

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

THE COMPLETE WORKS

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PAULIST PRESS
NEW YORK • MAHWAH

The Mystical Theology¹

1. This small essay is the key to the Dionysian method and to the structure of the entire corpus. It exerted a vast influence on the theology and mysticism of later centuries, especially in the West (Völker, *Kontemplation*, pp. 218–63). J. Vanneste (*Le Mystère de Dieu*, pp. 30–36) has argued for a major division within the corpus between this work and *The Divine Names*, on the one hand, and *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, on the other hand. In the alternative argument suggested below (especially in MT 3, note 17), *The Mystical Theology* first summarizes the preceding *Divine Names* and then previews the method of interpreting the perceptible symbols of the Bible and of the liturgy which is put into practice in the two subsequent hierarchical treatises.

On the general question of treatise headings and titles in the corpus, see DN 1, note 2 and EH 1, note 2. Regarding this title in particular, the term “mystical” is considered in the following note. In the Pseudo-Dionysian vocabulary, “theology” usually carried the literal sense of the “Word of God,” namely, in the scriptures. See R. Roques, “Note sur la notion de THEOLOGIA selon le Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite,” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 25 (1949): 200–12. This essay is reprinted in Roques, *Structures*, pp. 135–45. For examples of “theology” as the scriptural “Word of God,” see CH 4 180B 20, CH 9 261C 38, CH 12 293AB 7–15, EH 3 437B 22f., EH 5 501C 39f., DN 5 824D 49, DN 10 937D 45, and the unusual usage in EH 3 432B 22f. (note 82). The term can also mean discourse *about* God, such as Simon Peter’s confession (EH 7 564C 38), St. John’s revelation (Ep. 10 1120A 2), or the subsequent tradition, including the author’s own “theology” (DN 2 640D 41–46, DN 3 681A 4f.).

CHAPTER ONE

What is the divine darkness?

- 997A
1. Trinity!! Higher than any being,
any divinity, any goodness!
Guide of Christians
in the wisdom of heaven!
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
they pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
they completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty.
- 997B

1000A

For this I pray; and, Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things,² is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.³

2. The terms "mystic" (see line 7 of poem above) and "mysterious" both translate *mustikos*, with some reservations. The former translation is not meant in the later sense of a "mystical" or extraordinary, private experience of transcending one's self, but rather in the more general sense of something "mysterious" or secret or hidden. See Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, p. 47, and Louis Bouyer, "Mystique, essai sur l'histoire du mot," *Supplement de la Vie spirituelle* 9 (May 15, 1949). Bouyer's excellent discussion of the term "mystical" in Pseudo-Dionysius is more accessible in *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 406–16.

3. This advice to Timothy introduces both the specific account of Moses' ascent up Mt. Sinai (Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, pp. 48f.) and also the general uplifting that goes beyond the perceptible (Chapter 4 and the hierarchical treatises) and even beyond the intelligible (Chapter 5).

2. But see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninformed,⁴ that is to say, to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place.⁵ And if initiation into the divine is beyond such people, what is to be said of those others, still more uninformed, who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being, and who claim that it is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made? What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.⁶

3. This, at least, is what was taught by the blessed Bartholomew.⁷ He says that the Word of God is vast and minuscule, that the Gospel is wide-ranging and yet restricted. To me it seems that in this he is extraordinarily shrewd, for he has grasped that the good cause of all is both eloquent and taciturn, indeed wordless. It has neither word nor act of understanding, since it is on a plane above all this, and it is made manifest only to those who travel through foul and fair, who pass beyond the summit of every holy ascent, who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One who is beyond all things.⁸ It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is

4. See Socrates' similar warning in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 155e. On literary secrecy in general, see EH 1, note 4.

5. Ps 18:11.

6. This passage directly contradicts a passage from Aristotle, who used identical terminology to argue that negations are the opposites of affirmations (*On Interpretation* 17a 31–33). Here at the outset and again at its conclusion (MT 5 1048B 16–21), the treatise refutes the impression that negations can capture the transcendent Cause of all.

7. Like the other apostles, the Bartholomew of the New Testament (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13) was later credited with several apocryphal works.

8. Ex 20:21; cf. Ex 19.

complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.⁹ Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.¹⁰

9. This expression is perhaps better known as "the cloud of unknowing" because of the treatise by an anonymous English author of the fourteenth century: *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

10. The biblical narrative of Moses' ascent (Ex 19 and 20:18–21) was also the subject of Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses*, especially Part II, #152–170 (PG 44 372C–380A), where many of the Areopagite's themes are anticipated. As in the accounts of Hierotheus (DN 2 648AB 10–20 and DN 3 681C 41 to 684A 3) and of Carpos (Ep. 8 1097BC 21–26), this passage uses terminology otherwise associated with religious ritual. Here the Sinai events correspond to the liturgical experience of the hierarch, for whom Moses is indeed the prototype (EH 5 501C 33f.). While Gregory made this correspondence more explicit (#160), Dionysius lets his specialized terminology suggest it.

Like Moses, the hierarch is first purified, both with the other worshipers (EH 2 397B 14–21 and EH 3 428B 16) and also in his own ceremonial "purification" (EH 3 440A 11–14). In the liturgical dismissal the hierarch and those who have not yet completed their purification are separated (EH 3 436A 3–5) just as Moses stands apart from the crowds. Like Moses, the hierarch knows how to transcend the bare sounds of the scriptures (DN 4 708C 28) and the material lights of the rite (CH 1 121D 42f.). The hierarch and his "chosen" assistants approach the altar and, like Moses, contemplate the divine things (EH 3 425D 44–46). "Contemplation" is indeed the very name of the liturgical interpretation in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

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CHAPTER TWO

1025A *How one should be united, and attribute praises, to the Cause of all things who is beyond all things.*

I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside¹¹ they show up the beauty which is hidden.

1025B Now it seems to me that we should praise the denials quite differently than we do the assertions. When we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through intermediate terms until we reached the last things. But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things¹² so that we may unhappily know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.

CHAPTER THREE

What are the affirmative theologies and what are the negative?

1032D In my *Theological Representations*,¹³ I have praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology. I have shown the sense in which the divine and good nature is said to be one and then triune, how Fatherhood and Sonship are predicated of it, the meaning of the theology of the Spirit, how these core lights of goodness grew from the incorporeal and indivisible good, and how in this sprouting they have remained inseparable from their co-eternal foundation in it, in

11. "Clearing aside" here translates a term (aphairesis) that is otherwise rendered "denial."

12. These cryptic references to descending assertions and ascending denials are expanded in the next chapter.

13. This lost or fictitious treatise is mentioned and perhaps summarized in the first chapter of *The Divine Names* (DN 1 585B 10f. and 589D 38 to 592B 17). See DN 1, notes 3 and 10, for additional references.

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themselves, and in each other.¹⁴ I have spoken of how Jesus, who is above individual being, became a being with a true human nature. Other revelations of scripture were also praised in *The Theological Representations*.

1033B In *The Divine Names* I have shown the sense in which God is described as good, existent, life, wisdom, power, and whatever other things pertain to the conceptual names for God.¹⁵ In my *Symbolic Theology*¹⁶ I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive. I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures, and instruments proper to him, of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him, images shaped by the workings of the symbolic representations of God. And I feel sure that you have noticed how these latter come much more abundantly than what went before, since *The Theological Representations* and a discussion of the names appropriate to God are inevitably briefer than what can be said in *The Symbolic Theology*. The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing. In the earlier books my argument traveled downward from the most exalted to the humblest categories, taking in on this downward path an ever-increasing number of ideas which multiplied with every stage of the descent. But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.

1033C

Now you may wonder why it is that, after starting out from the highest category when our method involved assertions, we begin now from the lowest category when it involves a denial. The reason is this. When we assert what is beyond every assertion, we must then proceed from what is most akin to it, and as we do so we make the affirmation

14. The symbolism of lights and sprouting plants is also used for the Son and the Spirit in DN 2 645B 19-24.

15. These five biblical names for God are the first to be discussed in *The Divine Names* (chapters four through eight).

16. On this lost or fictitious treatise, see DN 1, note 89.

on which everything else depends. But when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. Is it not closer to reality to say that God is life and goodness rather than that he is air or stone? Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to him the terms of speech and thought?¹⁷

CHAPTER FOUR

That the supreme Cause of every perceptible thing is not itself perceptible.

1030D So this is what we say. The Cause of all is above all and is not in-existent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and

17. Or, "is it not more incorrect to say that God gets drunk or raves than that he is expressed or conceived?"

"Life," "goodness," "air," etc., are all biblical examples and are discussed elsewhere in the corpus (DN 1 596ABC, CH 2 144CD, Ep. 9 1105B; "air" refers to the "still small breeze" of 1 Kings 19:12 in the Septuagint). The point here is that not all affirmations concerning God are equally inappropriate; they are arranged in a descending order of decreasing congruity. Affirmative theology begins with the loftier, more congruous comparisons and then proceeds "down" to the less appropriate ones. Thus, as the author reminds us, *The Theological Representations* began with God's oneness and proceeded down into the multiplicity of affirming the Trinity and the incarnation. *The Divine Names* then affirmed the more numerous designations for God which come from mental concepts, while *The Symbolic Theology* "descended" into the still more pluralized realm of sense perception and its plethora of symbols for the deity. This pattern of descending affirmations and ascending negations can be interpreted in terms of late Neoplatonism's "procession" from the One down into plurality and the "return" of all back to the One (CH 1, note 4).

In the "return," not all negations concerning God are equally appropriate; the attributes to be negated are arranged in an ascending order of decreasing incongruity, first considering and negating the lowest or most obviously false statements about God and then moving up to deny those that may seem more congruous. Thus the first to be denied are the perceptible attributes, starting with *The Mystical Theology*, Chapter 4, which therefore previews the two subsequent treatises on perceptible symbols, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Chapter 2 of the former work will continue the theme of negating and transcending symbols, namely, interpreting first the most incongruous of the perceptible symbols attributed to the celestial, whether to the angels or to God. The anagogical or uplifting method of interpretation in these two treatises incorporates into itself the principles of negative theology. Both the spatial, material depictions of the angels in the scriptures and also the temporal, sequential images of God in the liturgy must be transcended in the ascent from the perceptible to the intelligible. Thus, "as we climb higher," Chapter 5 of *The Mystical Theology* denies and moves beyond all our concepts or "conceptual" attributes of God and concludes by abandoning all speech and thought, even negations.

On this sequence of treatises, see P. Rorem, "The Place of *The Mystical Theology* in the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus," *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 87-98.

hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible. It suffers neither disorder nor disturbance and is overwhelmed by no earthly passion. It is not powerless and subject to the disturbances caused by sense perception. It endures no deprivation of light. It passes through no change, decay, division, loss, no ebb and flow, nothing of which the senses may be aware. None of all this can either be identified with it nor attributed to it.

CHAPTER FIVE

That the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual.

1045D

1048A

1048B

Again, as we climb higher we say this. It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.

The Celestial Hierarchy¹

1. *The Celestial Hierarchy* has no other dependable modern translation into English. The best translation yet in print, abundantly annotated and accompanying a critical Greek text, is the French rendition by M. Gandillac (*Sources Chrétiennes* 58), to be abbreviated as Gandillac, CH. As to the overall structure of the treatise, Giuseppa Saccaro Battisti has argued for certain similarities with classical rhetoric: exordium (chapters 1–2), narratio (3–5), divisio (6–10), confutatio (11–14), confirmatio (15), and conclusio (the final sentence of chapter 15) (“Strutture e figure retoriche nel ‘de Caelesti Hierarchia’ dello Pseudo-Dionigi: Un mezzo di espressione dell’ ontologia Neoplatonica,” *Archivio di Filosofia* 51 [1983]: 293–319).

CHAPTER ONE

*Dionysius the Elder to Timothy the Fellow-Elder: Even though in various ways every divine enlightenment proceeds, out of its goodness, toward those provided for, it not only remains simple in itself but also unifies those it enlightens.*²

120A
120B
121A
1. "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."³ But there is something more. Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in. For, as the sacred Word says, "from him and to him are all things."⁴

2. Let us, then, call upon Jesus, the Light of the Father, the "true light enlightening every man coming into the world,"⁵ "through whom we have obtained access"⁶ to the Father, the light which is the source of all light. 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 and we should do so in accordance with what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion. We must lift up the immaterial and steady eyes of our minds to that outpouring of Light which is so primal, indeed much more so, and which comes from that

2. On the doubtful authenticity of these chapter headings, see DN 1, note 2, and EH 1, note 2.

3. Jas 1:17.

4. Rom 11:36; cf. DN 4 708A 4f., DN 13 980B 27f. This opening paragraph has bracketed the Neoplatonic theme of procession and return with two supporting biblical quotations. The cyclical pattern of "remaining," a downward "procession," and an upward "return" is essential to the structure of late Neoplatonism. Proclus received this motif from his predecessors Iamblichus and Syrianus and summarized it succinctly: "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and returns to it" (*The Elements of Theology*, ed. E. R. Dodds, no. 35, p. 38; see also nos. 25–39, pp. 28–43, and the comments by Dodds, XIX–XX and pp. 212f.). The language of a logical cause and effect helps avoid both the obvious mistake of interpreting this theme literally as a movement in space and also the more subtle pitfall of understanding it sequentially as a movement in time. Stephen Gersh has organized a major monograph around this construct of the "downward and upward processes" (*From Iamblichus*, see especially pp. 46, 224, and 286). Dionysius used this framework primarily to express the divine revelation, which "descends" to its recipients and then "uplifts" them, as perhaps suggested by the very sequence of his treatises (see MT 3, note 17) and as clearly stated in several passages: CH 1 120B to 121C 27, CH 2 141B 21–31, CH 9 260B 15–21, EH 3 428D 38 to 429B 25, DN 4 712C 29 to 713A 2, MT 3 1033C.

5. Jn 1:9.

6. Rom 5:2; cf. Eph 2:18, 3:12

121B source of divinity, I mean the Father. This is the Light which, by way of representative symbols, makes known to us the most blessed hierarchies among the angels. But we need to rise from this outpouring of illumination so as to come to the simple ray of Light itself.

Of course this ray never abandons its own proper nature, or its own interior unity. Even though it works itself outward to multiplicity and proceeds outside of itself as befits its generosity, doing so to lift upward and to unify those beings for which it has a providential responsibility, nevertheless it remains inherently stable and it is forever one with its own unchanging identity. And it grants to creatures the power to rise up, so far as they may, toward itself and it unifies them by way of its own simplified unity. However, 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.⁷

121C 3. All this accounts for the fact that the sacred institution and source of perfection established our most pious hierarchy. He modeled it on the hierarchies of heaven, and 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 interpretations⁸ 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 the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odors which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of light. The thoroughness of sacred discipleship indicates the immense contemplative capacity of the mind. Order and rank here below are a sign of the harmonious ordering toward the divine realm. The reception of the most divine Eucharist is a symbol of participation in Jesus. 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.⁹

7. This entire paragraph echoes the full Neoplatonic structure of remaining, procession, and return. See note 4, above. The veils that "upliftingly conceal" are the scriptures and the liturgy, as indicated in the rest of this chapter and in DN 1 592B 20–27.

8. On this use of the term "uplifting" (anagogy) to mean an "interpretation," see CH 15 337D 47, note 179.

9. These references to the Eucharist and to the beauties, odors, and lights there per-

The source of spiritual perfection provided us with perceptible images of these heavenly minds. He did so out of concern for us and because he wanted us to be made godlike. He made the heavenly hierarchies known to us. He made our own hierarchy a ministerial colleague of these divine hierarchies by an assimilation, to the extent that is humanly feasible, to their godlike priesthood. 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.

CHAPTER TWO

That divine and heavenly things are appropriately revealed even through dissimilar symbols.

136D 1. The first task I think is to set down the purpose of every hierarchy and to indicate how this is to the advantage of its members. Then, following on what scripture has revealed to us, a hymn of praise must be offered up to the heavenly hierarchies. I must describe the sacred forms given to these heavenly ranks by scripture, for one has to be lifted up through such shapes to the utter simplicity of what is there.¹⁰

137A We cannot, as mad people do, profanely visualize these heavenly and godlike intelligences as actually having numerous feet and faces.¹¹ They are not shaped to resemble the brutishness of oxen or to display the wildness of lions. They do not have the curved beak of the eagle or the wings and feathers of birds.¹² We must not have pictures of flaming wheels whirling in the skies,¹³ of material thrones made ready

ceived by the senses suggest that the opening of *The Celestial Hierarchy* also introduces "our" hierarchy, more thoroughly discussed in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Chapter 3 of *The Celestial Hierarchy* concludes the introduction to both hierarchies; Chapter 4 then begins the specific discussion of the angelic hierarchy.

10. This opening paragraph may outline the rest of the treatise. The purpose of a hierarchy is discussed in CH 3. Perhaps CH 4–14 could loosely be called a hymn of praise. The specific discussion of the "sacred forms" is found in CH 15.

11. All of these introductory examples are discussed later in the treatise, most of them in Chapter 15. The angels' facial features and feet are explained in CH 15 332A–D.

12. The symbols of the ox, the lion, and the eagle (Ez 1:10) are considered in CH 15 336D to 337A.

13. The flaming wheels (Dn 7:9) and the entire image of fire are discussed in CH 15 328D to 329D.

to provide a reception for the Deity,¹⁴ of multicolored horses,¹⁵ or of spear-carrying lieutenants,¹⁶ or any of those shapes handed on to us amid all the variety of the revealing symbols of scripture. The Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences but, as I have already said, it does so not for the sake of art,¹⁷ but as a concession to the nature of our own mind. It uses scriptural passages in an uplifting fashion as a way, provided for us from the first, to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature.

2. These pictures have to do with beings so simple that we can neither know nor contemplate them. What if someone therefore thinks that the scriptural imagery for these minds is incongruous and that the names given to the angels have the inadequacy of a pretense?

Indeed, it could be argued that if the theologians wanted to give corporeal form to what is purely incorporeal, they should have resorted to a more appropriate and related fashioning, that they should have begun with what we would hold to be noblest, immaterial and transcendent beings, instead of drawing upon a multiplicity of the earthiest forms and applying these to godlike realities which are utterly simple and heavenly. Now perhaps this intends to lift us upward and not lead the celestial appearances down into incongruous dissimilarities. But in fact it illicitly defies the divine powers and also misleads our mind, entangling it in profane compositions. One would likely then imagine that the heavens beyond really are filled with bands of lions and horses, that the divine praises are, in effect, great moos, that flocks of birds take wing there or that there are other kinds of creatures all about or even more dishonorable material things, whatever the completely dissimilar similarities of the revealing scriptures depict as tending toward the absurd, counterfeit, and emotional.

But if one looks at the truth of the matter, the sacred wisdom of scripture becomes evident, for, when the heavenly intelligences are represented with forms, great providential care is taken to offer no insult to the divine powers, as one might say, and we ourselves are spared a passionate dependence upon images which have something

14. Dn 7:9; Rv 4:2; cf. Ep. 9 1105B 16. Of course, "thrones" as a celestial name is treated below in Chapter 7 (205D).

15. Zech 1:8, 6:2; Rv 6:1-9; cf. CH 15 337AB.

16. Jos 5:13; cf. CH 15 333A 19.

17. R. Roques has considered this phrase, and its Latin translation by Eriugena, in "Valde artificialiter": le sens d'un contresens," *Annuaire de l'école pratique des Hautes Études* 77 (1969-1970): 31-72.

of the lowly and the vulgar about them. Now there are two reasons for creating types for the typeless, for giving shape to what is actually without shape.¹⁸ First, we lack the ability to be directly raised up to conceptual contemplations. We need our own upliftings that come naturally to us and which can raise before us the permitted forms of the marvelous and unformed sights. Second, it is most fitting to the mysterious passages of scripture that the sacred and hidden truth about the celestial intelligences be concealed through the inexpressible and the sacred and be inaccessible to the *hoi polloi*. Not everyone is sacred, and, as scripture says, knowledge is not for everyone.¹⁹

As for the incongruity of scriptural imagery or the impropriety of using humble forms to represent the divine and holy ranks, this is a criticism to which one must say in reply that sacred revelation works in a double way.

3. It does so, firstly, by proceeding naturally through sacred images in which like represents like, while also using formations which are dissimilar and even entirely inadequate and ridiculous.²⁰ Sometimes the mysterious tradition of the scriptures represents the sacred blessedness of the transcendent Deity under the form of "Word," "Mind," and "Being." It shows thereby that rationality and wisdom are, necessarily, attributes of God, that he is also to be deemed a true subsistence and the true cause of the subsistence of every being, and that he may also be represented as light and hailed as life.²¹ Now these sacred shapes certainly show more reverence and seem vastly superior to the making of images drawn from the world. Yet they are actually no less defective than this latter, for the Deity is far beyond every manifestation of being and of life; no reference to light can characterize it; every reason or intelligence falls short of similarity to it.

Then there is the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invis-

18. The double rationale for symbolism is also discussed later in this chapter in 145A 8-10, and in EH 1 377A 1-5, Ep. 9 1105C 36-45, and 1108AB 7-20.

19. 1 Cor 8:7; cf. Mt 13:11; Lk 8:10; cf. EH 1 376C 34f.

20. Note that the author does not advance two separate types of images that are mutually exclusive. The rest of the corpus explains that this is a "double" way in that "the very same things are both similar and dissimilar to God" (DN 9 916A 8-10). Thus later in this chapter, the author arranges some scriptural symbols in a continuum of similarity and dissimilarity (144C to 145A).

21. "Word": Jn 1:1; for further biblical examples and discussion, see DN 1 596B 20 and DN 7 872C. "Mind": Is 40:13; see DN 1 596B 19. "Being": perhaps Ex 3:14; see DN 1 596A 13 and DN 5 816B to 825B. "Light": 1 Jn 1:5; see DN 1 596A 13. "Life": Jn 11:25; see DN 1 596A 13 and DN 6 856B to 857C.

ble,²² infinite, ungraspable, and other things which show not what he is but what in fact he is not. This second way of talking about him seems to me much more appropriate, for, as the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility.

Since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible.²³ So it is that scriptural writings, far from demeaning the ranks of heaven, actually pay them honor by describing them with dissimilar shapes so completely at variance with what they really are that we come to discover how those ranks, so far removed from us, transcend all materiality. Furthermore, I doubt that anyone would refuse to acknowledge that incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are. High-flown shapes could well mislead someone into thinking that the heavenly beings are golden or gleaming men, glamorous, wearing lustrous clothing, giving off flames which cause no harm, or that they have other similar beauties with which the word of God has fashioned the heavenly minds.²⁴ It was to avoid this kind of misunderstanding among those incapable of rising above visible beauty that the pious theologians so wisely and upliftingly stooped to incongruous dissimilarities, for by doing this they took account of our inherent tendency toward the material and our willingness to be lazily satisfied by base images. At the same time they enabled that part of the soul which longs for the things above actually to rise up. Indeed the sheer crossness of the signs is a good so that even the materially inclined cannot accept that it could be permitted or true that the celestial and divine sights could be conveyed by such shameful things. And remember too that there is nothing which lacks its own share of beauty,²⁵ for as scripture rightly says, "Everything is good."²⁶

22. Col 1:15; 1 Tm 1:17; Heb 11:27.

23. CH 2 here continues the discussion of affirmations and negations begun in MT 3, applying the principles of negative theology to the interpretation of perceptible symbols, beginning with those most easily denied in their literal sense.

24. Dn 10:5f. (LXX); cf. Mt 28:3; see also CH 15 328D 41, 333A 6-10.

25. See also CH 4 177CD 19-21, DN 4 720B 15f., and DN 7 868C 31-33.

26. Gn 1:31.

4. Everything, then, can be a help to contemplation; and dissimilar similarities derived from the world, about which I have been talking, can be applied to those beings which are both intelligible and intelligent.²⁷ Of course one has always to remember the enormous difference between what is typical of the domain of intelligence and that of the senses.²⁸ Thus, among those lacking in intelligence, anger is a raging, passionate and irrational urge, whereas among those endowed with reason it is something else, and has to be understood to be such. For intelligent beings anger is, I believe, the sturdy working of reason in them and the capacity they have to be grounded tenaciously in holy and unchanging foundations.

Similarly with desire. For those lacking in reason it is a limitless appetite for the material, a thrust originating in that chronic urge to dwell with the ephemeral, that living, mastering longing to remain with whatever is applauded by the senses. Now when we apply dissimilar similarities to intelligent beings, we say of them that they experience desire, but this has to be interpreted as a divine yearning for that immaterial reality which is beyond all reason and all intelligence. It is a strong and sure desire for the clear and impassible contemplation of the transcendent. It is a hunger for an unending, conceptual, and true communion with the spotless and sublime light, of clear and splendid beauty. Intemperance then will be an unailing and unturning power, seen in the pure and unchanging yearning for divine beauty and in the total commitment to the real object of all desire.²⁹

What we call lack of intelligence and lack of perception in animals and in objects is in fact the deficiency of reason and of perception. But when we are talking of immaterial and intelligent beings we say this, as befits holy beings. They, as transcendent beings, far surpass our discursive and bodily reason, just as material perception is something far beneath those entities which are intelligent and disembodied.

So, then, forms, even those drawn from the lowliest matter, can be used, not unfittingly, with regard to heavenly beings. Matter, after all, owes its subsistence to absolute beauty and keeps, throughout its

27. On this expression for the angels, see Gandillac, CH, p. 81, n. 1.

28. Cf. Iamblichus, *de Myst.* I, 21, 66.5-9. On the comparison and contrast of Dionysius and Iamblichus regarding perceptible symbols, especially those connected to ritual, see P. Rorem, "Iamblichus and the Anagogical Method in Pseudo-Dionysian Liturgical Theology," *Studia Patristica* XVII, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 453-60.

29. On these emotions, see Gandillac, CH, pp. 81-83.

144C earthly ranks, some echo of intelligible beauty. Using matter, one may be lifted up to the immaterial archetypes. Of course one must be careful to use the similarities as dissimilarities, as discussed, to avoid one-to-one correspondences, to make the appropriate adjustments as one remembers the great divide between the intelligible and the perceptible.

144D 5. We will find that the mysterious theologians employ these things not only to make known the ranks of heaven but also to reveal something of God himself. They sometimes use the most exalted imagery, calling him for instance sun of righteousness,³⁰ star of the morning which rises into the mind,³¹ clear and conceptual light.³² Sometimes they use more intermediate, down-to-earth images. They call him the blazing fire which does not cause destruction,³³ water filling up life and, so to speak, entering the stomach and forming inexhaustible streams.³⁴ Sometimes the images are of the lowliest kind, such as sweet-smelling ointment³⁵ and corner stone.³⁶ Sometimes the imagery is even derived from animals so that God is described as a lion or a panther, a leopard or a charging bear.³⁷ Add to this what seems the lowliest and most incongruous of all, for the experts in things divine gave him the form of a worm.³⁸

145A In this way the wise men of God, exponents of hidden inspiration, separate the "Holy of Holies" from defilement by anything in the realm of the imperfect or the profane. They therefore honor the dissimilar shape so that the divine things remain inaccessible to the profane and so that all those with a real wish to see the sacred imagery may not dwell on the types as true. So true negations and the unlike

30. Mal 4:2. For further physical symbols of God such as those considered here in notes 30–38, see Ep. 9 1104C 25 to 1105B 28.

31. 2 Pt 1:19; Rv 22:16. Neither of these verses is precisely echoed in the Areopagite's wording; see Plotinus, *Enneads*, II, 3, 12, 20.

32. 1 Jn 1:5; see DN 1 596A 13, note 26, for other biblical texts. Mt 5:14–16 concerns an unhidden light.

33. Ex 3:2 concerns a nonconsuming fire. Wisd of Sol 18:3 refers to the pillar of fire (Ex 13:21f.) as a harmless sun. For other discussions of fire as a symbol for God and for the angels, see Ep. 9 1108C 39 and CH 15 329A.

34. Jn 7:38, from Prv 18:4; cf. Jn 4:14. See also EH 1 373C 40, DN 1 596B 19, Ep. 9 1104B 20; Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI, 9, 9, 49.

35. Sg 1:3; EH 4 concerns the sacrament of the ointment or myron as a symbol for Christ.

36. Is 28:16; Eph 2:20 (Ez 10:1); see the fuller range of biblical sources in note 68 to DN 1 596C 30f.

37. Is 31:4; Hos 5:14, 13:7f. Dove: Mt 3:16; Eagle: Dt 32:11.

38. Ps 22:6.

145B comparisons with their last echoes offer due homage to the divine things. For this reason there is nothing ridiculous about representing heavenly beings with similarities which are dissimilar and incongruous, for the reasons mentioned. And I myself might not have been stirred from this difficulty to my current inquiry, to an uplifting through a precise explanation of these sacred truths, had I not been troubled by the deformed imagery used by scripture in regard to the angels. My mind was not permitted to dwell on imagery so inadequate, but was provoked to get behind the material show, to get accustomed to the idea of going beyond appearances to those upliftings which are not of this world.³⁹

145C But enough now about these material and incongruous images of the angels as found in sacred scripture. What I must now do is to explain what I mean by hierarchy and to say what advantage such hierarchy offers to those who are members of it. So, I hope that my discourse will be guided by Christ, by my Christ, if I may put it this way, the inspiration of what has been made known about the hierarchy. And you, my child, must follow the recommendations of our hierarchic tradition. Listen carefully to things sacredly said and be inspired by them in an initiation into inspired things. Keep these holy truths a secret in your hidden mind. Guard their unity safe from the multiplicity of what is profane,⁴⁰ for, as scripture says, you must not throw before swine that pure, shining and splendid harmony of the conceptual pearls.⁴¹

CHAPTER THREE

What a hierarchy is and what its benefit is.

164D 1. In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine.⁴² And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it. The beauty of God—so simple, so good,

39. This remark is perhaps genuinely (unintentionally) autobiographical. For "uplifting" (anagogy) as an "interpretation," see CH 15, note 179.

40. 1 Tm 6:20.

41. Mt 7:6

42. This definition of hierarchy (order, understanding, and activity) provides the organizing principle for R. Roques's masterful *L'Univers Dionysien* (see p. 30). Other statements of general definition for hierarchy are found below, 165BC 17–32, in EH 1 373C and EH 5 500D to 504A3.

so much the source of perfection—is completely uncontaminated by dissimilarity. It reaches out to grant every being, according to merit, a share of light and then through a divine sacrament, in harmony and in peace, it bestows on each of those being perfected its own form.

165A 2. The goal of a hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him.⁴³ A hierarchy has God as its leader of all understanding and action. It is forever looking directly at the comeliness of God. A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors⁴⁴ reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself. It ensures that when its members have received this full and divine splendor they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God's will to beings further down the scale.

It would be quite wrong for those granting initiation in the sacred things, as indeed for those sacredly initiated, ever to do anything or even to exist against the sacred orderings of him who is after all the source of all perfection. This would certainly be wrong, particularly if they themselves desire the splendor of God, if they are forever gazing on this splendor in a way appropriate to its sacred character, and if it is to this splendor that they are conformed, proportionately to each mind.

165B If one talks then of hierarchy, what is meant is a certain perfect arrangement, an image of the beauty of God which sacredly works out the mysteries of its own enlightenment in the orders and levels of understanding of the hierarchy, and which is likened toward its own source as much as is permitted.⁴⁵ Indeed for every member of the hierarchy, perfection consists in this, that it is uplifted to imitate God as far as possible and, more wonderful still, that it becomes what scripture calls a "fellow workman for God"⁴⁶ and a reflection of the workings of God. Therefore when the hierarchic order lays it on some to be purified and on others to do the purifying, on some to receive illumination and on others to cause illumination, on some to be perfected and on others to bring about perfection, each will actually imitate God in the way suitable to whatever role it has.

165C

43. On this goal of assimilation and union, see Gandillac, CH, p. 88, n. 1.

44. *Wisd of Sol* 7:26.

45. For other definitions of hierarchy, see note 42 above.

46. 1 Cor 3:9; 1 Thes 3:2.

What we humans call the beatitude of God is something uncontaminated by dissimilarity. It is full of a continuous light and is perfect, indeed it lacks no perfection whatsoever. It is purifying, illuminating, and perfecting; or rather it is itself purification, illumination, and perfection.⁴⁷ It is beyond purification; it is beyond light; it is the very source of perfection which is more than perfect. It is also the cause of every hierarchy and yet it surpasses by far every sacred thing.

165D

3. Now it seems to me that those who have been purified should in fact be perfectly uncontaminated, that they should be free of all dissimilar blemish. I think that those receiving sacred illumination should receive the divine light in full, that they should be uplifted in the holy eyes of their mind so as to be fully able to engage in contemplation. I think that those being perfected should draw away from imperfection and join the company of those who behold sacred things with a perfected understanding. It is also right that those who purify should give of their superabundant purity to others. It is right too that those who give illumination—those minds clearer than the others, joyfully full of the sacred radiance, and obviously able both to receive the light and to pass on what they acquire—that these should spread their overflowing light everywhere among those worthy of it. Finally, it is only proper that those charged with the task of creating perfection, as those who understand the perfecting impartation, should cause the perfect to be what they are by introducing them to an understanding of the sacred things so reverently beheld. And so it comes about that every order in the hierarchical rank is uplifted as best it can toward cooperation with God. By grace and a God-given power, it does things which belong naturally and supernaturally to God, things performed by him transcendentally and revealed in the hierarchy for the permitted imitation of God-loving minds.

165A

165B

47. The triad of purification, illumination, and perfection is particularly prominent in the discussion of the three clerical orders of deacons, priests, and hierarchs. See EH 5 504A 5 to 509A 3, and CH 7, note 75. On the origins of this famous trio, see the argument of A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 57–59.