Introduction

In the beginning was beauty, and beauty was with God, and beauty was God. If the tradition of divine names, which (in its Christian form) originates with Dionysius the Areopagite and includes among its ranks Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and others, is correct in identifying God with the name beauty, then repurposing the prologue to John's Gospel in this way seems hardly controversial. For if beauty is a divine name then not only is it fitting to say God is beautiful, but it is equally fitting to say that *God is beauty itself*. However, like most arguments from fittingness—that is to say, arguments whose veracity derives from the congruency, proportion, or harmony between the various elements of a proposition or idea rather than from some categorically higher, or univocally determinate, logical necessity[1]—the simplicity of its utterance stands in stark contrast to the complexity of its intelligible content.

It is the aim of the present work is to explore what it means to say that beauty is a divine name. Although this aim may at first appear rather modest, it unleashes a multitude of dimensions involving both beauty as an "object" of theological inquiry as well as the nature of a divine name. These dimensions both in themselves and in their relation to each other provoke some important questions that will help to order the content in an introductory fashion.

The initial, and perhaps most significant, question to be asked is why explore this issue at all? A few different responses suggest themselves, each contributing to the overall trajectory of the present work. Firstly, although there is a multitude of studies on beauty there are none that examine it as one of the divine names. When one considers the fact that the divine names tradition is a primary conduit through which beauty enters the Christian theological tradition, the lack of such a study ought to be startling. The majority of studies on beauty have been undertaken in the field of philosophical discourse, with varying outcomes as to what beauty is depending on the fundamental disposition of the one undertaking the study.

1. On theological arguments from fittingness, see esp. Narcisse, *Les Raisons De Dieu,* 566–79.

However, insofar as these studies treat beauty as an object of philosophical inquiry, they necessarily treat it as a naturally occurring phenomenon detached from any essential bond with the divine. As the present work hopes to illustrate, such a treatment can only ever render an incomplete portrait of beauty.

A second reason for examining beauty as a divine name concerns the burgeoning field of theological aesthetics. "Theological aesthetics" identifies a young, and so broad, mode of theological discourse, too broad to be reducible to one overarching definition. Some, like Richard Viladesau, maintain that theological aesthetics in the most general terms involves both approaching "the aesthetic from the point of view of a "fundamental" theology," and also "the use by theology of the language, methods, and contents of the aesthetic realm."[2] That is to say, what he calls a "theopoesis"—the "art of making theological discourse affecting and beautiful"—is relevant, if not essential, to every mode of theology.[3] Others, like Alejandro García-Rivera, find in theological aesthetics a moment in which theology can synthesize its vast tradition with concrete particularities like culture or poetry in order to illuminate the objects of its inquiry.[4] In this sense, theological aesthetics involves an attempt to bring clarity to the relation between beautiful things and beauty itself, that is to say, "between Beauty's divine origins and its appropriation by the human heart."[5] Still others, like David Hart, find in beauty a means by which the content of Christianity derived from the living event of Jesus Christ may be conceived as a powerful rhetoric of peace to challenge the rhetoric of violence that marks so much contemporary discourse be it theological, philosophical, political, or otherwise.[6] The infinite beauty of God, which surpasses all sublimity and totality and which takes concrete form in the person of Jesus Christ, is an offering of "a peace that enters history always as rhetoric, as persuasion, as a gift that can be received only as a gift."[7] Theological aesthetics, in this sense, is the most appropriate and fitting form for theological discourse insofar as it identifies the ceaseless union of theology with the rhetoric and persuasion of Christ's beauty. These and other configurations of

2. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, ix, 38.
3. Ibid., 38.
4. See, e.g., García-Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*.
5. Ibid., 11.
6. Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*.
7. Ibid., 413.

theological aesthetics illustrate the variety that appears almost inevitable when the theological enterprise aligns itself with beauty.

Despite such variance, however, one prominent feature of every configuration of theological aesthetics, which has particular relevance for the present project, stands out: theological aesthetics aspires to do theology from the perspective of an alliance between beauty and reason. It is such an alliance that one finds at the very heart of the project of theological aesthetics as undertaken by Hans Urs von Balthasar, a figure who could validly be considered the father of contemporary theological aesthetics. In the first volume of his massive trilogy, Balthasar explains the importance of choosing a first word for any theological enterprise, and it is an explanation worth quoting at length:

> Whoever confronts the whole truth . . . desires to choose as his first word one which he will not have to take back, one which he will not afterwards have to correct with violence, but one which is broad enough to foster and include all words to follow, and clear enough to penetrate all others with its light. . . . [It] is a word with which the philosophical person does not begin, but rather concludes. It is a word that has never possessed a permanent place or an authentic voice in the concert of the exact sciences, and, when it *is* chosen as a subject for discussion, appears to betray in him who chooses it an idle amateur among such very busy experts. It is, finally, a word from which religion, and theology in particular, have taken their leave and distanced themselves in modern times by a vigorous drawing of boundaries. . . . Beauty is the word that shall be our first.[8]

In the context of von Balthasar's project, a project to which almost every form of contemporary theological aesthetics owes a debt of gratitude, beauty is not simply an object to be theologically explored. Rather, calling to mind echoes of the prologue of John's Gospel, beauty is the first word—one might even say that for von Balthasar, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was beauty. Appropriating beauty as the first word of the theological enterprise serves to embed theological reasoning firmly in the depths of that modality and power of being referred to with the name beauty. Beauty is not only to be sought and explored, but it becomes the energy that fuels theological mindfulness. Of course stating the matter in this rather vague and enigmatic way does little to explain precisely what it means, and one must engage von Balthasar's monumental effort

8. Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* [hereafter *GOTL*], 1:17–18.

to acquire such an understanding of how it works itself out in his project. However, the present project aspires to contribute in its own way to better understanding the importance that beauty provides to theological discourse both as an object of theological enquiry and as an energy that fuels theological mindfulness and gives shape to theology as a unique *Denkform*. It is hoped that by the end of this book, the reader will acquire more clarity about how theology may more effectively engage beauty as a way to energize its own spiritual, contemplative, and cognitive aspirations.

There is another aspect of von Balthasar's contention cited above that is worth noting especially as it relates to contemporary theological aesthetics. He speaks of the distance that has arisen between theology and beauty in the modern era. And while his own project may have closed this distance in some respects, there remains within much contemporary thought be it philosophical, theological, or otherwise, a continuing momentum away from beauty toward the "aesthetic" (however the latter may be conceived). Although the origins of the displacement of beauty by the aesthetic are many and complex, it is possible to emphasize the influence of two seminal works: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750), and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Baumgarten, whose work sets the foundation for the new "science" of aesthetics, identifies beauty with the perfection of sensible cognition: *Aesthetices finis est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis. Haec autem est pulcritudo*.[9] This begins a slow migration of beauty away from the realm of the intellect and more deeply into the realm of the senses, a migration that is itself exacerbated by the already growing division within modernity of intellect and sense, mind and body, thought and things. In his third *Critique*, Kant relegates beauty to the realm of nature. He defines it exclusively with respect to that which conforms to the human faculty of presentation and representation,[10] and replaces its once transcendental status with his configuration of the sublime. Of course, his configuration of the sublime taps into a tradition that dates back as far as the second-century figure Longinus who is believed to have written the first account of the sublime. Nevertheless, after Kant's third *Critique*, the sublime as a philosophical theme acquires more influence than it previously held.[11] And its influence, in many ways, fills the void left by the demotion of beauty. But the sublime is a theme that

9. Baumgarten, *Aestehtica*, pt. 1, ch. 1, §14. To my knowledge, there is currently no critical edition or English translation.

10. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, bk. 2, §23.

11. See, e.g., Shaw, *Sublime*. Axelsson, *Sublime*.

is perhaps best treated at another time. Suffice it to say, the Baumgarten-Kantian heritage, wherein beauty is identified in some form or another as the result of a judgment of taste upon some phenomena, comes to mark the whole of the modern project of aesthetics.

By the time aesthetics becomes recognized as a independent branch of academic discourse, it has eclipsed beauty despite the fact that "the aesthetic" remains a rather vague reference. In his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Society for Aesthetics, to cite as one bit of evidence, Kendall Walton calls aesthetics a "strange field and in some ways a confused one," whose "confusion is that of an adolescent trying to find itself."[12] Walton proceeds to explain that despite the confusion surrounding whatever it is that the name "aesthetics" signifies, one thing is certain: the "aesthetic" has for most replaced beauty.[13] For many in the various other fields (philosophy, sociology, history, anthropology, etc.), beauty is left behind as a vestige of a primitive past to make room for the aesthetic.[14] This signals a remarkable shift in the development of Western thought that in many ways parallels the shift of philosophical focus from being to thought within certain dominant modes of modern philosophical enquiry. And if the "aesthetic" in itself remains rather confused and without a solid identity, what might that mean for a mode of theology that aspires to appropriate it for its purposes? It is the hope of the present project to minimize any confusion that might shadow various configurations of theological aesthetics, not by reestablishing beauty's superiority over the aesthetic, but by reawakening contemporary consciousness to the necessity of beauty's role that has long shaped the origins of Western thought in all human thinking and being. It is hoped that by illuminating the way that beauty is understood in its association with the divine, space may continue to be opened to begin to rethink its importance for the theological task today.

In this sense, the present project views itself as contributing, not only to the broad work of theology in general, but also to all enterprises that identify themselves as theological aesthetics. Nevertheless, an important distinction must be noted. The division between the aesthetic and beauty that arises with the modern period and endures today bears itself out as a distinction within theological aesthetics, not unlike the distinction between knowing and being that acquires more emphasis in modern philosophy. On the one hand, there are those modes of theological aesthetics that,

12. Walton, "Aesthetics,"147.
13. Ibid., 149. Cf. also Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness,* 10.
14. E.g., Dufrene, *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique*.

conceding the primacy of the aesthetic over beauty, configure the theological task in dialogue with the "arts" as that term is understood today. This approach to theological aesthetics in general does not dismiss questions of beauty, but rather casts them within the context of artistic agencies and works. This approach contends that the various mysteries that theology investigates may be illuminated by applying strategies, grammars, ways of thinking, ways of perceiving, ways of performing, etc. that derive from the many modes of artistic expression and experience.[15] On the other hand, there are those modes of theological aesthetics that emphasize the role and significance of beauty as a primary component of the theological enterprise. Throughout the Western intellectual tradition, from the ancient Greeks well up until the high middle ages, beauty is understood as both spiritual and material, as that mode of being that gives form, as the power of being to entice the intellect through formal proportion and symmetry into being's own ontological depths. For these reasons and others, there is a ready-made fittingness between beauty and Christian theology: deriving as it does from the person of Jesus Christ—the very incarnation of the perfect proportion and symmetry between the material and the spiritual—Christian theology sees in beauty a powerful ally as it attempts to engage and illuminate the many mysteries that come to constitute its object. A similar perspective motivates contemporary practitioners of theological aesthetics who emphasize the place and significance of beauty. Quite naturally, with few exceptions, this mode of theological aesthetics also tends to embody a strong metaphysical dimension. However, because the term "metaphysics" names diverse modes of mindfulness that—*pace* Heidegger—cannot be subsumed under one characterization, it is configured in varying ways within this second mode of theological aesthetics. For example, the way that metaphysics factors into the Balthasarian project—as the history of Western philosophy's narrative(s) of being—differs in many significant respects from the way it factors into Hart's project, which configures metaphysics as the rhetorical power of Christ's beauty. Nevertheless, both may validly be considered metaphysical insofar as they, and other such configurations of theological aesthetics, attempt to examine the relation between the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the "beyond" physical, the finite and the infinite, or the created and the Creating. In sum, then, within this intra-theological aesthetic distinction between the aesthetic and beauty, the present project sees itself as between the two insofar as it examines beauty as a divine name. A divine

15. See, e.g., Begbie, *Beholding the Glory*; Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*.

name, as will be explained further on, is conceived as a communication of God's very self into the created order; it is a divine perfection that enters into the formal constitution of created entities. Examining beauty in this sense, then, has obvious resonances with the second mode of theological aesthetics that includes a strong metaphysical dimension. But it also holds relevance for the first mode insofar as it enables a more complete portrait of the foundations upon which all arts situate themselves, and the ends to which all arts, consciously or unconsciously, are striving.

A second question is why Dionysius and why Aquinas? The reasons for examining the issue of beauty as a divine name in Dionysius the Areopagite are straightforward: within the history of Christian theology, this enigmatic figure is the first to enlist beauty within the tradition of the divine names. To be sure, he is not the first to include the divine names in his theological synthesis; given its place in later Neoplatonism, the divine names as a theological trope influences a great number of Greek Fathers. Until the *Corpus Dionysiacum* makes its appearance in the sixth century, however, beauty is not included among the divine names as used by Christian theologians. Examining the historical contours of this matter may enable a more complete picture of the Dionysian project, both in itself and in its relation to its influences, textual sources, and historical context. And a more complete picture of Dionysius may contribute to further understanding the thinkers of the middle ages upon whom his influence cannot be overstated. In this respect, Aquinas serves not only as a representative of the scholastic embodiment of the Dionysian project, but also as one of Dionysius's most notable collaborators. More than any other figure including Aristotle, Dionysius exercises the most influence upon Thomas at least if frequency of citation is the determining criteria. Understandably, some would point to the number of commentaries Thomas wrote, and perhaps the esteem given to Aristotle as "the philosopher," rather than frequency of citation in order to emphasize his Aristotelian influence. But even if such a point is valid, it does not merit the degree to which Aristotle has eclipsed Dionysius in the history of Thomistic commentary and scholarship. Examining the issue of beauty as a divine name in Aquinas serves to contribute to a more complete portrait of the Angelic Doctor as well as a more complete portrait of the commentary tradition that he generates and the influence that he exercises upon a host of philosophical and theological thought.

With all the preceding in mind, the present work proceeds as follows. It is divided into three primary parts, each addressing distinct phases

of the development of beauty's association with the divine. Part 1, which consists of the first two chapters, examines the origins of the association between beauty and the divine as those origins are conceived and expressed in ancient Greek thought. Chapter 1 examines the work of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom bear tremendous importance to the Western understanding of beauty in general and the relation between beauty and the divine in particular. However, what emerges from this study is that despite their every effort, neither thinker is ultimately able to overcome the ambiguity inherent to beauty. In fact, it is in large part thanks to their remarkable philosophical skills that this ambiguity is revealed. It is an ambiguity that derives from the fact that beauty is somehow both a fully spiritual phenomenon, but somehow essentially bound up with the transient, material order. Both philosophers provide their most significant contributions not only in terms of the positive content of beauty they discover, but more so in drawing out the complex contours of beauty's inherent ambiguity. Chapter 2 then examines the issue as it is taken up into Neoplatonic projects of Plotinus and Proclus. Like Plato and Aristotle, both Neoplatonists contribute significant ideas to understanding the positive content of beauty. And also like Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus and Proclus continue to throw light on the inherent ambiguity within beauty's association with the supreme principle, in this case the One Good. One subtle difference, however, between these Neoplatonists and their philosophical predecessors that will be drawn out in this second chapter is the way in which the more spiritual or religious dimension of Neoplatonism enables it to somewhat relieve beauty's ambiguity by crystalizing the ambiguity itself into a paradigmatic middle. In other words, the more spiritual or religious dimension allows Neoplatonism to recognize ambiguity itself as thought's mystical "other" rather than having to philosophically resolve it. But crystalizing the ambiguity is not so much an act of overcoming it as it is a concession to it. The fundamental argument in this first part is that despite their remarkable efforts, the great minds of Greek thought are simply unable to find a way to mediate the spiritual dimension of beauty with its essential bond to the material, transient order.

Part 2 examines the way in which the Dionysian phenomenon establishes the foundations for understanding the identity between beauty and God. Chapter 3 begins the examination by exploring the so-called tradition of the divine names. It is a tradition that Dionysius refers to in the opening chapter of his treatise, but that he never mentions again anywhere in his corpus. The obvious foundation that many scholars believe

constitutes this tradition is the Neoplatonic configuration especially as it is worked out in Proclus. Given the historical context in which Dionysius is believed to have lived and studied, the important Procline influence cannot be overlooked. However, a close examination of the Dionysian treatise reveals several important differences between the way he understands the tradition of the divine names and the way that tradition appears throughout Neoplatonism. One must look, therefore, to the biblical tradition that, by Dionysius's own declaration, provides the central foundation for his whole corpus. It will be the task of the third chapter to examine the ways in which both traditions factor into the Dionysian understanding of the divine names.

Chapters 4 and 5 proceed with an examination of beauty as it is found in the Dionysian treatise *On the Divine Names*. A primary feature of beauty in the Dionysian account is that it refers both to God as he is in himself and God as he is in his communicative self-disclosure. How exactly Dionysius comes to this association is not definitively clear, but evidence can be acquired from the way in which he develops Neoplatonic thought. It is believed that one particularly original move made by Dionysius is to unite the One and the *nous* of Neoplatonism into two dimensions of the one Judeo-Christian Godhead: the One becomes aligned with God as he is in himself, while *nous* becomes aligned with God as he is in his self-communicative disclosure. The present work argues that when the addition of beauty to the tradition of the divine names is read alongside this other original development, one may speak of a coincidence of originality with respect to beauty as a divine name. Beauty associated with God as he is in himself is primarily configured as a transcendental plenitude and provides the content for chapter 4, while beauty associated with God as he is in his self-communicative disclosure is primarily configured as a principle of determination and provides the content for chapter 5.

Finally, part 2 is brought to a conclusion with chapter 6, which examines the relation between the Dionysian God who is beauty and the Neoplatonic One. This issue becomes important given the widespread view among twentieth-century scholars that the Dionysian God is little more than the Neoplatonic One disguised in Christian garments. As this chapter argues, however, when one considers the association between beauty and God in Dionysius, it becomes evidently clear that the Areopagite is far removed from viewing God as the Neoplatonic One.

Part 3 then examines the issue of beauty as a divine name as it appears in Thomas's commentary on the Dionysian text. In order to establish

some important foundational points for the examination, however, the first two chapters of part 3 consider some historical developments: chapter 7 examines the journey that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* undergoes as it travels to the Latin West and eventually arrives at the University of Paris, while chapter 8 examines the journey that beauty's association with the divine undergoes as it is passed on through the various thinkers, traditions, and schools of thought. Chapter 9 then examines beauty as a divine name in Thomas's teacher Albertus Magnus, through whom the Dionysian spirit is primarily passed on to Thomas. Although there are many similarities between Albert and Thomas, the differences serve to not only distinguish Thomas from his teacher but also to illuminate Thomas's own thought more clearly.

Building upon these historical developments, the final three chapters contain a specific examination of Thomas's treatment of beauty in his *Commentary on the Divine Names*. As of the writing of the present work, there are no extant English of French translations of the commentary, a fact which in many ways may account for the incomplete, if not insufficient, portrait of Thomas's views of beauty. The argument that runs throughout these final three chapters is that beauty for Thomas is primarily a theological phenomenon deriving as it does from the Dionysian tradition of the divine names. Chapter 10 provides a close reading of how Thomas understands the nature of a divine name as this notion appears throughout the commentary. What comes to light from this reading is that, although expressing himself through a scholastic idiom that may appear to suggest otherwise, Thomas does not veer very far from the Dionysian understanding that a divine name is in between God in himself and God in his self-communication. Chapter 11 then examines the various ways in which Thomas understands beauty as he encounters it within the pages of the Dionysian text, while chapter 12 examines the way that Thomas develops his doctrine of beauty as a divine name in his later work. The focus in chapter 12 will be on the *Summa Theologiae*, though other important works will be taken into consideration.

Most fundamentally, the present work is an examination and exposition of a relation and relations. The primary relation concerns that between beauty and God, but this relation is such that it embodies several others: the relation between the material and the spiritual, between the created and the Creating, between nature and that which transcends nature, between various created entities, between thought and being, between faith and reason, and even, though in a very subtle way, between grace and

nature. Such relations within relations is a fitting orientation from which to begin an exploration of beauty as a divine name.