

Aquinas on Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*

Besides writing an extensive and perceptive commentary on *The Divine Names*, Aquinas cited Dionysius more than 1700 times throughout his writings, referring nine hundred times to *The Divine Names*, and half that number again to *The Celestial Hierarchy*. The former discusses the biblical names of God, the latter considers the biblical depiction of the angels. Thomas did not write a commentary on *The Celestial Hierarchy*, but his frequent use of the text, either as an authority or to explicate a point of doctrine, illustrates the importance he attributed to the shorter treatise. These references occur in the widest possible range of contexts, but relate primarily to transcendent (divine and angelic) realities. In this paper I will refer, firstly, to Aquinas' realm of *The Celestial Hierarchy* on the ascent of knowledge from the material to the spiritual domain and, secondly, his interpretation of hierarchy both as a general principle of universal order and as the graded distinction between the angelic orders.

Dionysius opens *The Celestial Hierarchy* with a verse from James the apostle which echoes and endorses the Platonist tradition of the gift and inspiration of light: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." (James 1:17) The introductory paragraph is a précis of the entire Neoplatonic design of the universe, which provided in turn the dynamic structure for Aquinas' *Summa*: its immanence in the divine plenitude, outward procession, and final reversion. Dionysius enunciates the universal architectonic principle of *exitus* and *reditus* — the emanation of the cosmos from the originary transcendent One and its return to source. All things unfurl from the divine plenitude into a multiplicity of creatures, each of which harbours a profound desire to be reunited to its creative cause. The latter impulse is reflected in knowledge through the hidden power of material objects to raise us to knowledge of spiritual realities and ultimately of their divine origin. Just as there is a descending gradation of perfection among creatures from the highest to the lowest, so the inverse discovery of God occurs through a phased ascent from the material through the spiritual to divine reality. Angels, the immaterial beings which occupy the most elevated level among creatures, are known indirectly by analogy with material objects and have in turn a revelatory function in disclosing something of God's nature.

Dionysius invokes Jesus, "Light of the Father", to help us contemplate the hierarchies of the celestial intelligences which are revealed for our upward elevation (121B: ἀναγωγή,

ἀναγωγικῶς).¹ He exhorts: “To the best of our abilities, we should raise our eyes to the paternally transmitted enlightenment coming from sacred scripture and, as far as we can, we should behold the intelligent hierarchies of heaven in accordance with what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion.” (121A) The author’s stated purpose is to explain how it is possible for mortals to describe and understand the manner in which angels are revealed in Scripture. Although he asserts that we can only know divine realities by means of revelation, he interprets such knowledge in Neoplatonist terms; he has accordingly been characterised as both a Platonizing Christian and a Christianizing Platonist.

Hierarchy is the divinely established order by which creatures are arranged according to their proximity to God. Occupying the highest rank, angels as purely spiritual creatures surpass our knowledge and can be known only indirectly. We are bodily beings, our cognition rooted in material reality; all knowledge begins in the senses but is invested with a supervenient meaning, hence the need for symbolic or figurative thought and language. This is the strategy employed by Scripture; the Father of Light “through figurative symbols reveals to us the most blessed hierarchies of the angels”. Knowledge of angels leads upwards to knowledge of God; from them we rise “with immaterial and steadfast eyes of the mind to the primal splendour of the divine origin itself”. (121B)

God’s mystery is such that he can enlighten us only if he remains hidden by a variety of veils which are suited to our nature: “This divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the Providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings.” (121BC)² Likewise our knowledge of angelic pure intelligences can only be expressed through material symbols. Dionysius outlines the status of the angelic hierarchy, the manner of its description in Scripture, and its role in revealing the transcendent divinity: “[God] clothed these immaterial hierarchies in numerous material figures and forms so that, in a way appropriate to our nature, we might be uplifted from these most venerable images to interpretations and assimilations which are simple and inexpressible. For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate

¹ References in the text (*CH*) are to Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 3. Translations of Dionysius are from Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

² See *Ep.* 9, 1108AB; *DN* 1, 1, 592B and Aquinas’ commentary, *In DN* 1, 2, 64–65. Also *ST* I-II 99, 3 ad 3; *ST* III 60, 4; *In Boeth. de Trin.* 6, 3.

the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires.” (121CD) Notable is Dionysius’ emphasis on the empirical origin and nature of knowledge, which he also understands as a generous gift of God.

According to Dionysius, physical appearances of beauty are images of invisible loveliness (121D); beautiful odours are figures of intelligible diffusion; material lights are images for the gift of immaterial light. The entire physical universe symbolically mirrors the supernatural realm: “Order and rank here below are a sign of the harmonious ordering toward the divine realm... And so it goes for all the gifts transcendentally received by the beings of heaven, gifts which are granted to us in a symbolic mode.” (121D–124A)

Out of love for mankind, wishing to make us godlike, God revealed the heavenly hierarchies to us in a manner proportionate to our nature. “He revealed all this to us in the sacred pictures of the scriptures so that he might lift us in spirit up through the perceptible to the conceptual, from sacred shapes and symbols to the simple peaks of the hierarchies of heaven.” (121C–124A) Dionysius’ aim in *The Celestial Hierarchy* is to examine the manner in which angels are depicted in Scripture. Since they are immaterial beings, the question arises how they can be known and named by humans whose cognitive activity is rooted in sense experience. A similar question arises regarding our knowledge of God, hence Aquinas’ frequent references to Dionysius’ approach to angels when dealing with language and thought about God.

Contrasting the Old and New Testaments Dionysius pithily remarked in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: “The one wrote truth by way of images, while the other described things as they happened.” (EH 432B) Chapter 2 of *The Celestial Hierarchy* examines the images used in Scripture to refer to angels and God. Dionysius’ purpose is to defend the use of symbols, especially those which seem inappropriate or offensive. We should not impiously believe, with the uneducated masses, he states, that the heavenly and godlike intelligences are many-footed and many-faced, are modelled on the stupidity of oxen or ferocity of lions, or that they have the curved beak of an eagle or the wings and feathers of a bird. (137A) Scripture, Dionysius suggests, uses poetic imagery to depict formless intelligences in a way that is suited to our mind. Its aim is to lift us up in a way that befits our nature; the word used by Dionysius, ἀναγωγή (ἀνάγω = lead upwards), expresses the function of theology to elevate human nature.

Dionysius considers the objection that it is incongruous to depict angels, who are intrinsically simple, unknown and inconceivable, by means of images. Would it not have been

more appropriate to attribute to them forms akin to their nature, drawn from the most honourable, immaterial, and transcendent realities, instead of ascribing to what is utterly simple and godlike a multiplicity of the lowliest earthly forms? In his reply Dionysius gives two reasons why forms are attributed to what is formless, and shapes to the shapeless. Firstly, since we lack the capacity to directly ascend to intellectual visions, we need an uplift suited to our nature to raise us to the forms of the shapeless and marvelous sights. (140A) Secondly, it is proper for the mysteries of scripture that the sacred and secret truth of the celestial intelligences be hidden from the common crowd, since not everyone is holy and, as Scripture states, not everyone has knowledge. (140B) To the accusation of incongruous representation, that it is shameful to ascribe base forms to the divine and holy ranks, Dionysius explains that divine revelation operates a double strategy, using both images which bear a true likeness to divine beings, as well as unlike forms that are dissimilar and absurd. (140C) Examples of the first kind of names are ‘Word’, ‘Mind’, and ‘Being’: these reveal God’s rationality and wisdom, and that as subsisting existence he is cause of beings; he is portrayed as light, and praised as life. (140C) These names, Dionysius acknowledges, while more honourable and vastly superior to those drawn from the material world, are likewise deficient, since God transcends all existence and life; no light can represent him; reason and intellect are incomparably deficient in their resemblance.³

Scripture also praises God through negative names such as “invisible”, “infinite”, and “unlimited”, and other designations which show not what he is, but what he is not. (140D) This approach, Dionysius states, is more authoritative (κυριώτερόν) since, in accordance with the secret and sacred tradition, God in no way resembles any of the things that exist, and we have no knowledge of his supra-existential, incomprehensible, and unspeakable infinitude. (141A) Negations regarding divine matters are therefore true while affirmations are unsuited to the secrets of the ineffable; it is more fitting that invisible realities be revealed through dissimilar representations. (141A) Instead of degrading the heavenly ranks through unlikely resemblances, their use by Scripture suggests how greatly angels transcend all things material. Incongruities, he suggests, will lift up our mind more than similarities. Noble images could

³ The examples given here are not images of physical objects, but (with the exception of light) pure perfections free of intrinsic limitation. As such they may be affirmed of God by proper analogy rather than symbolically. In the continuation Dionysius addresses the attribution of incongruous images and dissimilar likenesses to God. See *In II Sent.* 16, 1, 2 ad 5, cited below.

delude us with a false knowledge of the heavenly realm, which is why the sacred writers wisely introduced “unseemly dissimilarities” and “dissimilar similarities”⁴ to spur the mind to rise beyond base matter. It should also be remembered, Dionysius notes, that there is nothing that is bereft of beauty, as affirmed by Genesis: “Everything is very good.” (141C)

Aquinas draws much inspiration and guidance from the early paragraphs of *The Celestial Hierarchy*. As well as noting Dionysius’ emphasis on the primacy of negative theology, he cites the treatise on the importance of figurative or metaphoric language as the vehicle which conveys a knowledge of God through his likeness to creatures. The opening lines of *The Celestial Hierarchy* are cited in *ST I*, 9, which considers God’s immutability. One of the objections which Aquinas raises against his own position cites the assertion in the Bible that wisdom is more mobile (*mobilior*) than any moving thing (Wisdom 7:24). But since God is wisdom itself, the objection concludes, he is therefore movable. In his reply Aquinas explains that wisdom is called mobile by way of similitude (*similitudinarie*). The ensuing explanation unmistakably reflects the spirit of the opening lines of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, blending the Neoplatonist theories of emanation, hierarchy, similitude and participation with the efficient and formal principles of Aristotelian causality. Aquinas explains:

To call wisdom mobile is a metaphorical way of saying that wisdom diffuses its likeness even to the outermost of things; for nothing can exist which does not proceed from the divine wisdom by way of some kind of imitation, as from the first efficient and formal principle; as also works of art proceed from the wisdom of the maker. And so in the same way, since the likeness of the divine wisdom proceeds in degrees from the highest things, which participate more fully of its likeness, to the lowest things which participate of it in a lesser degree, there is said to be a kind of procession and movement of the divine wisdom to things; as when we say that the sun proceeds to the earth, inasmuch as the ray of light touches the earth. In this way Dionysius (*CH 1*) expounds the matter, that every procession of the divine manifestation comes to us from the movement of the Father of light.⁵

Aquinas relies heavily on the authority of Dionysius in affirming the valid use of metaphor in speaking about God. He approvingly quotes *CH 1*, that “the divine glory shows us the angelic hierarchies under certain symbolic figures, and by its power we are brought back

⁴ *CH 137C*, 141B: ἀπεμφανούσας ἀνομοιότητας; 137D–140A: ἀνόμοιοι ὁμοιότητες.

⁵ *ST I*, 9, 1 ad 2.

to the single ray of light.”⁶ Revealed in figurative images, angels lead us to the knowledge of God who is their original source. Aquinas’ detailed discussions on metaphor in theology occur in his commentary on Book I of the *Sentences* (*In I Sent.* 34, 3, 1: *Utrum aliquid debeat dici translative de Deo*) and the first question of *Summa Theologiae* (*ST I*, 1, 9: *Utrum uti debeat metaphoricis vel symbolicis locutionibus*). Dionysius features throughout the discussion: in the initial objections, *Sed contra* paragraphs, responses and replies.

One of the objections in the commentary on the *Sentences* cites Dionysius’ statement that symbolic utterances are veils of the truth and as such have no role in theology.⁷ In the *Sed contra* Aquinas cites the Areopagite’s assertion that the divine radiance can only shine upon us when veiled in a variety of likenesses. He explains: “The divine ray is the truth of divine realities. It is therefore necessary that the truth of divine realities be presented to us under bodily likenesses.”⁸ Aquinas’ reply is based entirely on Dionysius, listing four reasons why it is fitting to designate the divine by bodily likenesses. These four reasons, he states, are given at the start of *The Celestial Hierarchy* and in Dionysius’ letter to Titus. The primary reason is the lofty nature of the matter, which surpasses our intellectual capacity: we cannot comprehend divine truth as it is in itself, hence it must be presented to us according to our cognitive mode (*secundum modum nostrum*). It is natural for us to come to intelligible reality from sensible realities, as we come to what is prior from what is posterior; intelligible realities are presented to us under the shape of sensible things, so that the mind may rise from the things which we know to those we do not.

The second reason why the divine is represented through bodily images is the twofold nature of human cognition, which is both sensitive and intellectual. Divine wisdom has ordained that each should lead us to the divine according to its capacity; he therefore employed corporeal figures which the sensitive part can grasp, since it cannot comprehend the intellectual nature of divine things.⁹ The third reason why divine realities are described through bodily likenesses is that we know of God more truly what he is not than what he is. Dionysius states that affirmations regarding divine realities are vague, while negations are true (*Dionysius dicit, quod in divinis affirmationes sunt incompactae, negationes verae*), a statement cited with

⁶ *ST II-II*, 180, 5 ad 2.

⁷ *In I Sent.* 34, 3, 1, arg. 3.

⁸ *In I Sent.* 34, 3, 1, *Sed contra*.

⁹ *In I Sent.* 34, 1.

frequency by Aquinas in his theory of divine names.¹⁰ Since things affirmed of God are to be understood not as they are present in creatures, but by imitation and according to their likeness, God's eminence is made more evident by things that are most clearly removed from him. These are corporeal realities, hence it is more suitable that God be signified by bodily forms, so that the human mind, accustomed to them, might learn that what it affirms of God is predicated only through a certain likeness, insofar as the creature imitates the creator. A weakness of this argument, it might be objected, is that God is denoted more satisfactorily by the removal of higher realities since these resemble him more closely. Aquinas' point seems to be that all likeness to God is through analogy and imitation, a fact that is more obvious in the case of names drawn from lower things.

The fourth reason given by Aquinas in his commentary on the *Sentences* as to why divine realities are veiled in corporeal images is that divine truth should remain concealed; the profound mysteries of the faith are to be safeguarded from derision by infidels and errors of the simple-minded. Aquinas seems to suggest that the obscure character of material symbols preserves the divine mysteries; they do not readily proclaim the truth to all and sundry but require enlightened interpretation. Aquinas gives a similar reply to the objection based on Dionysius' assertion that metaphors and symbols are veils of the truth, and therefore unsuited for use in theology. He replies that the revelation of truth is made according to the capacity of the recipient. For some this may be a hindrance rather than a help, either because they would attack it out of impiety, or misunderstand it due to their simplicity. The truth of divine realities must therefore be concealed to preserve its mystery.¹¹

In *ST I*, 1, 9 Aquinas also relies on Dionysius when approving the use of metaphor in theology:

It befits scripture to present divine and spiritual realities under the likenesses of material things. For God provides for all things in a manner suited to their nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge has its origin in sense. Hence in sacred scripture, spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the metaphors of material things. This is what Dionysius says (*CH 1*): "The divine ray cannot enlighten us unless it is hidden within the covering of many sacred veils." It also befits Sacred Scripture . . . that spiritual truths be presented under bodily likenesses, so

¹⁰ *In I Sent.* 34, 3, 1.

¹¹ *In I Sent.* 34, 3, 1, ad 3.

that even the simple who are unable to grasp intellectual things in themselves may be able to understand it.¹²

To the objection that theological truths are obscured rather than illuminated by physical likenesses, Aquinas replies:

The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery with which it is veiled, as Dionysius says (*CH* 1); and its truth so far remains that it does not allow the minds of those to whom the revelation has been made, to rest in likenesses, but raises them to the knowledge of intelligible realities; and through those to whom the revelation has been made others also may receive instruction in these matters. Hence those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly (*expressius exponuntur*). The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds and as a defense against the ridicule of the impious, according to the words “Give not that which is holy to dogs.” (Matthew 7:6)¹³

To the objection that representations of God should be taken primarily from higher creatures rather than lower, since they are closer to the divine likeness, Aquinas again cites Dionysius (*CH* 1) that it is more fitting that divine truths be presented under the figures of less noble than of nobler bodies.¹⁴ In support of Dionysius’ position he adduces three reasons, instead of the four offered in his earlier commentary on the *Sentences*. He states, firstly, that men’s minds are better preserved from error if divine realities are described in more lowly forms: “For then it is clear that these things are not literal descriptions of divine truths, which might have been open to doubt had they been expressed under the figure of nobler bodies, especially for those who could think of nothing nobler than bodies.” Secondly, metaphorical images based upon material objects are more in keeping with the knowledge we have of God in this life, since we know more of God what he is not than what he is; similitudes drawn from things furthest away from him convey better that he is above what we may say or think of him. The third reason, stated succinctly, is that when clothed in metaphor, divine truths are better hidden from the unworthy.

¹² *ST* I, 1, 9, co. See *CH* 1, 2.

¹³ *ST* I, 1, 9 ad 2.

¹⁴ *ST* I, 1, 9 ad 3.

Dionysius repeatedly refers to the creaturely terms attributed to God as “unlike likenesses” or “dissimilar similitudes”. Aquinas seems to interpret such deficient likeness or similitude simply as metaphor, which he contrasts with the proper likeness of analogy. In his early commentary on Book 2 of the *Sentences* he states:

The divine properties are shown forth in creatures in two ways. Either they are shown forth according to likeness of analogy, as in the case of life, wisdom, and things of this sort, which befit God and creatures analogously. And in this way the divine properties are especially shown in the rational nature. Or they are shown forth according to likeness of proportion, insofar as spiritual properties are designated metaphorically by corporeal things. And in this way the divine properties are shown forth in fire, as has been said. But this likeness does make for the character of image. Hence Dionysius calls it an unlike likeness.¹⁵

In his commentary on Book 3 of the *Sentences* St Thomas writes: “A created thing’s likeness to God is of two sorts. One is according to participation (*secundum participationem*) in the divine goodness, just as all things partake of life by his living. In this way the rational creature, in whom is found being, living, and understanding, is most like God... Another likeness is according to proportion (*secundum proportionem*), as if one were to speak of a likeness between God and fire because just as fire consumes a body, so God consumes wickedness. And this likeness is needed in figurative speech and attributes; in *CH 2* Dionysius calls this ‘unlike likeness’ (*dissimilem similitudinem*).”¹⁶

The contrast introduced here by Aquinas between likeness through participation and likeness through proportion invites comment. Does not likeness through participation correspond to the measure or proportion in which the creature receives the perfection endowed by God? Likeness by participation may equally be termed “likeness by proportion”. What Aquinas refers to here as “likeness according to proportion” is the limited likeness conveyed by metaphor, which is why he refers to it as figurative. It is indeed an “unlike likeness” since what is conveyed, in the example given, is a pale similarity which conveys the distance between divine light and earthly fire, rather than their intrinsic kinship or similitude. Wisdom and life, on the other hand, are properly attributed both to God and to intelligent creatures, proportionately to the latter, infinitely to the creator. To understand the “unlike likeness” of

¹⁵ *In II Sent.* 16, 1, 2 ad 5.

¹⁶ *In III Sent.* 2, 1, 1, ad 3.

metaphor or figurative speech as a likeness of proportion (*similitudo proportionis*), as distinct from likeness of analogy (*similitudo analogiae*), which is the case with goodness, life or intelligence, is curious, since proportion is of the essence of analogy. Greek ἀναλογία is translated as *proportio*. There is an immeasurable difference between the attribution of a sensible likeness to God and the predication of such pure perfections as goodness, life and intelligence. The former is metaphoric and extrinsic; the latter intrinsic, analogical, and proportional in the proper sense.

In *ST I*, 88, 2 Aquinas gives a more characteristic explanation in his response to the question whether our intellect can understand immaterial substances from its knowledge of material objects. Against his own view that such knowledge is not possible, he anticipates an objection based on Dionysius' authority: "It would seem that our intellect can arrive at a knowledge of immaterial substances through the knowledge of material things. For Dionysius says that 'the human mind cannot be raised up to immaterial contemplation of the heavenly hierarchies, unless it follows material guidance in a manner according to its nature.' (*CH* 1, 3, 121CD) Therefore we can be led by material things to understand immaterial substances."¹⁷ In his reply Aquinas gives his own moderate position by clarifying Dionysius' intention: "We can rise from material things to some kind of knowledge of immaterial things, but not to a perfect knowledge because there is not a sufficient proportion (*comparatio*) between material and immaterial realities. Likenesses, if they are taken from material realities in order to understand the immaterial, are very dissimilar, as Dionysius says."¹⁸ Interestingly the *Sed contra* of the question also refers to Dionysius: "On the other hand, Dionysius says (*DN* 1, 1, 588) that intelligible objects cannot be known by sensible realities, nor simple objects by the composite, or the incorporeal by the corporeal."¹⁹

Sensible figures cannot adequately represent the perfection of pure spirits; they denote certain notions, but only imperfectly. Thomas draws from this idea of Dionysius, expressed many times, a more general theory of knowledge by analogy, both of God and pure spirits. He clarifies that the relation between the material and immaterial varies according to each degree of being and the corresponding level of knowledge. Human nature, which has to God a resemblance of participation, is more suited to manifesting him than the purely sensible which

¹⁷ *ST I* 88, 2, arg. 1.

¹⁸ *ST I* 88, 2 ad 1.

¹⁹ *ST I*, 88, 2, *Sed contra*.

has only a resemblance of improper (imagined or transferred) proportion. Our knowledge of angels, while also analogical, is less inadequate because as fellow creatures we are not disproportionately distinct, as both angels and men are from God.

Aquinas on Dionysian Hierarchy

An important concept which framed the background to Dionysius' understanding of angels was the principle of hierarchy, adopted from Proclus. In the global order every creature occupies its allotted place, fulfilling a specific function within the scale of beings and thus contributing to the perfection and beauty of the universe. According to the Neoplatonic concepts of hierarchy, unity and harmony, the diversity of creatures is ordered in a vertical scale from higher to lower: God at the summit, with creatures gradually descending in a cascade of decreasing perfection. Central to this conception were the allied principles of continuity and mutual cooperation, according to which the highest degree of the inferior order touches the lowest degree of its superior.

In the following paragraph from *CH 4*, Dionysius provides a comprehensive statement of the radical origin of the created universe in God's diffusive goodness, as well as the diversity and hierarchy of beings:

One truth must be affirmed above all else. It is that the transcendent Deity has out of goodness established the existence of everything and brought it into being. It is characteristic of the universal cause, of this goodness beyond all, to summon everything to communion with him to the extent that this is possible. Hence everything in some way partakes of the providence flowing out of this transcendent Deity which is the originator of all that is. Indeed nothing could exist without some share in the being and source of everything. Even the things which have no life participate in this, for it is the transcendent Deity which is the existence of every being. The living, in their turn, have a share in that power which gives life and which surpasses all life. Beings endowed with reason and intelligence have a share in that absolutely perfect, primordially perfect wisdom which surpasses all reason and all intelligence. And, clearly, these latter beings are nearer to God, since their participation in him takes so many forms. (177CD)

With obvious reference to *CH* 4, Aquinas (albeit in an objection), cites Dionysius as distinguishing between four grades of beings: “intellectual, rational, sensible and simply existing”.²⁰

It is noteworthy that in the treatise on *Separated Substances*, having declared his intended reliance on Dionysius as the best guide in the investigation of angels, Aquinas refers to this paragraph from *The Celestial Hierarchy*:

First, as to the origin of the spiritual substances, Christian tradition teaches most firmly that all spiritual substances — like all other creatures — were made by God, and this is proved by the authority of the canonical scriptures. For it is said in the Psalms, “Praise ye him, all his angels; praise ye him all his hosts”. And after all the other creatures have been enumerated, it is added, “For he spoke and they were created: he commanded and they were created.” And Dionysius explains this origin finely in the fourth chapter of *CH* (177C) when he says, “In the first place, it is true to say that the super-essential dignity, by its universal goodness, in establishing the essences of all the things that are, brought them to being.” And after a few words he adds (180AB) that “The celestial substances are first and in many ways made in the participation of God.”²¹

Another comprehensive perspective, inspired by Dionysius occurs in *ST I* 57, 1:

The established order of things is for the higher beings to be more perfect than the lower; and for whatever is contained deficiently, partially, and in manifold manner in the lower beings, to be contained in the higher eminently, and in a certain degree of fulness and simplicity. Therefore, in God, as in the highest source of things, all things pre-exist supersubstantially in respect of his simple being itself, as Dionysius says (*DN* 1). But among other creatures the angels are nearest to God, and resemble him most; hence they share more fully and more perfectly in the Divine goodness, as Dionysius says (*CH* 4). Consequently, all material things pre-exist in the angels more simply and less materially even than in themselves, yet in a more manifold manner and less perfectly than in God.

Besides the general notion of hierarchy adopted from Dionysius, which became a constant in his global outlook, Aquinas recognised the special meaning attached to the

²⁰ *In I Sent.*, 3, 4, 1 arg. 4.

²¹ *Sub. Sep.* 18, Lescoe, 134–135. See *De Pot.*, 3, 16, arg 19.

hierarchical relationship between the angelic orders. It was to express this that Dionysius invented the term “hierarchy”, as defined in *The Celestial Hierarchy*: “In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it.” (164D) In coining the term Dionysius recognised three related iterations: order, understanding, and activity. Their common defining characteristic is proximity to God in the measure proper to each individual, and the knowledge of which each is capable according to its status. A more succinct definition a few lines later states: “The goal of hierarchy is unity and similarity with God insofar as possible.” (165A)

Aquinas is so convinced of the validity of Dionysius’ definition of “hierarchy” that he devoted an entire question to its defence in Book 2 of his commentary on the *Sentences*. He asks if Dionysius’ definition of hierarchy is fitting (*Utrum definitio hierarchiae data a Dionysio, sit conveniens*).²² In his formal response he explains that “hierarchy” means “sacred principate” (*sacer principatus*, from *hieron* + *archon*). Every principate requires “degrees of power and of end” (*gradus potestatis et finis*). Thus in a secular principate subjects are ordered to the good of the prince, as is an army to the good of its leader. He continues: “In a sacred principate the end must be assimilation to God”. Aquinas applies this to the angelic hierarchy, confirming the suitability of Dionysius’ definition: “But the angels can only obtain this end through ordered action (*per ordinatam actionem*), for which ordered power (*ordinata potestas*) and directing knowledge (*scientia dirigens*) are needed. And thus the definition of hierarchy includes order, which expresses degrees of power, knowledge as directing, action as leading to the end, and likeness to God as the end intended.” Against the suitability of Dionysius’ definition Aquinas raises seven objections. These, it may be said, are not of great significance, referring primarily to semantic aspects of the definition.

Angelic Hierarchy

Dionysius invented the term hierarchy (“sacred origin or principle”) to denote the order, understanding, and activity of angels in relation to God, each other, and the world. In reply to the question “How many ranks are there among the heavenly beings? What kind are they? How does each hierarchy achieve perfection?”, Dionysius states that such knowledge is given only through divine revelation:

²² *In II Sent.* 9, 1, 1.

Only the divine source of their perfection could really answer this, but at least they know what they have by way of power and enlightenment and they know their place in this sacred, transcendent order. As far as we are concerned, it is not possible to know the mystery of these celestial minds or to understand how they arrive at most holy perfection. We can know only what the Deity has mysteriously granted to us through them, for they know their own properties well. I have therefore nothing of my own to say about all this and I am content merely to set down, as well as I can, what it was that the sacred theologians contemplated of the angelic sights and what they shared with us about it. (*CH* 6, 1, 200C)

Having emphasised that he is only describing what has been stated about angels in the Bible, Dionysius introduces as authority his “sacred initiator” or “famous teacher” who revealed to him what has become enshrined in tradition as the canonical hierarchy of the angelic order:

The word of God has provided nine explanatory designations for the heavenly beings, and my own sacred-initiator (ὁ θεῖος ἡμῶν ιεροτελεστής) has divided these into three threefold groups. According to him, the first group is forever around God and is said to be permanently united with him ahead of any of the others and with no intermediary. Here, then, are the most holy “thrones” and the orders said to possess many eyes and many wings, called in Hebrew the “cherubim” and “seraphim.” Following the tradition of scripture, he says that they are found immediately around God and in a proximity enjoyed by no other. This threefold group, says my famous teacher (ὁ κλεινὸς ἡμῶν καθηγεμών), forms a single hierarchy which is truly first and whose members are of equal status. No other is more like the divine or receives more directly the first enlightenments from the Deity. The second group, he says, is made up of “authorities,” “dominions,” and “powers.” And the third, at the end of the heavenly hierarchies, is the group of “angels,” “archangels,” and “principalities.” (*CH* 6, 2, 200D–201A)

The “famous teacher”, referred to here as Hierotheus, and credited in *The Divine Names* with the “splendid *Elements of Theology*”,²³ is more than likely an invented character, perhaps an added detail in the author’s fictive strategy. The similarity between the names of the *Θεολογικὰς στοιχειώσεις* attributed to Hierotheus and the *Στοιχείωσις Θεολογική* of Proclus is undeniable; the only question is why the author betrayed such a pertinent hint.

²³ *DN* 3, 2, 681A.

Dionysius posited three triads within the celestial hierarchy, and two in the ecclesiastical; in the latter bishops occupied the summit and communicated directly with the lowest order of angels; there was thus continuity in the descending line of divine munificence and enlightenment. Dionysius conceived the hierarchy as a scale of graded perfection determined by the proximity of the constituent triads to God, their knowledge of God, and the measure of their participation in his activity of enlightening and perfecting the inferior orders. The dynamism of *exitus-reditus*, the architectonic principle of the universe, is mirrored in the upward-downward interplay between the levels, a constant exchange of give-and-take: purification and being purified, enlightening and enlightened.

Following his revered master, Dionysius interprets the biblical denomination of each rank according to the function with which it is associated.²⁴ The Seraphim (“carriers of warmth”) are named for their ardent illumination, the Cherubim their knowledge and wisdom; the Thrones are free from every earthly defect and desire the supremely transcendent. (205BD) The Dominations (κυριότητες) are named for their benevolent rule, the Powers (δυνάμεις) because of their courage, and the Authorities (ἐξουσίες) for their care of lower angels. (237D–240A) The Principalities are marked by their “harmonious exercise of princely powers”; Archangels are interpreters of divine enlightenment; Angels are messengers of God’s word. (257B–260B) The ranks differ according to the measure in which they receive, and transmit to others, the divine light which shines most brightly in the highest order and increasingly less as they become more distant from the divine source.

Aquinas’ primary authority for the nine angelic orders, as for Dionysius, is Scripture which he explicitly invokes as his *auctoritas* in *ST I*, 108: “The name Seraphim is found in Isaiah; Cherubim in Ezechiel; Thrones in Colossians; Dominations, Virtues, Powers, and Principalities in Ephesians; the name Archangels in Jude and Angels in many places of Scripture.”²⁵ Scripture thus guarantees the appropriate naming of the angelic orders. Aquinas relies closely on Dionysius, however, for his interpretation of the angelic ranks revealed by Scripture.²⁶ In the *Sed contra* of *ST I*, 108, 1 he refers to Dionysius in asserting three distinct

²⁴ *CH 7*, 1, 205B. See *ST I*, 112, 4; *ST I*, 106, 2, arg. 2: Sicut Dionysius dicit *CH 7*, nomina Angelorum designant eorum proprietates. Seraphim autem incipientes dicuntur, aut calefacientes, quod est per amorem, qui ad voluntatem pertinet.

²⁵ *ST I*, 108, 5, *Sed contra*.

²⁶ *ST I* 108, 1; *ST I* 108, 2; *ST I* 63, 7; *In II Sent.* 6, 1, 1; *ST I* 108, 4.

angelic hierarchies. In the question, devoted to the angelic hierarchies, he elaborates on Dionysius' definition of hierarchy as "order, knowledge, action".²⁷ The description of hierarchy as *sacer principatus* (sacred rule or authority) conveys the specific sense understood by Dionysius as the proportional sharing by spiritual individuals in divine gifts — as distinct from the graded perfection of the entire universe. The communion in divine gifts is the privilege of angels and humans. They share alike in the gifts bestowed by God, and thus belong to a sacred order that binds them to their divine source: "Since there is one God, ruler not only of all the angels, but also of men and all creatures, so there is one hierarchy, not only of all angels but of all rational creatures who can partake of the sacred things." As spiritual beings, humans and angels enjoy a conscious relationship with God which is lacking in the rest of creation. Significantly, however, in a more radical sense they constitute different hierarchies because they participate differently in the divine gifts: "It is obvious that men and angels receive divine enlightenment differently, since angels receive it in its pure intelligibility, men under sensible likenesses, as Dionysius teaches (*CH* 1, 124). Therefore there must be a distinction between the human and the angelic order."²⁸ The human and angelic hierarchies are distinguished by the manner and measure in which they receive divine illumination.

Parallel to the distinction between men and angels, there is an analogy of discovery between the distinction of hierarchy between angels and men, and the manner in which different angelic grades are distinguished. Just as all angels have knowledge superior to that of men, so there are relative grades of inferior and superior knowledge within the angelic ranks. The grades of perfection relate to the functions which they perform. In the *Sed contra* of *ST* I, 55, 3 Aquinas cites Dionysius as stating that "the higher angels participate in a more universal knowledge than the inferior".²⁹ In the corpus of the article he explains that things are more superior according to their nearness and similarity to the primary unity which is God. God possesses the complete plenitude of knowledge in the perfect unity of his divine essence; he knows all things in a single simple act. Lower intelligences, angelic and human, possess a limited and less simple measure of knowledge. Among intelligences the more superior an angel the fewer ideas he needs to know the universe of intelligible realities. Aquinas remarks, by illustration, that men of stronger intellect grasp many things with fewer ideas.

²⁷ *ST* I, 108, 1, arg. 2.

²⁸ *ST* I, 108, 1.

²⁹ See *CH* 12, 2, 292CD: The Cherubim share in a "higher wisdom and knowledge".

Also in *ST I*, 108, 1, Aquinas, appealing again to Dionysius, explains the distinction between the angelic hierarchies according to the various degrees of universality of knowledge. The highest order grasps the truths of things (*rationes rerum*) as they proceed from the first universal principle who is God. Such knowledge “belongs to the first hierarchy, connected immediately with God, and, ‘as it were, placed in the vestibule of God,’ as Dionysius says (*CH* 7, 2, 208A).” The second angelic rank knows things in their dependence on created universal causes, marked by a certain multiplicity. The third and lowest hierarchy of angels knows universal truths as they are reflected in the multiplicity itself of individual things and depend on particular causes.³⁰ The hierarchies are distinguished, remarks Aquinas, not in the manner in which they know God, since they all know him in the same way, i. e. through his essence, but according to the manner in which they know the diversity of things known.³¹

St Thomas gives an analytic explanation of the meaning and nature of hierarchy, which he applies to the triadic constitution of the angelic realm. The very meaning of hierarchy requires a diversity of orders based on differing offices and acts, as is clear in civic society. But while there are diverse orders, they may be reduced to the simple relationship of beginning, middle, and end. In cities there are three classes: the upper class or nobles, the middle or honourable class and, at the bottom, the common people. He concludes: “So too, then, in each of the angelic hierarchies there are orders, distinct on the basis of diverse acts and offices, but all reducible to three: the highest, the middle and the lowest. This is why Dionysius teaches that in each hierarchy there are three orders.” (*ST I*, 108, 2)

Dionysius rather than St Gregory the Great is Aquinas’ prime authority in assigning the diverse ranks of angels within the triadic orders. This is clear from his reply to the objection in *ST I* 108, 6 which stated that Gregory placed the Principalities above the Powers rather than immediately above the Archangels, as proposed by Dionysius in *CH* 9.³² In the *Sed contra* Aquinas states: “Dionysius (*CH* 7) places in the highest hierarchy the Seraphim as the first, the Cherubim as the middle, the Thrones as the last; in the middle hierarchy he places the Dominations, as the first, the Virtues in the middle, the Powers last; in the lowest hierarchy the Principalities first, then the Archangels, and lastly the Angels.”³³ In the corpus of the article he

³⁰ *ST I*, 108, 2.

³¹ *ST I*, 108, 1 ad 2.

³² *ST I*, 108, 6, arg. 4.

³³ *ST I*, 108, 6, *Sed contra*.

outlines the differences between Dionysius and Gregory. He is eager, however, to minimise the divergence and to acknowledge the scriptural authority of both.³⁴

³⁴ *ST I*, 108, 6; *ST I*, 108, 6 ad 4; *Contra Gentiles* 2, 80.