

Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Thomas Gallus: Interior Angelic Hierarchies and More

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Francesco Botticini, The Assumption of the Virgin (c. 1475; detail)

THOMAS GALLUS (c.1200–1246; Thomas of Vercelli, Thomas of St. Victor) studied at the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris before co-founding a monastery in Vercelli, Italy. Strangely overlooked today (but that is changing), his ideas are valuable and important for the study of the history of mysticism and in the West, and, potentially, for modern Christian spirituality. His accomplishments include following:

Gallus authored glosses, summaries and commentaries of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Ps.-Dionysius introduced the concept of *apophatic* mysticism: the notion that God is ultimately unknowable, and that the supreme mystical experience involves not knowing, but unknowing. Surprisingly, Ps.-Dionysius nowhere associates the ascent to or attainment of unknowing

with love! That connection came from Gallus. The Victorines were Augustinians, and Gallus' work — relying on the Song of Songs as well as the Dionysian corpus — represents an ultimate marriage of Augustinian love mysticism with Neoplatonic intellectual mysticism.

Along with this, Gallus was also the first to discuss an interiorized version of the angelic hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius. The latter, it will be recalled, posited the existence of nine hierarchical orders of angels, arranged in groups of three. Gallus understood there to be a parallel psychological situation within a person's soul. As symbolized by Jacob's ladder, these interior angels or soul activities interact and communicate upwards and downwards, between celestial levels of the soul and those concerned with activity in the material world.

The above two things enable Gallus to integrate what today we call *apophatic* (conceptless) and *kataphatic* (concept-oriented) mysticism. These are seen as two movements of the same, higher-order process. This also solves the problem of *quietism*. The mystical life is not merely a progressively more extreme flight from the world: an ascent beyond body to soul, from soul to intellect, and then beyond intellect to some wordless, formless experience of unknowing. In the Augustinian tradition, a mystic must apply insights gained and achieve an enriched ability to practice charity to God and man through good works. The mystical life is not one of withdrawal from the world, but of angelic activity in it. Knowledge about the world leads us to know and love God more, and knowing and loving God more makes use better serve Him in the world.

Finally, Gallus work on the *apex of the mind* and *spark of synderesis* was groundbreaking. For him, the *apex mentis* or highest summit of the soul is not, as in some earlier and later writers, solely an organ of moral conscience. Rather, it is truly a spark of God's consciousness that we possess, in which highest the affective experience and the highest intellectual knowing of God may coincide.

Inner Angelic Hierarchy

Gallus' best descriptions of the interior angelic hierarchy come not in his works on the Dionysian corpus, but in the Prologues of two commentaries on the Song of Songs (Barbet, 1967). The brief description below borrows liberally from Tichelkamp (2017) and Coolman (2017). We consider the nine ranks of angelic functions from lowest to highest — which would correspond to a process of gradual ascent (similar to the *Journey of the Mind to God* by St. Bonaventure, who was influenced by Gallus). However it would be equally logical to consider them in the reverse order, from highest to lowest.

First triad: Natural sensing and judging powers of soul operating alone

1. Angels

Basic perceptions or observations of the world, without yet any judgment of these observations.

2. Archangels

Intellectual judgments that discern whether what is observed is agreeable or disagreeable to oneself.

3. Principalities

The mind then makes an affective/volitional choice to approach what was judged agreeable, or desires to flee from what was judged disagreeable

Second triad: Natural forces of soul operating in cooperation with supernatural grace

4. Powers

Initial activities of reason, intellect, and affect—mental powers.

5. Virtues

Activation of mental/moral virtues, e.g., temperance, courage.

6. Dominations

Free will suspends the intellect and affect “in order to receive divine interventions; mind “is stretched and exercised (*extenditur et exercetur*)... to the highest limits of its nature.

Third triad: Operations of supernatural grace alone

7. Thrones

A suspension of the mind’s greatest powers, intellect and affect, gives way to the reception of divine grace that heightens the activity of intellect and affect.

8. Cherubim

This order contains the knowledge (*cognitio*) of both intellect and affect as they have been drawn or attracted by divine grace beyond the mind. Intellect and affect have “walked together up to the final failure of the intellect, which is at the summit of this order.

9. Seraphim

The Seraphic level contains “only the *principal affection* (spark of synderesis) which can be united to God (*sola principalis affectio Deo unibilis*).

When the mind has fully ascended, the soul is in proper order, and, like a healthy spiritual plant or tree, it can now communicate the life-giving fecundity of God, the Divine Source, from the highest level to all lower orders of the mind and soul. In a way reminiscent of certain Eastern esoteric systems (kundalini yoga and Taoist spiritual alchemy), the *summum bonum* of human life is neither ascent, nor remaining in ecstasy, but a steady-state circulation. This would imply (following basic principles of Victorine and Augustine psychology), one being an agent of God’s charity in the world. Hence the ultimate ethical end is the *unitive state*, or what some in the yogic traditions call the *jivan mukta* state.

Details here are necessarily very sketchy, but interested readers may find more detail in Coolman (2017), Tichelkamp (2017) and this video by Coolman.

Love above Knowledge in Thomas Gallus (Boyd Taylor Coolman)



The video is also interesting because Coolman draws an analogy between internal angelic hierarchy to certain ideas of the Jesuit philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, concerning hierarchical levels of human consciousness.

Readings

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Written by John Uebersax

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