Dionysian Hierarchy in Thomas Aquinas: Tradition and Transformation


Denys is now central to our reflection on the thought of Thomas Aquinas. This revision both of what we find in Aquinas and of how we judge his thought is enabled by the advance of Neoplatonic scholarship as well as by the change in the moral climate of scholarly investigation. This colloque manifests a sense for traditions, now more adequately balancing the scholarly search for sources, which imagined a return to the purity of the original fountains. The hermeneutical approach has not the moralistic judgementalism exhibited by the older philology when it uncovered the fraud of a pseudoanonymous author and the naiveté of those who accepted his self-representation. We are more ready than our predecessors to appreciate the authenticity of an identification with St. Paul on the Areopagus by one who wished, following him, to lead his hearers to the ‘Unknown God’. Equally, we are not so ready to regard as dupes those who found in Denys the Unknown mysteriously revealed. But, here we move beyond developments and transformations in historical scholarship. We touch what is specific to contemporary developments in religion, philosophy and theology. And so we confront changes in the place which Thomas occupies for us as well as transformations in our representation of his thought.

Our appreciation of the importance of Denys is bound up with the self-overcoming of the Neothomism of the Leonine revival. Erected against what it conceived as modern idealisms, like the condemned ‘Ontologism’, Neothomist suspicion extended even to the Neoplatonism of Augustine. No Platonism served its various purposes. No Platonism, neither ancient nor medieval nor modern, encouraged the separation of philosophy, nature and state from sacred doctrine, grace and church to which Pope Leo would subordinate them. Still less does Neoplatonism reduce theology to a deductive


science of concepts, true thought to realism, or nature to empirically comprehended objectivity. It was no kindness to Aristotle that to his logic these characteristics of the Leonine Thomas were attributed. His Aristotelianism was supposed to be so total that Leonine Neothomists who exposed the magnitude of Thomas’ citation of Denys maintained also that nothing characteristic of his mentality had penetrated Thomas’ mind. 3 Happily, even before the ecclesial revolution associated with the Second Vatican Council made Neothomistic scholasticism irrelevant, it was in decline, having been rendered ineffective or untenable by its two mid Twentieth century heirs: the Thomas of the Thomistic historians and of Transcendental Thomism.

Before moving to them, let us note ironic results of the Leonine revival. It had set out to oppose what it conceived as the totalitarian rationalism which it supposed underlay the all engulfing advance of the modern secular state. But the Thomism it erected against this enemy acquired, in accord with the iron laws of dialectic, the characteristics of the mentality against which it wrestled. So far as the Leonine Thomism has continuing protagonists among us, they are in some measure the disciples of one or another of the baroque Thomistic schools, and they still advance a doctrinal tradition. Now, however, they have been freed from their former service as institutionally enlisted warriors. The result is astonishing. One of them recently treated Thomas’ as if the poles of his thought were Augustine and Denys and maintained in the course of his argument “la doctrine de l’analogie occupe en réalité peu de place dans la pensée de saint Thomas.” 4 Nothing was said of Aristotle! Here Thomists and the best recent historical scholarship can meet. We are now conscious that Aristotle is not best opposed to these Christian Neoplatonists in the neoscholastic manner. 5

The reasoning self through which Augustine reduced the Plotinian hypostases in order to arrive at the trinitarian God and its human image recuperates the Aristotelian NOUS. Equally, an Aristotelian sense for the priority of individual material substance is not to be set against a Dionysian idealistic realism. Rather, insofar as Denys understands the act of creation through a Procline logic which sees the similarity of the top and bottom of the cosmos, the One and pure matter, and which also understands the One as the cause of substance at every level of the universe, Denys assists the recovery of the kind of

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3 See MICHAEL EWBANK, “Remarks on Being in St. Thomas Aquinas’ Expositio de divinis nominibus,” Arch. hist. doct. lit. m. a. 56(1989), 123.
Aristotelian ontology we associate with Aquinas. It is at least as true to say that Thomas understands Aristotle through Denys as the contrary. Moreover, it is the quasi-Apostolic authority of Denys which enabled Aquinas to give so much weight to Aristotle. He found them mostly in agreement and this was not only because for most of his life he thought Aristotle to be the author of the Liber de causis.  

Neither the Transcendental Thomism of the middle of our century, nor that Thomism which regarded itself as more historical, appreciated the weight of Denys for Aquinas. In accord with the Leonine revival, they sought to find philosophy in Thomas, a philosophy separable from theology which could engage secular thought in our time. This was itself a distorting vision and one which would not value Thomas’ relation to the greatest of mystical theologians. But, even more problematic, in the intellectual circumstances of the Leonine revival, the concern with philosophy produced a preoccupation with ontology. Ontology had not obsessed Aquinas as it did these Neothomists and being is for Denys only a name for the superessential God and not even the first. Further, even if the so-called historical Thomism endeavoured to overcome the same modern subjectivity with which the Transcendental school sought a compromise, both assumed what was most fundamental to modern philosophy. Both Twentieth century Thomisms placed the Divine and human subjectivities in immediate relation, no higher intelligence mediated their connection. Both found in judgment’s grasp of the act of being the meeting place of the human and Divine intellects. Both eschewed the mediatorial system whose elaboration composed the bulk of Denys’ writing. These hierarchies had made Denys indispensable to the mediaevals. Aquinas was no exception, even if Boethius and others shared with Denys the authority for Thomas’ view that mediation by way of the higher intellects is essential to the human reception of what God knows.

The purposes of the Leonine revival, Thomas resurrected to correct and persuade our secularity, distorted the pattern of his thinking just where he was close to Denys. However, the Transcendental Thomism, though sharing the general distortion, had more sympathy for some of the Dionysian aspects of Thomas’ thought than did the historians. Remarkably, this was just because the Transcendental school was more open to modernity.

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6 The reference for AQUINAS, “Dionysius almost always follows Aristotle,” is Scriptum super Sententiae, II, dist. 14, 1, 2, (MOOS, p. 350) [my other references to the Commentary on the Sentences follow the edition in BUSA, note 20 below unless indicated]; the most complete consideration of the reason in and for this apparently strange association is BOOTH, Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology.


8 See LUIS CORTEST, “Was St. Thomas Aquinas a Platonist?” The Thomist 52,#2(April, 1988), 209-19. For example, G. MCCOOL, pressing the Transcendental cause, which proposes to be Platonic, Thomistic and contemporary all at once, wrote in “Is St. Thomas’ ‘Science of God’ Still Relevant Today,” International Philosophical Quarterly 14(1974), 453: “Rahner’s metaphysics of being’s self-expression in its other is much closer to Neo-Platonism than St. Thomas’ metaphysics is usually thought to be ... Thomas’ metaphysics of esse, at least in Gilson’s understanding of it, is considered to be distinct from and incompatible with the Neo-Platonic metaphysics of the good.”
than were the historians. Because the school was not so dogmatically and narrowly realist in its epistemology, nor so determined to establish being outside the self, the Transcendental Thomists shared something of the Dionysian assumption that the hierarchy of intellectual forms and the hierarchy of being were the same. Karl Rahner took into the centre of his Thomism the equation from the *Liber de causis* between the perfection of being and intellect’s complete self-return.⁹ Because, like the Neoplatonists, they came to being through the self, and with the Neoplatonists unified the cosmos in accord with the structure of the self, the Transcendental Thomists did not deny that the *summae* were systems. Contemplating the compact and tightly ordered Dionysian corpus, with its explicit references to the inner connection of its own elements, and meditating upon its hierarchies and concepts stimulated medieval systematizing in theology. Here we reach a point of meeting between Christian thinkers in the Sixth, the Thirteenth, and the Twentieth centuries.

Finally, the Transcendental thinkers preferred to find the way to God through the structure which the self exposed in its quests rather than through objective conceptual knowledge. This opened these Thomists to what in Thomas’ assimilation of Denys would most interest the second half of the Twentieth century, namely his negative theology. In their opposition to positive conceptual knowledge as appropriate to philosophical theology, we touch what must occupy us next in this communication and the point where the Transcendental Thomists are one with Étienne Gilson.

The most important of the historical Thomists had no sympathy for the Transcendental school, but, in his view that essence was always finite and that esse was not knowable conceptually, we have the place where Gilson’s opposition to modern idealism meets the Transcendentalist movement toward the post-modern.¹⁰ This is the point where the turn toward Denys among Thomists is one with their positive relation to Heidegger.

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The Twentieth century Thomism which regarded itself as recuperating for us the historical thought of Thomas as against the tendency of the Leonine revival both to assimilate his teaching to a common scholasticism and also to the traditions of the baroque Thomistic commentators was less able to recognize essential features of Thomas’ thought than were some of those who approached Thomas with their own philosophical projects more directly in view. This irony reminds us that philosophy and the study of its history are not separable. It was just the endeavour to find something metaphysically distinctive in Thomas, when combined with the confidence both that what made him distinct would best serve the anti-modern aims of the Leonine revival and also coincide with the post modern in our own world, which was Gilson’s undoing.

Gilson identified in Aquinas an existential metaphysic which he supposed to be the true Christian philosophy, though Thomas, by Gilson’s account, taught this metaphysic in opposition to his contemporaries and almost all his commentators not only missed the crucial point but even assimilated his distinctive position to its opposite! For Gilson, and equally for Maritain, Thomas’ existential metaphysic of Exodus rose out of a return to a sense for Being against all the ancient and medieval idealisms. By Gilson’s account, Thomas’ sense for Being conformed to Heidegger’s most profound reflection, enabled authentic Thomistic ontology to escape the Heideggerian criticism of ontotheology, and stood resolutely against the false subjectivism of modernity. This existential Thomism was opposed to all essentialisms both ancient and modern. Neoplatonism was its ancient foe.

Denys was the main conduit of the Neoplatonism which was essentialism’s most pernicious invasion of Christian metaphysics. Clearly, then, according to Gilson, Thomas used Dionysian thought only to transform it completely into its opposite.

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12 It is now clear, in contrast, that Thomas’ metaphysic of being is both formed in a positive relation to Neoplatonism and retains fundamental elements of Neoplatonic logic. See W.J. HANKEY, “Aquinas’ First Principle,” IDEM, God in Himself, 2-13; PAUL ROREM, Biblical and Liturgical Symbol within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 149 & 150, IDEM, Pseudo-Dionysius. A
apophatic side could be used to squeeze all conceptualization out of the act of being. Thus Denys’ contribution assisted Aquinas to preserve the ontological difference between the Divine Being and beings. Beyond this use within an existential ontology to which Denys was at heart opposed, he contributed nothing to Thomas’ metaphysics.

Professor Gilson’s Thomism is past, being sustainable neither historically nor philosophically. It has been succeeded for many by the work of Cornelio Fabro. Fr. Fabro was one of the first Thomists of the Leonine revival to notice and to give positive attention to the role of participation in the thought of St. Thomas. Although he also paid


great attention to developing a Thomistic ontology and to working out the exact relation between essence and existence in it, he was critical of Gilson. In general Fabro was much more careful about how the construction of that ontology stood to philosophy both in Thomas’ time and in our own. In respect to our circumstances, Fabro realized that Heidegger in fact not only made no exception for Thomas in his history of ontotheology, but also that this was not caused by a simple ignorance of Thomas’ doctrine. Defending Thomas required a criticism of Heidegger. Further he was clear that the genuine engagement with contemporary philosophy which is necessary for the construction and defence of Thomism in our time required that the result be more than the representation of a past historical position.

What was true for our time was equally the case for the Thirteenth century. The philosophic logic Thomas gave to the metaphysic of Exodus 3.13 could not come out of Scripture itself. Fabro did not hold with Gilson that Scripture revealed a philosophical metaphysic which both was privileged as the true Christian philosophy and was therefore protected against dissolution in the movement of rational reflection. Not only was Thomas’ ontology a philosophical construction related to his situation in history, but further, its particular matrix was primarily Neoplatonic and decisively Dionysian. Because of this recognition, Fabro’s Thomism has not been rendered untenable by the historians’ discovery that Thomas’ ontology does not stand against the so-called ‘essentialism’ of earlier pagan, Islamic and Christian Neoplatonists, but rather is anticipated by their developments and is dependent on them.

As a result both of its relation to contemporary and to medieval philosophy, Fabro’s Thomistic ontology is not polemically anti-Platonic, the identity of *esse* and *essentia* in the Divine simplicity is not interpreted, as in Gilson, as if *essentia* had finally been squeezed out. Still, Fabro goes far enough with Heidegger that his formulation of the hierarchy of being in terms of ‘intensity’ is intended to meet something of the Heideggerian criticism of ontotheology. However, and decisively, given that the most recent developments in the discovery of a Dionysian Thomas are by those whose relation to the history of philosophy is primarily determined by Heidegger, negation, even Deny’s negative theology, stands, for Fabro, within ontology, not against it.14

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Let me emphasize this crucial point. For Cornelio Fabro, the negative way is used to modify the forms of conceptually knowable being. The negative way is not rather, as in the subsequent developments, placed against all philosophical theology. Negation and affirmation are ontological and epistemological means for constructing and moving within a hierarchy. That this is true both for Thomas himself and for Fabro’s construction of Thomism is evidently at our moment in philosophy the central point in determining their relation to Denys.

Beyond Fabro’s Thomism, there are two further stages in respect to the elements we have been considering. First there are those who looking, on one side, to the priority of the negative way in Denys, and, on the other, to Heidegger’s criticism of ontotheology, demand a radical transformation of our understanding of Thomas’ system. These keep something of the form of Thomist philosophical theology but deny that what is said can be thought. The predications made of God by Thomas have no proper positive significance. As in Denys, predicative thought and affirmative knowledge belong to and indeed constitute the realm of creatures. Since this position leaves Thomas’ theology an empty shell, speech not only without significance but properly opposed by thought, it gives way directly to the second of these last stages.  

In the second, the Dionysian negative theology is taken to be the negation of all philosophical or conceptual theology. The Dionysian writings are not in fact the medium of Neoplatonic philosophy, but its overcoming by the Christian religion. Thomas was fatally wrong not only in making Denys an authority contributing to a system in which Being was God’s highest name, a system where God was identified with a form of Being in an ontologically understood cosmic hierarchy, where there were positive proper predications of God, where negation was a means within philosophical theology for

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constructing the hierarchically ordered modes of being and moving between them, but also, and most fundamentally, Thomas misunderstood and betrayed Denys by treating his writings as contributions to the tradition of philosophical theology. Rather they are directions for religious acts, hymns of praise and guides to union. Denys’ statements are not propositions conveying conceptually graspable philosophical and theological information. Clearly when Denys is understood against Aquinas as theologically negating philosophical theology rather than as providing that science with a tool, he is seen as doing in the ancient world what Heidegger attempts in ours. The God of the Hebrews has been freed from fatal entanglement with the philosophy of the Greeks and their fateful ontology. With this development we have completed a circle which we began to describe when we considered the first neoscholastic Thomism of the Leonine revival. Thomas and Denys are now again completely opposed to one another and Thomas is judged to have totally misconceived this most revered authority.

Before leaving this survey of the philosophical circumstances which have governed the emergence of Denys as central to our understanding of and judgment about the thought of St. Thomas, we need at least to mention a minority view. Evidently, for reasons both of the philosophical and practical circumstances of the Leonine revival and of the prevailing philosophical situation generally, the dominant and almost total perspective governing Thomistic studies has been Heideggerian in contrast to the idealist, and, especially, to the Hegelian, opposite. But there is a persistent minority voice both of those who see in Hegel rather than in Heidegger the proper heir and interlocutor of Thomas and also of those who do not regard the German idealists as mistaken in supposing that the Procline systematic Neoplatonism, and Denys as its Christian continuation, belong properly to their origins. There are even a few who connect the three. For them systematic conceptual thought will persist. Domesticated, Dionysian negation will belong to the movements between being and non being and to the forms of their dialectical union, as well as to the transitions into one another of religion, theology and philosophy. The difference between Thomas and Denys will be recognized, but relativized. Above all Thomas’ recuperation of Aristotelian and Augustinian reason at the level of the First Principle, and his elevation into the First Principle of a total system of what is for Proclus the logic of the finite, are seen not as betrayal but as appropriate development. In recent years this idealist view of philosophy and its historical dialectic is self-consciously chosen.


It reappears both as a rejection of a Heideggerian end of philosophy generally and of Christian philosophical theology particularly. It also re-emerges as a return to modes of Catholic thought which preceded the Leonine revival of neoscholastic Thomism and which were condemned during its rise and ascendancy.18

What I have said so far shows the difficulty as well as the present importance for philosophy of the comparison we are undertaking between the thought of Denys and that of Aquinas. These circumstances exclude establishing at the same time both the characteristics of the Dionysian corpus and of Thomas’ system. For our purposes I shall assume that both are systems of Neoplatonic philosophical theology. This assumption may betray what is essential to both thinkers and will deliver Denys into the hands of Thomas to have his way with him even more than it may traduce Thomas by drawing him into the Procline and Dionysian world. Having reduced them to the same level, I shall conclude by referring to the results of studies I have made of some elements in their thought when both are regarded as contributors to the tradition of systematic philosophical theology.

The first of the studies concerned St. Thomas’ interpretation of Isaiah VI.6: “Volavit ad me unus de seraphim”: “Then flew one of the seraphim unto me.”19 From his first theological work, the Expositio super Isaiam ad Litteram, through the last system, his Summa Theologiae, to his late exposition of St. Paul’s epistles, St. Thomas Aquinas follows Denys in denying what Isaiah said he saw.20 It was impossible that one from among the

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19 Isaiah VI, 6-7: Vulgate and Authorized Version. My study is “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6,” Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge, 64 (1997), 59-93.

20 THOMAS AQUINAS, Expositio super Isaiam ad Litteram, vol. 28, Opera Omnia in suo Leonis XIII P.M. edita (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1974), capitulum VI, 6-8, p. 51; In Quatuum Libros Sententiarum, vol. 1, Opera Omnia,
superior orders of angels, and the Seraphim were in fact the highest order, could minister immediately and directly to a creature below the angelic hierarchy. No Seraph flew to Isaiah.

Denys had devoted chapter thirteen of *The Celestial Hierarchy* to showing “Why the prophet Isaiah is said to have been purified by the seraphim” despite the contradiction between this scriptural dictum and the fundamental principles of spiritual hierarchy exposed earlier in Denys’ treatise.\(^{21}\) As Salvatore Lilla has shown, these principles are primarily Procline, and the form in which they are cited by Aquinas can be traced to Proclus.\(^{22}\) Moreover, they accord with what Thomas learned from his other major source of Procline Neoplatonism, the *Liber de causis*.\(^{23}\) So Thomas concluded that, on this matter, the highest vision of the apostolic community, the common knowledge of the primitive church, and the conclusions of pagan philosophy were one.\(^{24}\)

Remarkably, they agreed not on the order of nature which could be overruled by the higher order of grace. Rather, what St. Paul, his disciple Denys, the early church, and

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philosophy understood in common was the higher order, the order of grace, which admits of no exceptions.25

In allowing Proclus, mediated by Denys and others, to determine the order of grace against the text of Isaiah VI, Aquinas was not following a generally accepted tradition. The problem of the opposition between Isaiah and Denys had been before the Latin church since Gregory the Great, one of the first western theologians to give evidence of knowing something of the Dionysian teaching. In his sermon on the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Pope Gregory states that he has not enough evidence to follow Dionysius completely. In consequence, the problem of a contradiction between a text of the Bible and a quasi-biblical author puzzled theologians who had not read the pseudo-Areopagite themselves.26 Generally, except for Eriugena, they followed Gregory and tried to avoid the Dionysian conclusion. But in the Twelfth century Dionysius overran the schools. The arguments shifted in his direction. In the end, none among the schoolmen was a clearer, more definite, and more principled Dionysian on the questions involved than the Angelic doctor himself.

If one accepts the unity and authority of the whole of sacred scripture, as Denys, Gregory and their scholastic followers did, this is not a confrontation between a philosophical “vision” or “système du monde”, on the one hand, and “un texte scripturaire”, on the other.27 The Bible, which had, for all of them, finally one author - God speaking through the mission of the Holy Spirit - said opposed things. Isaiah VI. 6 and Hebrews I. 14 were opposed by Zachariah II. 3-4 (where one angel sends another) and by Daniel VII. 10 (“Millia millium ministrabant ei, et decies millies centena millia assistebant ei” [Vulgate], “thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” [A.V.]). Some are immediately in the divine presence, some are sent; some angels command, others go at their will. In addition, Gabriel, who announced the incarnation, was only called an angel (Luke I. 19 & 26).

The problem is how can Scripture be thought as a whole? There is, for these theologians, no biblical theology in the Twentieth century sense apart from the Hellenistic systematizing reflection.28 Since Henri de Lubac corrected Beryl Smalley, we have come to

25 “Quia ordo angelicus attenditur secundum dona gratiarum. Ordo autem gratiae non habet alium supernum ordinem, propter quern praemitti debeat, sicut praeter mittuntur ordo naturae propter ordinum gratiae.” STI, 112, 2, resp. There is a similar problem with respect to the Summa as a whole. What is for Aquinas the proper order of sacred doctrine (as opposed to that of philosophical theology) is, in fact, the order of systematized Neoplatonism, see HANKEY, God In Himself, 148-151.
26 GREGORY, XL, Homiliarum in Evangelia, Liber 2, “Homilia XXXIV,” pts. 12 and 13, Patrologia Latina 76, 1254B-1255B: “utrum per se haec faciant, an per subjecta agmina agantur, quae, sicut dicitur, in eo quod a majoribus veniunt majorum vocabula sortiuntur, nos affirmare nolumus quod apertis testimoniis non approbamus.”(1254D).
27 DE GANDILLAC in La Hiérarchie, note 7, 148-149.
28 On the genesis of this division, see JONATHAN Z. SMITH, Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of
realize that Aquinas is a conservative mediaeval in his interpretation of Scripture. An American academic, who writes both on Thomas’ ontology and on his handling of his sources, makes this judgment:

He does not say that the literal is the pre-eminent sense; he says that it is the foundation ... the literal sense is the beginning of the supernatural itinerarium mentis ad Deum ... The subordination of literal, natural discourse to the analogical discourse of the revealed is the Thomistic understanding of any discursive hierarchy, scriptural or ontological.

The four senses Thomas inherited from Augustine freed him to systematize Scripture so as to make it and theology equivalent. Dionysian hierarchy determined divine order in both.

Albert the Great leads the way for Aquinas. In his commentary on the thirteenth chapter of the Celestial Hierarchy, Albert has a firm hold on the reasoning of Dionysius.

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Albert the Great leads the way for Aquinas. In his commentary on the thirteenth chapter of the Celestial Hierarchy, Albert has a firm hold on the reasoning of Dionysius.
Thomas' teacher understands what necessitates the angelic hierarchy and how that order serves humanity. Through it, the simple, utterly incomprehensible knowledge of everything, at once universally and particularly, in God is diminished by a gradual particularization so that, finally, it can, in the lowest angels, illuminate and direct us. The gracious movement of God toward us through this order would be destroyed if the first hierarchy, which always stands in the immediate presence, where there is the first influx of the divine light and where all is contemplated in its universal simplicity, were to leave off these intuitions for the sake of the particularized knowledge and particular actions of the lower ranks.33

Among the very varied works which occupied the last years of St. Thomas' life, two concern the structure and nature of the realm of separated substances, i.e. his little treatise bearing that title, and the commentary on the Liber de causis.34 These, and other writings from this period, including his exposition of the epistles of St. Paul, reveal that Thomas now has at his disposition and is using William of Moerbeke's translation (1268) of Proclus' Elements of Theology. This enabled Aquinas to understand developed Platonism better, to distinguish it from Aristotle and, on at least one matter, the principles for the determination of the number of these substances, to choose the Platonici against Aristotle.

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However, long before Thomas had the means to identify the Neoplatonic source of the principles by which he understood the celestial hierarchy and its relations to humans, he was stating them with clarity and using them to determine his interpretation of Scripture.

At the beginning of his theological teaching, commenting on Isaiah VI. 6, Thomas is clear that, having raised the question of seraphic and human contact, the great Gregory leaves it “sub dubio”. Denys, instead, is explicit and definite because, for Denys, the order of the divine law requires “ut inferiora reducantur per media”. There are no leaps or gaps; all transitions are mediated. This law is spelled out clearly and made determinative in Thomas’ Commentary on the Sentences:

this is the invariably established divine law: that the last are perfected by the first through media. But between us and the first angels the inferiors intermediate. Therefore, the action of the first does not come to us immediately, but through a second mediating rank.

This law is given, and its consequence drawn, in the sed contra. In the body of the article, St. Thomas (like St. Albert) uses the lex divinitatis to develop his conception of the angelic hierarchy as a means by which what is simply and universally known in God is gradually contracted and particularized. Thus it comes to be both something knowable by human intellects and shaped into individual ends. Only thereby can what is contemplated simply in God become the varied subjects of particular actions. In the Summa Theologiae, again with St. Albert, Aquinas considers, under the perspective of this law, the structure of the created order and of human society generally, as well as the angelic order in itself and in its relations to humans. Thomas maintains that for the

ordo divinæ providentiae non solum in angelis, sed etiam in toto universo, quod inferiora per superiora administrantur.

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35 AQUINAS, Super Isaïum, 51, lines 363-364.
36 “Sed contra, secundum dionysium, ‘haec est lex divinitatis inviolabiliter stabilita; quod a primis ultima per media perficiantur’. Sed inter nos et primos angelos sunt mediis inferiores. Ergo primorum actio immediate non pervenit ad nos, sed est per medios secundos.” In Sententiarum, pt. 2, ds. 10, qu. 1, art. 2, s.c. 1, p. 152. See also In Sententiarum, pt. 2, ds. 10, qu. 1, art. 3, ag. 6 and ra. 3, p. 153. The law is a principle cited by him and determinative for Aquinas in his major works of systematic theology. Though he attributes it to Dionysius, I have not been able to find the formula in the words used by Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Aquinas, John of Paris, Aegidius Romanus, Boniface VIII and François de Meyronnes in the various mediaeval texts of Dionysius given in CHEVALLIER’S Dionysiaca. There is reason to think that Hugh of St. Victor is a common source for their understanding of Dionysian hierarchy. But, though I have found the doctrine in HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, Commentariarum in Hierarchiam Coelestem S. Dionysii Arologite, Patrologia Latina 175, 924-1154, I have not discovered these formulae there.
In this administration, “according to a common law the higher are not sent but only the lower”.37

Aquinas also finds this conception of universal order and the cosmic role of separated substances in the Liber de causis and he explains that work so as to draw together the author of the Liber, Proclus and Denys with respect to it. The Liber de causis proposes that “all intelligence is full of forms”. The causally higher intellects contain more universal forms, from these derive those intelligences which contain less universal forms.38 In his explanation, Aquinas first notes that Proclus agrees that the “superiores habent formas magis universales, inferiores vero minus universales” and then tells us that Denys says the same in the Celestial Hierarchy.39 Thomas goes on to set out his general doctrine on the role of the angelic illuminations in bringing the divine knowledge and purposes to us.

Thomas draws together what he found in the earlier propositions of the Liber to extract a corollary of the lex divinitatis. Proposition 19 distinguishes between, and connects in a descending causal chain, “intelligentia divina”, receiving the first good gifts from the first cause, “intelligentia tantum”, which has between it and the first cause a mediating intelligence, “anima intelligibilis”, and “anima tantum”, from which we arrive at “corpora naturalia tantum”. Thomas' explanation refers us to proposition 106 of the Elements (on intermediates between what is wholly eternal and what is in time) and then to the De Divinis Nominibus of Denys. There he finds the law that “fines primorum coniunguntur principiis secundorum”. He compares the “divinae intelligentiae” of the Liber de causis to the Dionysian “supremi angeli sunt quasi in vestibulis deitatis collocati”. The seraphim are the very highest of these. In making the categories of Proclus, of the Liber de causis, and of Denys cohere, Thomas shrewdly places in the rank of mere intellects those angels who intermediate between the highest and ensouled humans.40 In this final period of his labors, St. Thomas is also delivering, or at least revising, his exposition of St. Paul's epistles and, hence, of the Epistle to the Hebrews with its first chapter comparing Christ and the angels. There everything fundamental to what he finds common to the author of the Liber de causis, Denys, and Proclus emerges.41 The magister in sacra pagina carries with him the philosophical principles he has learned, and learned to

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37 Thomas, Summa Theologiae I, 112, 2, corpus, the Latin reads: “secundum communem legem superiores non mittuntur sed inferiores tantum”. I quote Piana in the Ottawa, 1944 edition.

38 Aquinas, Super Librum de causis, proposition 10, p. 66: Omnis intelligentia est plena formis; verum tamen ex intelligentiis sunt quae continent formas plus universales, et ex eis sunt quae continent formas minus universales.

39 Ibid., p. 69, see also, p. 72.

40 Ibid., p. 107.

41 This must be understood strictly. Thomas has fundamental criticisms of the Platonists. The judgement of Vivian Boland, Ideas in God According to St Thomas Aquinas: Sources and Synthesis, Studies in the History of Christian Thought LXIX (Leiden: Brill, 1996); is correct: “Dionysius must be interpreted always as a Catholic believer ... In Saint Thomas' commentary on the Liber de causis 'the faith' tells against Proclus and against 'platonic positions', against the 'Auctor', against Aristotle but never against Dionysius who remains for Saint Thomas an authoritative source for what the faith teaches.”
develop, as a systematic theologian, a *magister in sacra theologia*. The form of his exposition of the first chapter, with its three questions arising out of the opposition of authorities, and its logical content, reveal a mind for whom scriptural exposition and theological disputation can only reach resolution if both are activities of one systematic intelligence. The oppositions in the texts with which the one divine Author of the Bible presents us, and the conflicts of the other authorities both with one another and with the canonical books, can only be resolved systematically. Isaiah VI. 6 appears to contradict the good order which is essential to the system, to stand against the very *lex divinitatis*, against the law and possibility of order. That Neoplatonic thinking was the only thought which explicitly gathered all the elements into one whole and under one principle. Thomas knew no other way of thinking systematically.

A Procline and Dionysian systematizing underlies Thomas' understanding of the biblical text. But, the conditions of this systematization are given by Augustine. First, is the Augustinian principle that the text as exterior words is subordinate to the interior intellectual word which it expresses. Second, for the exterior sensible text to approximate the interior intelligible word it must be understood in four senses. In consequence, Thomas can understand the literal sense of texts like Isaiah VI. 6 through a hierarchical order, a *lex divinitatis*. For the sake of the higher truth of the realm of intellectual subsistences, and to maintain its order as the first and best revelation of the absolute divinity in which intellect, order, and being are simply one, Thomas followed Denys in denying that a Seraph was sent to Isaiah and he used Denys to perfect Augustine.

The second of my recent studies which touches matters relevant to the present topic concerns the medieval and early modern history of a eucharistic text of Augustine. Lanfranc gives the text an interpretation which reverses its meaning and Lanfranc’s interpretation comes to Aquinas as Augustine. The Lanfranc passage masking as Augustine makes the invisible the sign of the visible: by the invisible, intelligible body is signified the visible and palpable body of Christ. Authentic Augustine teaches the contrary: a sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace. Typically, Bonaventure,

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44 LANTFRANC’s *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* (PL 150, 421-425), was chopped up, rearranged, abridged and entered eucharistic controversy for 500 years primarily, but not exclusively, as Augustine’s *Sentences of Prosper*. Aquinas uses the authority of Lanfranc disguised as Augustine at *Summa Theologica* III, 60, 3 s.c., ST III, 75, 5 s.c., ST III, 83, 1, s.c.; at ST III, 77, 1, Lanfranc is under the cover of Gregory the Great.
45 For example: "Signum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensibus, aliquid aliquid ex se faciens in cognitionem venire", *De Doctrina Christiana* II, 1, 1, (CCSL 32, 32): “A sign is something which over and above the specific
maintaining an Augustinian anthropology which allows intellectual intuition to humans, interprets authentic Augustine through pseudo-Augustine. However, with Thomas there is a noteworthy paradox. Denys' theological authority strengthens Aristotle for him. He gives priority to sensation in human knowing and thus to the authentic text of Augustine.

Thomas uses both the authentic and the pseudo-Augustinian texts as authorities in the same question in the Summa Theologiae. For Aquinas what is essential about signs is not their sensible aspect but rather that they lead us from the known to the unknown, and what he emphasizes about sacraments is that they make men holy. When he asks, "whether a sacrament is always a sensible thing", he has already established that a sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing because through it humans are sanctified. The question of its sensibility remains unsettled.

The matter in the end turns not on the authority of Augustine, who is represented both as thinking that sensible realities are the least of things "without which humans are able to live well", and also that sacraments involve a physical element and the coming of the divine word. These genuine statements of Augustine are difficult to reconcile. The matter turns on the question of human nature and cannot be settled by reference to Augustine's authority. If humans have intellectual intuition, then they do not need sensible signs to lead them to the holy. On this aspect of anthropology, Augustine and his followers are at best ambiguous. As heirs of the Plotinian - Porphyrian Neoplatonism, they seem to allow for an intellectual intuition independent of sensation. Denys is Aquinas' source for the Procline tradition which here supports Aristotle. For it we humans cannot come to the intelligible divine realm except through the sensible. Therefore, signs which would lead us must be sensible, not because signs are by nature sensible, but rather because what God would use to make us holy must be adapted to our condition. By this route we

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46 See BONAVENTURE, Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi, vol. 4 (Quaracchi, 1889), X, 1, dubia 4, pp. 226 - 27
47 ST III, 60.
48 ST III, 60, 3, ad 2: Dicendum quod sacramentum in hoc quod significat rem sanctificantem, aportet quod significet effectum, qui intelligitur in ipsa causa sanctificante prout est sanctificantis.
49 ST III, 60, 4, obj. 3: res sensibiles sunt minima bona sine quibus homo recte vivere potest et s.c.: Augustinus dicit super Ioan: "Accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit sacramentum.
50 ST III, 60, 4, ad 1: Et inde est quod primo et principaliter dicuntur signa quae sensibils offerentur: sicut Augustinus dicit in II de Doctrina Christiana, quod "signum est enim res praeferri speciem, quam imponit sensibus, aliud aliud et se faciens in cogitationem venire." Effectus autem intelligibilis non habent rationem signi nisi secundum quod sunt manifestati per aliqua signa. On the complex, unresolved, unsystematic "dualisme" of Bonaventure as compared to Aquinas, see É.-H. WÉBER, Dialogue et dissensions entre saint Bonaventure et saint Thomas d'Aquin à Paris (1252-1273), Bibliothèque thomiste 41 (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 140-142 and IDEM, La Personne humaine, 90-108. Differences in how they reason about hierarchy are explained by JANET COLEMAN, "The Dominican Political Theory of John of Paris in its Context," in DIANA WOOD, ed. The Church and Sovereignty c. 590-1918. Essays in Honour of Michael Wilks,
come back to affirm the genuine text of Augustine. Because the invisible body is not itself sensible, it could then only be called a sacrament “in so far as it is signified through something sensible” (quodammodo sacramenta inquantum sunt significata per aliqua sensibilia). Augustine’s definition is saved from his own anthropology by means of an Aristotelian and Dionysian philosophical theology!

Finally, I made a study of the origin of the notorious ‘augustinisme politique’ to which, in accord with the interests of the Leonine revival, the historical Thomists of the first half of our century opposed St. Thomas. It is not difficult to show that the ‘politique’ ascribed to Augustine is really derived by the mediaevals from Denys transformed. There is a Latin hermeneutical tradition which understands the episcopal hierarchy of Denys through the Roman papacy in its claim to possess the two swords. It has been extensively investigated by David Luscombe in a series of studies. He has looked particularly at St. Thomas as standing within this tradition of understanding. In fact, Aquinas not only adheres to this tradition of interpretation but also strengthens its theocratic tendency. He does this in two ways. First, he understands hierarchy as a

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51 W. J. HANKEY, “Dionysius dixit.”


means of government. Second, having drawn Denys into politics, Thomas assimilates the Dionysian hierarch to Aristotle’s political sovereign.

Denys is certainly the origin of the language of our discourse about hierarchy.

By creating the abstract noun *hierarchy* from the cultic title *hierarch*, Dionysius invented a word for a structure or system for “sourcing” or channelling the sacred, and linked it all inextricably to the single leader. Dionysius claimed that the hierarch is named after the hierarchy, but the opposite is in fact the case: *hierarchy* was derived from *hierarch*. He used the existing term for a cultic leader to create the new word *hierarchy* and to imply that this person (the hierarch) completely dominates the system or arrangement (the hierarchy).  

It is crucial that, in fact, Dionysius still speaks of only one ecclesiastical hierarch, the bishop, who by liturgical acts creates a sacramental world distinct from the profane. However, the general tendency of his thought is not only to gather all order moving graciously toward us from above in a single sacral hierarch, but also to make the presence of the celestial order with us sensible and historically concrete. Denys’ divine hierarch is both the link with the originating hierarchy above and he is also the source, and governing power of the sacred order below him. Christian society may be represented as a hierocracy with a single apex. The cultic hierarch whom Dionysius inherited becomes within a development of Dionysian hierarchy the hierocrat. It is possible then that the hierocrat whom the Dionysian tradition makes intelligible will be quite different from Denys’ own episcopal hierarch. In Latin Christendom this possibility becomes actual.


Certainly, there are in the Latin tradition of which Aquinas is an heir, tendencies to absorb earthly power into the church, to institutionalize the celestial city, and to mediate the saving divine order through a unified sacral hierarchy, but it will not serve understanding to locate their sources in Augustine or Augustinianism. From Hippo’s great bishop, the west learns that Providence governs the earthly; evil cannot prevail, because the spiritual is higher and stronger. As the soul is to the body, so the celestial spirits are to the earthly. Further, just as there are ontological inequalities between the governing celestial and the earthly realms, between the rightly ordered ruling soul and the body, so also fundamental inequalities are given in the relations between humans. These elements necessary to what Denys will call hierarchy, Augustine teaches. But just the most general principles of Neoplatonic hierarchy derive from Hippo. We will find there neither an elaborated revelation of the order of pure spirits, nor the development of mediating ranks within a strongly unified system of descending causal powers, nor the tendencies to externalize, embody and institutionalize the invisible holy city of saints and angels, nor even, quite specifically, a “divine” bishop. Hippo will not supply these doctrines of the Areopagus, indeed Augustine often leads thought in contrary directions.

There are dualities given in Augustine which do not come together in a Proclan or Dionysian third: the celestial city of saints and angels and the earthly institutional church, that same church and the state each independently given by God’s good providence. There is also Augustine’s ascendant logic which leads the soul from science to wisdom, from what is lower and external to what is higher and therefore intellectual and inner. Further, Augustine definitely places the bishop within the church as a servant member, a sinner, a lamb of the flock, a son of the divine Father, a hearer of the Word. Though the bishop is also a priest, pastor, father and preacher, he is not the perfect or divine hierarch, the causally mediating link between the heavenly and the earthly orders, the point where the lowest rank of heaven touches the highest pinnacle of earth. Finally, there is in Augustine a gracious Christocentric humanism which is able to invert the natural subordination of humans to angels, indeed to overthrow the hierarchy of creatures generally, and which certainly functions at some points in western intellectual and institutional history to reverse Denys.

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For those attempting to unite different and sometimes opposed sources, traditions and elements of political and ecclesial theory, the Procline and Dionysian logic will be attractive. Above all, unlike the binary thinking of Augustine, the triadic logic is dynamic. This is the logic of the activity by which all things are derived from and return to their single source. This logic does not leave two given, but opposed, realities in unresolvable communion and conflict. It both demands the existence of the difference, the other, and also transforms it into the *per media*, the middle or means through which the highest, the one self-diffusive source, draws what is lowest, the furthest manifestation of the one, back to itself. Metaphysically, there is no ultimate dualism.\(^{61}\)

Applied to institutions this logic common to Proclus and Dionysius proves to be terribly dangerous. *Per media* it takes account of the existence of the other side. The protagonists of the pope give a necessary place to the secular power. The protagonists of the king make a place for the church. But, the medium is, necessarily, only means or instrument. Ultimately the dynamic process is a reduction. For Denys, moreover, the reduction does not occur only in a hidden beyond, in the ascended Christ, priest and king, but also, and of necessity, here in the sensible world.

Essential to the Dionysian thinking is a movement outward and downward to *scientia*, the sensible, the external, historical and particular. There are two movements. There is both *exitus* and *reditus*. While in Denys’ ecclesiastical hierarchy, there is only one hierarch, the bishop, and only one place of action, the church in its liturgical life, the divine order operates through his actions in space and time and the fundamental logic does not in principle exclude the drawing of the secular power into his activity as another of his *media*. It belongs to the Dionysian logic that the authorities and powers leading humanity back to the heavenly city must have an earthly external coincidence.\(^{62}\)

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Thus, the only authority other than holy Scripture cited by Boniface VIII in *Unam Sanctam* is Denys, “Nam secundum B. Dionysius lex divinitatis est infima per media in suprema reduci.” All things are not led back equally and immediately to their source, but mediately, according to their proper order. The greater dignity and nobility of the spiritual in respect to the earthly power requires that, for the good to be done, the spiritual must direct the earthly as its subordinated means.

As I said above, Aquinas knows the *lex divinitatis* of Denys and it is a rule for him from the beginning to the end of his writing. It requires intermediaries ordering the various series through which God operates: the angelic hierarchy, physical causes, virtues, human communities. It is *immobiliter firmata* or *inviolabiliter stabilita*. Aquinas regards it as explicating St. Paul in Romans 13 on the divinely established order. It is the law of divinity.

The intellectual substance of the *lex divinitatis*, though not the formulae for it as given by Albert, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Jean de Paris, Aegidius Romanus, Boniface VIII and François de Meyronnes, is to be found in Hugh of St. Victor’s *Commentarium in Hierarchiam Coelestem S. Dionysii Areopagite*. The theologians just listed share an understanding of the law which goes back at least to Hugh. Only one of them, John of Paris, when applying this general principle to questions on the relation of the civil and}

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63 The text goes on: *Non ergo secundum ordinem universi omnia eaque ac immediate, sed infima per media, inferiora per superiorem ad ordinem reducantur.* *Spiritualum autem et dignitatis et nobilitatis terrarum quamlibet praecellere potestatem, operet tantum clarissimius et alius quae omnem participationem spiritualis gratiae non nisi ipsa mediante concipiunt*; 1088C: *nulla quae omnes participationem spiritualis gratiae nòn nisi ipsea mediant concipiunt*; 1088C: *nulla hierarchia est quae non habeat et primum, et medios, et ultimum ordinis.* See also 1091A and Liber IX, titulus capituli 10, 1099-1104 generally.


65 Cognate rules are *ST I*, 110, 3 co: *sint Apostolus dicit, Ad Rom. XIII: Quae a Deo sunt, ordinata sunt.* In hoc autem ordine rerum consistit, quod quaedam per alia in Deum reducantur, ut Dionysius dicit, in *De Cael. Hier.*

66 PL 175 (924-1154): 931 D: *His hierarchiis, id est principalibus sacris totius reipublicae mundi: in quibus summa potestas est, quae imperat tantum, et infima, cui tantum imperatur; et media quae imperat inferiori, et cui a superiori imperatur and II, 5 generally; 1035C: quippe quae omne participacionem spiritualis gratiae nonnisi ipso mediante concepiit.* 1088C: *nulla hierarchia est quae non habeat et primum, et medios, et ultimum ordinis.* See also 1091A and Liber IX, titulus capituli 10, 1099-1104 generally.
ecclesiastical hierarchies, reaches further back to the actual character of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as described by Denys. Only John resists the impulse to combine the general Neoplatonic tendency to refer everything to a higher unity with the specific Dionysian requirement that the unity save humans through externalization in historical sensible reality which together arrive at a result different from that of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* itself.\(^6^9\) The ecclesiastical hierarchy of Denys and John is a sacred figure, separated from profane things, constituting a sacramental world through liturgical acts. To repeat the main point: Denys’ bishop has no secular authority. His power derives from his contemplative knowledge of and union with the celestial order. Nothing is said in Denys about the hierarch’s relation to the civic order or to worldly power. Aquinas, in contrast, belongs securely to the general tradition stemming from Hugh of St. Victor in this matter. He engages in no search for the original Dionysian hierarch in distinction from the pontifical priest-king of Hugh and his hierocratic papalist successors. St. Thomas’ teaching on the union of church and state is best understood as part of this general tradition.

For Aquinas, salvation requires a subordination of temporal to spiritual power; these powers are united in the Roman Pontiff. For humans to obtain the supernatural end of eternal life, the royal priesthood of the God-man Jesus Christ must have an earthly embodiment in a *regale sacerdotium*, ordering the earthly to the heavenly, the secular to the spiritual and, thus, all the kings of the Christian people are subject to the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ, as to the Lord Jesus Christ himself.\(^7^0\) Can the Vicar of Christ direct temporal rulers universally or only within the Papal States?\(^7^1\)

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\(^6^9\) The sacramental realm is constituted by the bishop and reserved to him, but, precisely on this account, it is separated from the secular. According to the doctrine of Denys, the supreme cannot lead the lowest except *per media*. Therefore the highest in each hierarchy, kings and popes, are without the means to subordinate either sphere to the other. The hierarchies are one only in the celestial realm. *Constat autem secundum doctrinam eisdem Dionysi quod infini non reducuntur ad supremus nisi per medios, nec supremi perfecti hierearchiae infimos immediate sed mediants mediis. Igitur summus pontifex non habet potestatem generalem et immediatem super laicos nisi quantum habet eiusdem Dionysi quod*. The hierarch’s relation to the civic order or to worldly power. Aquinas, in contrast, belongs securely to the general tradition stemming from Hugh of St. Victor in this matter. He engages in no search for the original Dionysian hierarch in distinction from the pontifical priest-king of Hugh and his hierocratic papalist successors. St. Thomas’ teaching on the union of church and state is best understood as part of this general tradition.

\(^7^0\) ... *papa, qui utrisque potestatis apicem tenet, sollicit spiritualis et saecularis, hoc illo disponeunte qui est, sacerdos et rex*, *In II Sententiarum, d 44, exp textus, ad 4, ed. P. MANDONNET (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929). Later uses of the title *Vicarius Christi* are, for example, *Summa contra Gentiles* (Leonine XV, 1930), IV, 76; *De Regno ad regem Cypri* (Leonine XLII, 1979), p. 466, lines 110ff. ... *non terras regibus sed sacerdotalibus est commissum, et principium summo sacerdoli successori Petri, Christii vicario Romano Pontifici, cui omnes reges populi Christiani oportet esse subjectus sint ipsi Domini Ihesu Christo, et Contra errores Graecorum* (Leonine XI, 1967), c. 32, p. A 101; c 34, p. 102, lines 3-5: *quod Petrus sit Christi vicarius, et Romanus pontifex Petri successor in eadem potestate et a Christo collatis.*

For Aquinas, the old days in which kings could stand against Christ are past: *in isto tempore reges sunt vassalli Ecclesiae.* The pope possesses this general lordship of the church. Indirect power in respect to the temporal is for lesser prelates. The Christian church is one body and has one head, Christ, who operates through his vicar, the Roman Pontiff: “in uno speciali populo unius ecclesiae requiritur unus episcopus, qui sit totius populi caput”.

Thomas’ argument here is political. The church, like any other political body, is best served by having a single head. Aquinas, who conceives the papal hierocracy in a traditional Victorine form, is also the Aristotelian who respects the integrity of the political.

... St. Thomas stresses ... the stability of the political order. For its sake the church refrains from going the whole length in imposing this God-given authority ... over the natural state. ... [T]he pope ordinarily exercises no immediate jurisdiction. He does not wield the two swords. One of them, that of earthly justice, he hands over to the secular ruler who is to unsheath it, however, at his beck (*ad nutum*).

This restraint is not compelled by the nature of the papal authority or power but is prudential. This is made clear by a text in which the Dionysian hierarch and Aristotle’s politician meet.

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73 I am following D. Bigongiari, *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas, Representative Selections*, (New York: Hafner, 1969), introduction, xxxiii-xxvii. Bigongiari relies here on *In I Sent. 44 and ST II-II, 60, 6*. Aquinas’ position would seem to be the same as that of Albertus Magnus, *Commentarius in Opera B. Dionysii Areopagita* (Paris XIV, 1892), *De Ecclesiasticia Hierarchia* 5, 11, p. 705; 5, 19, p. 718; *De Codesti Hierarchia* 5, p. 115: *secundum statum patriae, cum assumantur homines secundum gradus Angelorum ... quidem sunt superiores, quidem medi, quidem inferiores, et superiores quidem recipiunt illuminationes a Deo immediate, medi vero et inferiores (cum hoc divinitatis sit per prima, media et per media ultima reducere) recipiunt mediantibus superioribus*; 10, 2, dubia ad 2, p. 296; *Super Dionysium de Divinis Nominius* (Cologne XXXIV, 1, 1972) 4, 2, p. 129, lines 19-21 and 44ff. The comments of Albert and Thomas on chapter twelve: “king of kings” and “lord of lords” etc., are usefully compared. Aquinas is more concise and yet more ready to draw the political order into his explanations. At *Summa Theologiae* (Paris XXXIII, 1895) pars II, 22, 141, 3, p. 483, Albert shows what he thinks about the relation of the pope to the secular mediating powers. In relation to divine ordinances: *Papa est ordinarius omnium hominum, quia vice Dei est in terris*. This defines the papal *plenitudo potestatis*. For the giving of the powers of Christ as priest-king to Peter and his successors one might supply, AQUINAS, *Super Evangelium S. Matthiae Lectura*, 5th ed. (Taurini-Romae: Marietti, 1951) 16, 2, sections 1392 & 1993.

74 *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, 76 (Leonine XV, 1930, 241, lines 26-28). Bigongiari refers us also to *Contra errores Graecorum*. I was unable to find his quotation in the Leonine edition (vol. 40, 1967) but the work is certainly an extreme statement of the papal position: rejecting the Vicar of Christ is compared to the rejection of the *Filioque* (c. 32, p. A101), the pope has *in totam Ecclesiam Christi potestatis plenitudinem* (ibid.). His power is Christ’s through Peter.

75 Bigongiari, xxxvii. The *ad nutum* reference is *In IV Sent. 37*, expositio textus with *ST II-II, 64, 4*, ra 3. See 4SN ds 37, q 2, art 2, ex.: “[ecclesia] habet etiam temporalum [gladium] quantum ad ejus jussionem ‘quia ejus nutu extrahendus est’, ut dixit bernardus” (in the BUSA, *Opera Omnia*, vol 1, p. 610).
In the *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum et Religionem*, Thomas’ argument exalts the papal authority by means of the episcopal. He does this by assimilating both to the hierarch of Denys’ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. This is consistent with, and indeed necessary to, the conception of the apex of that hierarchy which is common to Hugh of St. Victor and his heirs in the Latin Dionysian tradition. Thomas concludes that the pope exercises a direct power in the universities as the heir of the ruler of the Greek polis.  

Aquinas reasons that because Aristotle regarded the regulation of education as a prerogative of the ruler of the commonwealth, he assigned the judgment as to what sciences should be studied in the state, and which and how much of these each citizen should learn, to the art of politics. The pope as ruler of the whole Christian republic, i.e. the whole Christian church, has inherited this prerogative and the right to make these judgments. By this argument the papal power is extended *ad cathedram*, to the teacher’s chair. This is a direct power. Aquinas does not indicate that any of the prerogatives of the ruler of the commonwealth or judgments belonging to the political art are in principle outside the power of the *summus saceros*. The shedding of blood necessary to the wielding of the secular sword is not compatible with the priestly sacrifice. So secular rulers wield this sword for and at the beck of the priest. The priest commands its use. The secular sword remains in his power. Only when the priest-king is fully educated, theoretically and practically, in the art of politics will he know how and where to delegate his *plenitudo potestatis*, or, indeed, what lies outside it.

History is the school in which the Dionysian hierarch learns the Aristotelian political art and the exercise of political prudence. Aquinas helps make the hierarch a hierocrat and then assists his education by teaching him more Aristotle. But, Aquinas himself is no more an Aristotelian than a Dionysian, and he and his hierocratic intellectual companions are at least as much Aristotelians and Dionysians as they are all Augustinians.

These and other of my earlier studies show, on one side, that the authority and strength of Denys’ writings for Aquinas is unsurpassed by any others. Denys determines his interpretation of Holy Scripture, providing Thomas’ conception of divine order to which particular texts must conform. Other scholars have demonstrated recently how Denys determines Thomas’ understanding of Aristotle and why he chooses Aristotelian positions. My studies confirm these conclusions, but show the same in respect to the choice and understanding of Augustine.

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By means of Denys, Aquinas chooses the real Augustine as against the pseudo. But, elsewhere, Thomas transforms Augustine’s trinitarian theology by placing it within the Dionysian and Procline division of the logic of the One from the logic of the many and by the priority given to the unity.\(^\text{77}\) In Thomas, the Augustinian binary logic is assimilated to the Dionysian triadic structure. The supreme *lex divinitatis*, the Divine ordering law, is for Aquinas the Dionysian principle that between extremes a mediating third always intervenes. Looking at Augustinian celestial, ecclesiastical, social and salvific orders through such a logic transmutes them.

Aquinas is one with his contemporaries and immediate predecessors among the medieval systematic theologians in the enormous weight Denys’ thought has for him. In making Denys’ authority so effective, these Thirteenth century builders of systems must together be distinguished from their Latin forerunners with the exception of Eriugena. Moreover, the influence that Denys has on the mind of Aquinas grows throughout his life and is strengthened by his late reading of a translation of the *Elements of Theology* of Proclus. The discovered coherence of Denys, the *Liber de causis*, and of Proclus did not unnerve Thomas. Rather it enabled him to give more completeness and subtlety to his choice of mediating hierarchy as his fundamental model of good, indeed, Divine order.

The other side is at least equally important. Denys is fundamentally transformed in Thomas’ use of him. Being is no longer the second name of the superessential in a mystical theology seeking union beyond knowledge, but is rather the most appropriate predicate for the First Principle of a hierarchically organized theological ontology. Moving through it draws the human into a beatitude dependent on the knowledge of God’s essence. In accord with what he understands from Denys, Thomas’ divides his treatise on God into a *de deo uno* and a *de deo trino*. This division and the ordering of the distinguished parts is not found in Augustine nor in the treatises on God of medieval Augustinians. Nonetheless, what is given a Procline or Dionysian hierarchical order is a typically Augustinian consideration of the Divine essence. The resulting theology is a series in which the divine essence itself is represented in hierarchically ordered and connected moments as its self relation becomes more and more distinct and more and more explicitly revealed. It is this Aquinas who is usefully compared and contrasted with St. Gregory Palamas as another heir of Denys.\(^\text{78}\)

Equally, Denys, and the Neoplatonism which derives from Iamblichus, are responsible for the principles governing celestial hierarchy in Aquinas, for the enormous role it plays in his system, for the distinctions of its forms and ranks and for their names. However, a great part of the purpose of this hierarchy for Denys is lost when it is moved into Thomas’ world. What intervenes is Thomistic ontology. He insists rigorously on a

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\(^\text{77}\) HANKEY, “The *De Trinitate* of St. Boethius”.

\(^\text{78}\) As for example in ERIC D. PERL, “St. Gregory Palamas and the Metaphysics of Creation,” *Dionysius* 14(1990), 105-130.
distinction between the donation of substantial being, which is the creative act, and all other subsequent donations. The higher angels confer knowledge but not, as in Denys, being, grace, and glory on the lower spirits. Moreover, the equality of humans as compared to angels prevents hierarchical communication in the celestial order being the model for that communication in the church. This modeling is fundamental to Denys’ purpose.  

There is an analogous difference in respect to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Evidently Thomas does not derive the population of the hierarchy from Denys. It and the characteristic powers of its members are given in the evolution of ecclesiastical and political institutions. Denys contributes the principle that the more eminent in the hierarchy contains what derives from it and the indispensable necessity of hierarchical mediation for the reception of divine knowledge. Here again Thomas’ distinction between the ontological constitution of creatures and their operations applies. This time it prevents Thomas drawing the quasi-Donatist conclusions which are natural to Denys.

Because what is given in the spiritual hierarchy cannot be total for Aquinas, a fall into spiritual ignorance or pollution does not destroy the underlying sacral character of the members of the hierarchy nor prevent them from remaining vehicles of grace and exercising the functions of their offices. So despite the authority of Denys for him, Aquinas contributes to the particular western ecclesiology with its emphasis on sacramental character and formal validity as against the more authentically Dionysian ecclesiology of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Hierarchy is understood by Thomas politically. It is the medium of divine government. The celestial hierarchy governs the cosmos; the ecclesiastical governs the Christian republic. In complete opposition to Denys, Aquinas follows a hermeneutic tradition which identifies the principal ecclesiastical hierarch with the Roman Pontiff. This tradition specifically associates the papal mediation between the spiritual and earthly realms with the pope’s possession of the highest and most perfect potestas in virtue of his possession of both swords. Aquinas, the Aristotelian, absolutizes this potestas by making the pope, as head of the Christian republic, heir to the prerogatives of the governor of the polis. The hierarchy whose laws derive from Denys has now altogether another character than that in his Ecclesiastical Hierarchy.

It does not seem to me to be possible at present to decide whether Thomas traduces Denys in his transformation of him. The principle of indeterminacy applies. The question takes us too close to the religious, philosophical and theological questions of our own time. We are too interested in the question. In this we are on common ground with

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A consequence of Thomas' submission to Denys is that Aquinas is able to be Aristotelian and Augustinian and that Denys is essential to constructing Latin intellectual and political systems. However, Denys is totally transformed in the systems of intellectual and institutional power he enables. And this is precisely because the logic he conveys is more inclusively dialectical than those Aristotle or Augustine provide. Ironically, during the millennium about to pass, just because he represents one tradition but carries from it a logic of such synthetic power, Denys has been essential to making Latin Christendom the most potent tradition. Whether that power is only the power for the greatest of self-overcomings or has another fate is also profoundly a question of what the Dionysian corpus really is about. Above all it is a question of the difference between what Denys said and what Aquinas heard, together with the questions as to whether we are either more profound or more accurate listeners than Thomas was.

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Résumé

As context, the article traces the transformation, indeed reversal, of our understanding of the place and influence of Denys in respect to Aquinas since the Leonine revival of Thomism. A Neoplatonic Aquinas would be incompatible with the ecclesiastical and intellectual purposes for which Thomas' metaphysical theology was revived in the late nineteenth century. But in the last 35 years of our century, with the decline of Leonine Neothomism and the intellectual domination of Heidegger, a Neoplatonic Thomas is not only sought, but may be found to be still too much a metaphysical rationalist. Important here is the reversal of the conclusions of Étienne Gilson. Now, Denys has become a standard for Aquinas in so far as Denys is the exemplar of a non metaphysical theologian. Aquinas and Denys are opposed to one another again, but from the contrary perspective.

The body of the article operates within the assumption that Denys and Aquinas are both philosophical theologians in the Neoplatonic tradition. The author uses three of his recent studies to show that Scripture, Augustine and Aristotle are interpreted and given place within Thomas' system by means of his interpretation and unsurpassed respect for Denys. First, we consider how and why Aquinas follows Denys in denying that a Seraphim flew to Isaiah as the Scripture asserts. We conclude that a Procline and Dionysian systematizing underlies Thomas' understanding of the biblical text. Second, the author shows that Aquinas interprets Augustine on sacraments as sensible signs through an Aristotelian anthropology given authority within Denys' Procline Neoplatonism. Aquinas replaces pseudo Augustine with authentic Augustine by means of Denys. Third, the author considers how the so-called “augustinisme politique” in Aquinas, is in reality Thomas' following of the Latin hermeneutic of Denys deriving from Hugh of St. Victor. Using concepts taken from Aristotle, Thomas intensifies Hugh's argument for direct Papal rule of the secular and the sacred. For Aquinas, the Roman Pontiff as ruler of the Christian republic unites the sacred Dionysian hierarch and the head of the ancient city.

Overall the article concludes that Denys is crucial for Aquinas' understanding of Scripture, Augustine and Aristotle, but that Denys is radically transformed in the process to serve a characteristically Latin trinitarian and metaphysical theology, as well as a Latin political
understanding of hierarchy. There are grave hermeneutical problems for western minds in recovering a Denys before and against Aquinas, more than scholarship is involved.

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