

Feisal G. Mohamed. *In the Anteroom of Divinity: The Reformation of the Angels from Colet to Milton.*

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Order, wonderful order. Feisal Mohamed conducts his reader into the splendor of what he aptly designates the “anteroom of divinity,” the dwelling place of the angels — pure intellectual substances whose disposition in ninefold hierarchy is the quintessence of the Christian Neoplatonic vision of an ordered creation. The point of departure is the mystical theology of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, the shadowy sixth-century Syrian theologian who appropriated the apostolic identity of one of Paul’s interlocutors in Athens, a Greek philosopher mentioned in Acts 17:34. Ever since John Scotus Eriugena’s translation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* in 852, the influence of Dionysius’s angelology on Christian Platonism in the Latin West has been both continuous and enormous. Thomas Aquinas, for example, quoted Pseudo-Dionysius more frequently than any other single source, including the works of Aristotle. Mohamed’s book, however, is concerned with the reception of this mystical tradition during the English Reformation and Renaissance, “from Colet to Milton.” As he nimbly demonstrates, the early modern response to Christian Neoplatonism, and in particular to the Dionysian metaphysics of cosmic and sacramental hierarchy, was complex and deeply conflicted. By the mid-fifteenth century Lorenzo Valla had cast serious critical doubt on the text’s claim to apostolic authenticity, with the consequence that the authority of Dionysian thought had already come to be diminished at the dawn of the Reformation. Protestant Reformers whose hyper-Augustinian theology emphasized the immediacy of the connection of the soul to the divine by “scripture alone” and “grace alone” through “faith alone” were bound to rebuff the elaborate apparatus of mediation implied by the mystical hierarchical *dispositio* of the orders of angels, and indeed chose to dismiss the author of the angelology with one voice as “Dionysius, whoever he was.” Yet despite persistent doubts concerning authenticity and authorship, the Dionysian metaphysical tradition continued to exert a tremendous hold upon the English philosophical and poetical imagination throughout the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century.

Commencing with the pre-Reformation “Oxford reform” of John Colet, and proceeding thence to an exploration of the thought of Richard Hooker and the poetics of Spenser, Donne, and Milton, Dr. Mohamed ably demonstrates the continuity of influence of the Dionysian corpus under diverse guises. In his treatise *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* (1593, 1597) Hooker evokes the complementary logic of the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies in his defense of the “sensible excellencie” of the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* as well as in the threefold order of ministers. While Hooker repeatedly describes bishops of the Reformed Church of England as “angels among men,” it should be noted that for him the Supreme Hierarchy is none other than the Sovereign herself, the “uncommanded commander” of the political cosmos, both civil and ecclesiastical — an adaptation of the Dionysian model that would doubtless have

given Boniface VIII pause. Peter Lake has observed that Hooker's embrace of the Dionysian semiotics with its "hallowing" of sensible things as "resemblances framed according to things spiritually understood" (*Lawes* 4.1.3) constitutes a virtual "reclamation of the whole realm of symbolic action and ritual practice from popish superstition to that of a necessary, indeed essential, means of communication and edification." Lake surely hits the nail on the head. Hooker demonstrates the possibility of a reconciliation of the precepts of an orthodox Reform with an ancient tradition of Christian Platonism, and in doing so defines the deepest hermeneutical presuppositions of the Church of England for many generations to come.

Through Mohamed's insightful exposition, Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* reveal further the deep tension involved in the embrace of the Dionysian scheme from the perspective of Protestant soteriological assumptions. Like Hooker, Spenser is engaged in the delicate task of simultaneously retaining and undermining the mystery of angelic hierarchy. Donne and Milton, on the other hand, exhibit heightened degrees of a Reformed scepticism towards the mediatorial function of the angels. Mohamed is especially persuasive in his likening of Donne's attitude to that of John Calvin and, in a subsequent chapter, in revealing an intensification of Milton's apocalyptic thinking through a comparison of the Archangel Michael as presented in *Lycidas* with his portrayal in *Paradise Lost*. Mohamed is most surely justified in his general claim that "the significance of angelology has been overlooked in studies of Milton and his contemporaries, and indeed in studies of the English Renaissance, for far too long." Mohamed's beautiful monograph is a most welcome, even uplifting contribution to the intellectual history of the English Renaissance and Reformation, and is certainly deserving of the careful attention of scholars in literary, philosophical, and religious studies.

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