the Absolute, which is the act itself. Thus, the Absolute is the end of things. (ScG III, 17; S.Th I, q. 44, a. 4)

Although God does not identify with the world and is radically different from the world, He is present as the causative, exemplary and final cause: He constantly gives the being, delineates the nature of things and provokes dynamism of the reality.

So, we can say, that Aquinas distinguishes three main ways of the presence of God in the world called *per essentiam*, *per potentiam* and *per praesentiam*. (S. Th I, q. 8, a. 1) The first one, *per essentiam*, indicates that the first effect of God's action is existence which offers a share in the perfection of God; as long as the thing exists, God is present in it not externally but deeply like *esse* for the being. Therefore, He acts intimately (*intime*) in everything. This presence is the "reason for being". The second, *per potentiam*, means that the principle of acting in the other (for example, the scope of the king's reign). Although he is not physically present in the given area, his power applies there. This leads to our understanding of providence, in which God acts, respecting the freedom and nature of every being; we can offend God if we »act against our own good« (Cvetek and Cvetek 2018). (ScG III, 122) The third, called *per praesentiam*, indicates to have something within sight, namely, as power over property, but it is responsibility for the household in the same way as the housekeeper is responsible for the house: he/she is everywhere.

The proper way for rational creatures (and therefore the second presence in the world of rational beings) is the presence of God as what is known in the knower, what is desired in what one desires.

3.2 Grace as transcendent God's presence

God's grace is a specific way of the presence of God in the world: it is defined as an accident, something that does not modify the being in its ontological identity (grace as created is perfection added to the substance of a soul, so it does not belong to the exact definition of man; if it was so, a man without grace would not be a man), but gives it a new quality (S. Th I, q. 8, a. 3, ad 4). It is not some kind of "foil" in which you can wrap things, but is the ability to act which exceeds the

power of nature (Huzarek 2011; Mróz 2018). There is a certain disproportionality of cause and effect. But what does this “presence” of grace consist in? Since it is an accident (*accidens*) enabling something, its presence is known because of effects, because of “ease” (*prompte*). (S. Th I-II, q 108, a. 1, ad. 2)

Aquinas tries to show God’s presence in the metaphysical perspective as the One who does not contrast Himself with creation but enables creation to achieve the fullness (Wippel 1985).

Thomas indicates three consequences:

a) The presence of God as the “end” or ultimate goal signifies that every time a human being desires a partial good, he implicitly desires God Himself, who is the supreme good.

b) In a situation of many causes of different kinds, it is necessary to separate the one whose power makes the rest of them work, because there is a certain order between them. In this sense, each act of creation, by giving the original power (possibility) of action, is the discovery of God as the cause of the activity of causative causes. His presence is expressed not in the fact that the order of action in accordance with the nature of beings is violated, but when it is realized.

c) Being a common cause of existence and not just a »regional« one of some group of objects. God is most deeply present in things, He does not act on them from outside but from inside, *intime operetur*.

4. Aquinas’s meaning of transcendence of God

Aquinas’s description suggests that it is impossible to describe God’s presence relying on being outside. Due to a different form of existence which is incomparable to creation, it is impossible to limit God’s presence to simply one of many in the world. Thus, the concept of transcendence largely conveys the truth about incomparability and does not bear spatial terms, as it is frequently seen. On the other hand, immanence, contrary to certain views, does not signify the self-independence of creation. As the study of Rudi te Velde demonstrates, the relationship between transcendence and immanence does not rely on an extrinsic relationship, but on the fact that God is at the same time beyond and in the reality itself (te Velde 2009). His presence consists in a kind of »off-center« force: this presence appears with some orientation or transcending movement. It is a kind of exceeding that makes the presence of God also an exceeding presence.

Following the idea of te Velde, it is worth showing four ways of understanding transcendence which are present in St. Thomas’ works. The first one points out that

a) God’s simplicity reminds that God is not part of the world, but He remains distinct from everything else.

b) He does not act from any need but only out of his goodness.

- c) He is beyond the comprehension of every created mind.
- d) Nature and grace: grace is a transcending presence of God in human soul

Thus, we discover the challenges of the present-day theology: to learn to see the world again, like in an instrument which is out of tune. The problem is that it is difficult to teach someone to see God as Aquinas did, if the metaphysical framework has disintegrated. This framework allowed people to think deeply, not just collect data such as big data we can find thanks to Google, but we are not able to use such information. What we are looking for is before our eyes, but we cannot detect it because we do not think deeply. We cannot see causes in the effect; we do not see the whole in a part to which the part refers; we do not see the fruit in the seed. It is like a computer file that is there, but we do not have the software to open it and as a result we cannot read it.

At the same time, the presence of God in the world, without being part of our metaphysical order, must be presented in a different way: this causal thinking which has been already mentioned (characteristic of wisdom, which is the knowledge of the deep causes of reality) helps in this respect. Aquinas uses similar images to show how God exists in the world and how He acts. For Thomas, the key is to understand that the presence of God does not violate the nature of any being, does not cause in it any action which deprives it of its identity. To illustrate it Aquinas applies the image of tides (the rise and fall of the sea levels), which is caused by the gravitational forces exerted by the Moon: this is how God influences creation, like the Moon's effects on the sea water: He remains Himself, although He acts in a way incompatible with the normal course. (S. Th., II-II., q.2, a.3c) Maybe the image of the magnetic field today would be a suitable metaphor as well, in the vein of Saint Thomas?

5. Towards the *visio Dei beatifica*

However, it is essential for St. Thomas to understand that this presence of God, which is not obvious to us (*quoad nos*) makes sense. His hiding is the liberation of desire in a human being to look for Him (a bit like in a game of hide-and-seek, when someone close to us hides and we really want to find him) which develops a human being. This means that salvation is something that is developing in us – *visio Dei beatifica* begins here, in the vision of God in the world which surrounds us, as a cause in effect so that it is possible later to sharpen this view and by cooperating with grace to receive the gift of full vision, which is eternal happiness. This is the key to the *Summa Theologiae* in which each *pars* develops from the presence in creation (*Prima Pars*), through presence in good deeds (*Secunda Pars*), to the hypostatic union and sacraments (*Tertia Pars*) and thanks to them, the participation in God opens for us. (Mongeau 2015) It is difficult to understand this concept in the culture of instant gratification, because time is shortened as much as possible: the goals must be achieved at once.

Why does God not present Himself at once as He is, in His creation, but as a kind of way to *visio Dei beatifica*? St. Thomas indicates three reasons for the way God acts. He manifests Himself through things which are not at all the best, but He chooses humble means:

a) To avoid mistakes: our speaking about God based on creation is not direct but analogical. The magnificence of the world could lead one to think that God is »the same« as the world.

b) This is the right way to live in the world, because here on earth we learn more about who God is not than who He is – just as »small« things immediately suggest that God is not like them.

c) To hide divine matters from the unprepared and unworthy.

In conclusion, Thomas sees the presence of God in created nature by essence, power and presence which needs to be deduced, but also by the grace which is revealed by the »effects« of this presence. Therefore, Aquinas was able to create *Adoro Te devote*, writing about God that *sub his figuris vere latitans*, that His presence is truly hidden beneath these appearances. (Hibbs 2007)

6. Conclusion

The entire theological project of Aquinas is based on teaching people to see the transcendent God. This is not an »easy« transcendence (using the Bonhoeffer terminology). It is not the presence of God based on exclusivity, as if it was the presence of God in opposition to the world, either God or the world, but the presence based on the assumption – both God and the world.

Therefore, the fullness of this awareness is expressed by liturgical doxology, which tells us about this presence through three prepositions: through Him, with Him and in Him (Krajnc 2018).

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