Heaven on Earth in Medieval Europe: Material Expressions of an Immaterial Realm

Christopher A. Tiegreen
Georgia State University

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Heaven on Earth in Medieval Europe:
Material Expressions of an Immaterial Realm

by

Chris Tiegreen

Under the Direction of Nick Wilding, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
2021
ABSTRACT

The religious mind in medieval Latin Christianity was thoroughly preoccupied with heaven, not only as an afterlife destination but as a present reality just beyond the reach of physical senses. But material expressions of heaven could, in connecting with the senses, usher the soul into an experience of heaven’s realities, and many ecclesiastics, philosophers, architects, artists, musicians, city leaders, and utopian visionaries thought heaven’s realities had significant implications for life on earth. As a result, social hierarchies, the geometry of structures, the intervals of sacred music, the iconography of artists, the organization of sacred and civic space, and the words and rituals of the liturgy mimicked heavenly ideals in myriad ways. The question this project explores is to what extent late medieval and early modern European life was intentionally patterned after heaven’s template.

The answer to this question helps us see medieval expression not simply in terms of theological and aesthetic preferences but as part of a complex, comprehensive worldview that would later face many challenges. This inquiry intersects with the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, art, and religion in helping us understand how views of the afterlife shape human activities, social structures, and expressions. Drawing from these disciplines, I explore beliefs about heaven within the larger medieval worldview and then examine material and social expressions of them in three case studies: Gothic France, Low Country pageantry and aesthetics, and northern Italian civic life. Assumptions about the afterlife profoundly shaped first the expressions of the sacred within the church, then reached beyond church walls to affect creative expressions, hierarchical structures both “sacred” and “secular,” and the ideals of city leaders and utopian visionaries. These findings help explain the dynamics of conflict in the reform movements, discoveries, and creative trends of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
INDEX WORDS: Medieval Europe, Religion, Catholic, Heaven, Materiality, Social structures
Heaven on Earth in Medieval Europe:
Material Expressions of an Immaterial Realm

by

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Committee Chair: Nick Wilding

Committee: Denise Davidson
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Office of Graduate Services
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
August 2021
DEDICATION

For Hannah, whose grace, patience, and sacrifice made these years of research a bit more heavenly than they would have been without her.
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<th>Patrologia Latina</th>
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<td><strong>Biblical books</strong></td>
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<td>2 Cor.</td>
<td>2 Corinthians</td>
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<td>Apocalypse (Revelation)</td>
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1 INTRODUCTION

A tourist passing through the massive arched entryways of Chartres Cathedral today might be fascinated by the historical significance of the building, impressed by the complexity of its architectural elements, or awed by the artistry that informed the design. Depending on the visitor’s religious perspective, he or she might even have a sense of leaving the normalcy of secular life and stepping into a more sacred space—especially if the purpose of the visit is to attend a Mass or see the Santa Camisia, a legendary relic said to have been Mary’s veil when she gave birth to Christ. Millions of tourists and pilgrims have been drawn to the cathedral to admire its size, its flying buttresses, its ample stained glass (including three large rose windows), its devotional labyrinth, and its statues, spires, and portals, and in one way or another, to be moved by the experience.

But a visitor passing through those same entryways in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, even while admiring the architectural and artistic elements of the cathedral, likely would have had an entirely different sensation. The transition may have involved moving from secular to sacred space, but not exactly in the way we understand those terms; though distinctions were made between ecclesiastical and secular powers, divisions between sacred and secular life were not about whether one was religious or not but whether one had taken monastic vows. Many late medieval visitors would have had a loftier vision in passing through those doors—an encounter with the divine and its embodiment in the celebration of the Eucharist, to be sure, but also something more: an entrance into the environment of heaven, or at least something like it. The atmosphere of a cathedral or church was meant to draw people toward a higher realm.
This journey toward heaven-like experiences was not merely a matter of the visitor’s own construction. It was crafted by centuries of semiotic evolution in which all sorts of symbols—visual, auditory, tactile, most of them thoroughly sensory and experiential—expressed heavenly themes. Life was not mentally divided between the sacred and nonsacred nearly as much as it was lived on a spectrum between heaven and hell with earth in between. Distinctions between material and spiritual and between temporal and eternal were common; distinctions between sacred and secular were confined largely to discussions of power. The differences may seem subtle, but they are significant. The issue was not specifically whether a person’s beliefs, practices, and experiences could be cast into sacred and secular categories; it was whether they moved him or her in lived experience further along the continuum toward heaven.

The experience of a heavenly environment did not apply only to large cathedrals like Chartres, of course; it was felt in numerous churches, abbeys, and other edifices large and small. Nor was it exclusive to Gothic structures. It applied in some degree to virtually every medieval church and cloister, regardless of its style. Heavenly connotations in the shapes integrated into structures, in the light and colors of windows, in the lift of arches and spires, and in the echoes of songs were described by diverse voices. They echoed streams of thought in late antiquity from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who in turn had drawn from pre-Christian thought of Plato and Pythagoras. These connections have long been recognized by historians of art, architecture, and music. The medieval and early modern religious mind had a strong sense of space and the spiritual terrain, and any contact with the divine—the Eucharist and the altar, the contexts and experiences of other sacraments, holy sites and relics, and even the basic elements of order and proportions—prompted thoughts of a less visible but nevertheless palpable realm.
It is difficult to imagine, then, that the late medieval mind so immersed in imagery of heaven would think in such terms only within the walls of a church and then shift into other modes of thought beyond them. It is also hard to imagine that a person who lived on a continuum toward heaven experienced that awareness in visual and musical expressions but not through other senses. This semiotic language must have extended beyond the walls of formally sacred spaces and into other types of experience. In fact, we know of debates about the heavenliness (or not) of polyphonic melodies, not only in church music but in more common use;¹ of discussions on the importance of hierarchies that mirror heaven’s design, both in ecclesiastical and city governments;² of statutes that prohibited unsightly ruins and enhanced the urban environment because cities should be “made in the likeness of paradise”;³ and of visionaries who planned buildings and cities with cosmological motifs, making little distinction between “heaven” and “the heavens,” which were all part of the same conceptual package.⁴ The veil between earthly and heavenly forms was unusually transparent in the late medieval mind, and the numerous hints of being able to cross that divide in actual experience, from both written commentary and accepted symbolism of the time, raise a significant question: To what extent was late medieval and early modern European life intentionally patterned after heaven’s template? Or, to put it in

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¹ Polyphonic music, which utilized full chords or multiple melodies, was a marked contrast from the tradition of plainchant melodies long in use in liturgical and other forms of music. It had been developing at least since the eleventh century but became the topic of strenuous debate at times, especially in the fifteenth century.
² John Colet and Jean Gerson, drawing from Pseudo-Dionysius, exhorted their readers and listeners to model earthly hierarchies after angelic patterns.
⁴ Imagined and/or built cities like Palmanova and Campanella’s City of the Sun are thought to have been designed in concentric circles or perfect squares to create a sense of equality (though not everyone in such a layout would be equidistant from the center), but the fact that some elements strongly resemble Solomon’s temple in Ezekiel’s idealized vision or the concentric spheres of the heavens in contemporary cosmology cannot be insignificant.
biblical terms more resonant in contemporary thought, to what extent did people attempt to create earthly shadows of heavenly things?⁵

Identifying conscious attempts to replicate divine order in earthly activities is not always straightforward, partly because pervasive patterns of thought are often acted upon without being articulated. Even so, a substantial number of theorists and practitioners—bishops, abbots, philosophers, craftsmen—openly discussed the theological and mathematical links between divine and human orders and sought to emulate the creativity of God in manmade endeavors. A sense of divine design, in precise geometric and mathematical form, inspired the creation of architectural and musical works. Equilateral triangles were a symbol of the Trinity and, for that reason alone, support the ribs under the vault of Reims Cathedral, though no observer will see them and other designs would have been just as functional.⁶ Debates at the construction of Milan’s cathedral centered on whether to base its design on the triangle or the perfect proportions of the square.⁷ The tonal consonances of octaves, fifths, and fourths often were implemented in chant and polyphony for mathematical and theological reasons as much as aesthetic and acoustic ones.⁸ Liturgy consciously drew from heavenly depictions in Isaiah and Revelation and called congregants to join in the heavenly choir.⁹ Metaphysical perfection was the fabric of the universe, and monuments like Gothic cathedrals emerged from an intellectual context that synthesized Platonic and Pythagorean ideals with biblical models like Moses’ tabernacle, Solomon’s temple, and the city of Revelation, all of which were commonly interpreted as either

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shadows or descriptions of heavenly realities. This confluence of diverse streams of thought may have been openly identified by a few, but it seems to have been assimilated by many.

The results were certainly not uniform. Perceptions of heaven and the divine order differed. In visual works, the degree of austerity or ornamentation may have depended on the architect or designer’s perceptions of heaven as much as on his aesthetic or functional preferences. But even among the various styles of buildings, practices, and institutions, underlying themes and rationales remained the same. The question was rarely whether to create human works and experiences according to divine models or not; it was which interpretation of divine models to follow. Likewise, not everyone agreed on how sensory these earthly experiences of heaven should be. Bernard of Clairvaux thought of music in heavenly terms but sought to prepare monks for mystical encounters with divine realities apart from physical senses, especially the visual.\(^\text{10}\) The mystical ideal of “imageless devotion,” whether ever realized or not, long remained an ideal. Some tension is evident in the discourse surrounding the shape and form of earthly expressions of heaven, and in the case of Bernard, tension seems to have existed even within his own mind. Forms and ideals were debated, but the possibility of experiencing heavenly order and design in the earthly realm was rarely denied.

If a preoccupation with heaven were as pervasive as it seems, it would have had significant social implications. Any effort to change the patterns of earthly organizational or physical structures may have represented much more than a desire for efficiency or an evolving aesthetic preference. In some cases, it would have represented a departure from, or even a rebellion against, the forms and structures of heaven itself, and therefore potentially an attempt to supplant divine order with devilish chaos. This dynamic may help explain, at least in part, why

\(^{10}\) Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 41-44.
changing views of cosmology later in the period took on more than a philosophical tone, and why Protestant-Catholic polemics surrounding images and sensory experiences could turn so violently acrimonious. In the minds of many, new trends in architecture, music, and art, on the one hand, and in governing hierarchies and systems, on the other, were not just new trends. They may have been seen as potential assaults on centuries-long processes of discerning the heavenly foundations of earthly existence.

If so, understanding late medieval and early modern perceptions of heaven and the cosmos, and how they changed over time, becomes an important area of study. The material culture of heaven becomes a language worth interpreting, not only for its theological and aesthetic messages but also for its social impact. Concepts of beauty and order take on not only philosophical significance but psychological significance too. And heaven on earth becomes not just an ideal of monks and mystics but a cultural phenomenon extending well beyond the walls of the church.

1.1 Thesis

This study is driven by two overarching questions: (1) In what ways did medieval Christians attempt to model earthly life after a heavenly template; and (2) to what degree did they see heavenly symbols and patterns as experiences of the real thing? These related questions—one on the replication of heaven and one on its immanence—have not yet been explored with an interdisciplinary, integrated approach. The use of heavenly themes in symbol and allegory is well covered ground, but most studies focus on the devotional uses and theological meanings of these symbols and allegories. To take the symbolism further, it is important to consider the degree to which medieval minds saw the iconography of heaven as effectual—as a model for or an experience of the actual presence of a heavenly environment. For
example, were depictions of the company of heaven, the “church triumphant,” on the walls and windows of churches merely a conclusion to the pictorial storyline for the illiterate, or were they a visual portrayal of a spiritual reality, a representation of the “great cloud of witnesses” in heaven that was at that moment surrounding and encouraging the “church militant” still on earth? Did the words of the liturgy express a hopeful ideal of the earthly congregation joining in with a heavenly song, or were they applied literally to the moment in which they were sung? Did city administrators pass statutes that only nodded toward theological concerns, or did they anticipate some practical benefit in modeling their urban landscapes after heavenly patterns? Beyond understanding devotional meditative thought, how are we to understand devotional felt experience? Quite a lot has been written on the symbolic and allegorical meaning of heavenly representations, but issues of practical experience are underexplored.

To a significant extent, exploring these issues demands a synthesis of existing scholarship. Musicologists have identified the heavenly theme in music, art historians have identified it in medieval structures and iconography, theologians have seen it in liturgy and rituals, and so on. The scholarship within disciplines is generally excellent, though not always aimed at answering the same questions in this study; across disciplines, greater integration is needed to reconstruct the role of heaven in the medieval mind. This project aims to bring coherence and depth to this complex of observations by identifying more supporting evidence, reinterpreting some of the existing scholarship, and tying the whole picture together.

My focus is on the ways formal theology and informal beliefs translated into lived experience, and my contention is that the representation, replications, and felt experience of heaven took a wide variety of forms but were pervasive throughout the Latin Christian world. Not surprisingly, the heavenly template was more overt the closer one got to the altar, but it
found expression at times in materials, iconographic language, and political and social structures outside the church. I argue that in varying degrees, many medieval Latin Christians understood themselves to be really but invisibly among the company of heaven, with an implied mandate to conform to a heavenly template in the way they organized space, gave sacred meaning to objects and images, structured civic life, and participated in worship and ritual both within church walls and beyond them. In doing so, many understood themselves to be experiencing a taste or glimpse or touch of the heavenly environment itself. To what degree can never be a fully answered question—entering into the lived experience of others, especially so far removed from the historian’s time, is an imprecise art, not an exact science—and one of the challenges of such a study is discerning whether the evidence points to isolated examples spread over a vast geographical area and several centuries (and only among the literate), therefore being exceptional, or whether it represents a coherent view or integral aspect of the medieval mentality. Enough evidence exists to demonstrate at least the fact of this mentality in some circles; this study is an effort to explore how pervasive it was and what it meant for religious, intellectual, creative, social, and political life.

1.2 Sources, Methodology, and Scope

The period of this study is the late Middle Ages, when these concepts were perhaps at their fullest development and before the Reformation altered the discussion of them. In order to understand them, however, it will be important to explore their long development—the ongoing discourse over several centuries of theologians, philosophers, and significant church or monastic voices who openly identified meanings and intentions related to heaven-like environments. Some of the conceptual background is rooted in pre-Christian philosophy, but it takes on Christian
vocabulary and significance in late antiquity, builds throughout the Middle Ages, crystallizes around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and then is magnified and refined by further philosophical discourse, monastic contemplation, mystic vision, and artistic innovations.

Though these streams of thought were not limited to Latin Christianity—Maximos the Confessor, for example, eloquently cast eastern liturgical services as reenactments of the heavenly environment—this study is limited to western Europe, with particular focus on France, the Low Countries, and northern Italy. The visual, musical, literary, and political cultures of these regions were certainly informed by the wider European context, but they are some of the fullest expressions of the concepts in question, broadly representative of Latin Christianity, and influential in developments in other parts of Europe.

To understand the mentality of late medieval religious landscape—the common or widespread worldview regarding the afterlife—this study begins with the conceptual background and the sensory and social environment. These concepts developed over centuries in a variety of forms and are discernible in doctrinal statements, spatial concepts, ritual meanings and forms, organizational structures, and literary works. Then in three case studies, I examine sensory participation, the “material” aspect of a material culture of heaven and how it was constructed in tangible ways that were accessible and relevant to common experience. The point in exploring a wide range of sensory experiences will not be to understand them exhaustively, and certainly not to account for every variation of them in every place. Specific variations are far too numerous to consider individually. The purpose here is to understand how the common conceptual underpinning of each kind of expression was made manifest in life, or to understand the mentality that made connections between heavenly ideals and earthly participation. Evidence
suggests that such connections were not uncommon; the questions under investigation in this research are to what degree they were sought and how they were experienced.

Scholarship on late medieval and early modern perceptions of heaven and the afterlife in western European Christianity covers a range of issues that can fit into three broad categories: what people believed about heaven and how and why those beliefs changed over time; the connection between those beliefs and earthly practices and representations; and the cultural/anthropological significance of practices and beliefs. Though the first and third of these categories are relevant to how perceptions of heaven were represented or enacted on earth, the second is the core of this study. Previous research in all three of these areas from a variety of disciplines—thology, art history, musicology, anthropology, sociology, psychology—provides a necessary background for understanding a material culture of heaven.

Foundational studies on Christian beliefs about and representations of heaven include Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang’s *Heaven: A History*, though their primary focus is on evolving perceptions and what visual representations tell us about them. They trace both formal and popular theology of heaven in western Christianity from the New Testament era through the twentieth century, utilizing literary and artistic sources in order to draw theological conclusions. Jeffrey Burton Russell’s *A History of Heaven* suggests a similar approach but more specifically explores beliefs about the immortality of the soul, not perceptions or earthly representations of heaven itself, and ends with Dante. It nevertheless offers valuable background about how beliefs changed over time.

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Gothic architecture and iconography, perhaps the most recognizable expressions of sacred space in late medieval culture, has been much studied and is the subject of seminal works by Émile Mâle, Georges Duby, Otto von Simson, Erwin Panofsky, and many others. \(^{13}\) Duby and Simson took for granted that Neoplatonic mystical theology, specifically that of Pseudo-Dionysius, was influential in the formulation of Gothic ideals, an assumption that has been more recently contested by Peter Kidson and others, though the older view is still held by many.\(^{14}\) The artistic and musical developments that followed, whether closely related to the Gothic movement or distinct from it, have been explored from numerous angles and interpretive approaches, but the experience of them is usually discussed as a devotional, contemplative, or liturgical matter, and the idea that sounds and images might have been perceived as heavenly—not just representational but somehow participatory—is underexplored, even if mentioned at times. Here the work of Carolyn Walker Bynum is helpful for understanding the intersection between faith and materiality.\(^{15}\) The experience of heaven in music remains a field for further research, though it is considered in individual case studies, particular those of women mystics. The predominant theoretical approach in studies of medieval beliefs about heaven, regardless of the discipline, considers concepts and representations and how they were employed to enhance devotion and faith.

The heart of this study, however, is not how heaven was conceived or understood, or even how it was represented, but how it intersects with earthly activity and was experienced

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through material and sensory expressions. Many scholars have explored how views of the afterlife may have reflected social conditions and earthly concerns, taking the topic of conceptual development a step further to understand not only how ideas evolved but why they evolved the way they did—what motivating factors led to elaborate preparations for death, prayers for the dead, and funerary rituals and practices, for example—probing the anthropological significance of practices and beliefs. This study, however, looks at the intersection between heaven and earth from the opposite direction: how social conditions and earthly activities were shaped by concepts of the afterlife. Beliefs about heaven were reflected materially and socially—materially in representations that include iconography and proportions in art and architecture but are certainly not limited to visual elements; and socially in the structures and relationships of society, including its hierarchies, benefices, and patronages. Some authors have touched on these latter aspects peripherally; many have explored heavenly elements in art and architecture without looking beyond visual elements into other senses (or even other visual elements, like plans for utopian cities, for example). This treatment is helpful for understanding “sacred space”—not space that is modeled after heaven, per se, but that is contrasted with the secular space around it. This study engages with these insights to apply them more broadly to other senses less readily accessible to the historian.

The general conceptual direction in virtually all treatments mentioned above moves from earth toward heaven: how experiences of the here-and-now shaped ideas of the there-and-then, how theological beliefs and expressions regarding heaven and the afterlife changed, and how we know of these changes through observing and analyzing material evidence and representations. Whether the focus is how to get to heaven, what it is considered to be like, and who else is there
(or not there), the historical theological emphasis in most scholarship positions late medieval and early modern people firmly on earth and asks what they thought about heaven.

On this point, this study enters into this discussion but flips its orientation to ask a different set of questions. Rather than considering how experiences of the here-and-now shaped ideas of the there-and-then, it considers instead how ideas about heaven shaped here-and-now experiences—how contemporaries may have modeled earthly life after heavenly templates, and how changes in beliefs about the afterlife may have altered material expressions and social experiences. This focus is anchored first in the minds of late medieval and early modern people and asks whether these thoughts about heaven affected specific behaviors on earth, and if so, how. It builds on the sacred space concept but is more specific: not just *sacred* space (as a place where connections with the divine or transcendent can happen) but *heavenly* space (as an earthly pattern modeled after future or otherworldly expectations). Rather than asking what visual representations tell us about beliefs, it turns the question around to ask why it was deemed important to express beliefs in material forms—or, to put it more succinctly, rather than asking what materiality tells us about beliefs, instead what beliefs tell us about materiality. It explores not how human beings made themselves think more about heaven and lift themselves up through their art, architecture, rituals, literature, music, doctrines, social structures, and so on, but rather how they attempted to bring glimpses and tastes of heaven down to earth.

The first phase of this project therefore deals with the conceptual background—what late medieval and early modern Christians in western Europe tended to believe about heaven. Much of the research cited above provides a solid foundation for understanding widely accepted theology and doctrines and for discerning trajectories of change, though there surely remain details, layers, and nuances to be further explored. Where the picture needs filling in is in the
more comprehensive worldview and modes of expression—not merely a system of beliefs but a way of life.

As stated above, this conceptual framework was expressed in doctrinal statements, spatial concepts, ritual meanings and forms, organizational structures, and literary works with relevant theological content. Of these, official doctrine about heaven and the afterlife may be the easiest to discern, but it is also the most derivative; ecclesiastical statements generally emerge from a context that has already long been discussed and debated. The background to doctrinal statements includes biblical interpretation of ancient Israel’s and early Christianity’s cultic practices and the concept of earthly forms being shadows of heavenly realities. Much of medieval belief and practice was mediated through patristic sources, particularly Augustine (foundational for all medieval religious thought), Gregory the Great (foundational as an ecclesiastical authority), and, for the purposes of this research, Pseudo-Dionysius (foundational for later mystical approaches).

Spatial concepts were often assumed, but they were also often discussed, particularly with each new architectural development in the late Middle Ages and early modern Renaissance. Obvious examples of “sacred space” include churches, monastic communities, shrines to saints, and reliquaries, but other spaces (or space-conscious activities, like processions) may also have carried similar but more subtle connotations. In the words of historian R. W. Southern, “The most revealing map of Europe would be a map, not of political or commercial capitals, but of the constellation of sanctuaries, the points of material contact with the unseen world.” The spatial constructs of the late medieval mind surely included all sorts of outposts of a heavenly environment on earth. The most familiar articulations of this concept are in Gothic architecture,

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16 Heb. 8.5; Col. 2.17.
especially with its treatment of light and representations of the rays of heaven and expressions of grace, but also the placements and arrangements of altars, statements on divine order and proportion, and representative cosmology in building design and city planning. The spatial configurations of the late medieval landscape included many connecting points between heaven and this world.

Ritual meanings and forms also contributed to the conceptual background of this-worldly experiences of other-worldly themes. The most apparent is the Eucharist and its perceived embodiment of the literal, physical presence of Christ—a moment in the Mass when heaven and earth were connected in a unique way that all could experience, if only vicariously through the priest on most occasions. Beliefs about the immanence of heaven are evident in funerary practices, burial rituals, requiems, chantries, and less formal prayers for the dead. And liturgical words and music were often seen as having some transcendent or magical quality that brought heaven to earth, if only for a moment. These practices formed a ritual environment that made the possibility of heavenly encounters seem real in other contexts too.

The clearest expression of heaven in organizational concepts is rooted in the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius and amplified by John Colet of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, Jean Gerson of the University of Paris, and others, who suggested that earth’s hierarchies ought to mimic the hierarchies of heaven, which was perceived as a multi-tiered organization with a sovereign at head and ranks of angelic leaders, administrators, warriors, and servants arrayed beneath him.18 Whether these commentators called for a reordering of society or merely used such reasoning to

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support already-existing structures is not always clear—the latter seems more likely in most instances—but the desire to model earth on heaven’s template was self-consciously asserted.

The most explicit conceptual statements about heaven come from theological (or semi-theological) literary sources: the visionary literature of (or about) mystics, monks, and saints; otherworldly travelogues like St. Patrick’s Purgatory or the Vision of Tondalus; theological treatises, sermons, and commentaries that are not doctrinal statements, per se, but are nevertheless reflective of commonly accepted views; and contemporary commentaries on ancient texts about heaven. These texts included the biblical books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation, and Paul’s epistles, among others, and extra-biblical apocalyptic literature of the Hellenistic period. The pinnacle of literary expressions of heaven, and one highly influential in late medieval and Renaissance thought, is Dante’s *Paradiso* with its conceptualization of the beatific vision. Though few of these sources are explicit about modeling earthly experience after heavenly forms, they nevertheless provide a crucial foundation for understanding how late medieval and early modern religious thought understood heaven.

Understanding the conceptual framework then allows for an investigation of material expressions and sensory experiences. The most accessible sensory experience is sight—paintings, altarpieces, architectural design, stained glass, the highly symbolic and sensory use of color (much of which is lost to us but is described in literary sources), the manipulation of lighting, and statues or images of saints, which on the surface are tributes or shrines to honored saints or instructions in biblical and ecclesiastical hagiography, but also are highly suggestive visual representations of “the great cloud of witnesses,” a visual company of the “church triumphant” in heaven surrounding the “church militant” on earth. Wherever late medieval

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19 Heb. 12.1.
western Europeans looked, they were likely to come across some reminder of the other world and people who had gone on before them. More than that, they were invited by their visual experiences to participate to some degree in that heavenly environment.

Expressions of the heavenly environment were not limited to the visual. Some images of the sacred wound of Christ were created specifically to be touched, and clothing textures, especially of priestly garments, invited some sort of tactile participation in otherworldly themes. Village bells, the use of sacred or vernacular language, and various forms of music (whether monophonic or polyphonic) suggested some need to find a correlation between perceptions of heaven and earthly auditory experiences. Liturgical use of incense in the Mass, at funerals, and in other services, celebrations, and processions invited participants into the aromas of heaven or paradise (as depicted in sculptures of angels swinging censers, for example), as did gardens and floral arrangements in real life or artistic representation. Though the latter were expressed entirely visually, they were highly evocative of aromatic sensations and drew viewers into an imagined experience of the “enclosed garden” of devotional space or a connection with Mary, the fragrant Rose of heaven. Feasts brought the tastes of heaven into personal experience to whatever degree they were positioned as representations of the “marriage supper of the Lamb” in biblical imagery. The standardization of Eucharistic elements over the course of the late Middle Ages was accompanied by at least some discussion of how earthly forms might embody the tastes of heaven. And city archives, eyewitness accounts of social events like processions and feasts, and utopian designs suggest at least the ideal of a civic agenda lived with in reference to heavenly templates.

20 Apoc. 19.6-9.
Of course, the sounds, tastes, and smells of the period are not preserved for us like visual evidence is. Fortunately, some observations and discussions about them have been. Though sensory experiences have not always been perceived or interpreted in the same ways in different times and places, and we cannot assume that certain smells, sights, sounds, or other sensations produced the same sorts of responses they would produce in us today, literary sources are invaluable in recapturing how certain experiences were perceived and interpreted at the time. Debates about music, discussions regarding the Eucharist and other rituals, musings on saints and relics and pilgrimages, reports of festal pageantry, and other relevant observations in contemporary texts provide helpful insights into intentions and meanings.

Any approach attempting to enter into the worldview of another time and place echoes the efforts of Annales historians to recapture the mentalités of their subjects and their times. This approach resembles the art historians’ goal of seeing through a “period eye.” Or, in the anthropological framework of Clifford Geertz, it is a matter of understanding the “cultural system” that enmeshes adherents in a comprehensive worldview and gives them “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations.”

Taking a similar approach to recapture the religious mentality of late medieval and early modern thought means asking questions beyond what contemporaries believed. We also need to know how connected or disconnected they felt with regard to the unseen realm. Did they think about it often? Converse with those who had gone before? Assume any real presence of saints and loved ones in these conversations or in visual or sensory representations? Did they understand themselves to be part of a community that spanned seen and unseen realms, or did they feel as confined by time and space as people of other periods did? Was the power of heaven or the presence of God available to them only in the

Mass and Eucharist (if there), or did their experiences of relics, pilgrimages, prayers, liturgy, images, vestments, incense, public spaces, and the vast array of connecting points with the divine give them a more general sense of transcendence? Discerning this worldview entails a broad interrogation of a wide range of sources—any in which representations of heaven can be seen (or read or envisioned), touched, tasted, smelled, and heard. Central to this investigation is not just the form of these expressions but the meaning attached to them. In many cases, meanings are expressed plainly. In many others, they are only implied.

Because clarity of meaning varies so widely, I place sources in a loose hierarchy of importance. Sources that overtly and consciously express meaning—an artist’s or architect’s explanation of heavenly elements in a design, for example—take precedence over those that do not. Even if creators of material forms or social structures incorporate other motifs and multiple purposes, their awareness of the possibility of translating immaterial aspects of heaven into visible, material expression is enough to demonstrate the point. In most cases, these are literary references that convey how experiences were created or remembered. Next are sources that incorporate a widely accepted iconography, ones that use a language of symbols and metaphors that is not unique to that source but common to the culture in general, and therefore commonly understood. This overt language of signs is somewhat esoteric knowledge in artistic and architectural circles today, but to the “period eye”—or ear or touch—might have been more universally understood. The lowest sources in the hierarchy are those that are unstated and perhaps even obscure, but can still be reasonably inferred, whether through frequency and context of expression, theories of sensory history, and principles of religious psychology. Examples might include occurrences of the sacred wound and its association with indulgences, patterns of floral or incense uses, or biblical connotations of priestly vestment textures or
calendar feasts, all of which might be reasonably tied to otherworldly values. These sources are important for filling in the gaps left by more explicit ones.

As cross-disciplinary and wide-ranging as this study is, no approach can be exhaustive. But an investigation into representative sources from different disciplines and through a combination of approaches can significantly and effectively reconstruct a sense of meaning—and the meaning of senses—applied to material forms.

1.3 Outline

This study consists of three case studies in which the sources are ample and representative enough to allow for reliable conclusions—the Gothic movement in northern France from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries; the religious culture and artistic innovations of the Low Countries from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, particularly under Burgundian rule toward the end of that period; and the civic religion and creative impulses of northern Italian cities, particularly Florence, from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. These cases cover many overlapping and shared cultural characteristics, but each region developed its own distinctiveness too. It cannot be argued that these three areas were in a cause-and-effect relationship of mutual influence (although certainly there were certainly connections), only that they each exhibited manifestations of a general consciousness. They are different manifestations, to be sure, but they spring from common ways of thinking, a religious perspective that broadly affected all of Latin Christianity. Together, they create a compelling picture of how this concept of experiencing heaven played out in late medieval and early modern Europe.

The first chapter, “The Medieval Heaven,” sets the conceptual context for the case studies to come. This background will include the theological beliefs and mentalities of the
age—their origins in late antiquity and early medieval thought as well as their expressions in the late twelfth to early sixteenth centuries—as well as their ritual, performative, and sensory manifestations. Two conceptual arcs are discernible throughout the period: an Augustinian/Dionysian/mystical arc and an Aristotelian/scholastic/sacramental arc. Though these streams of thought overlap substantially, each is influential in its own way in how heaven was imagined and, in varying degrees, practiced and experienced. Central themes include doctrinal formulations about heaven, late medieval cosmology, the idea of sacred space, the dual focus of monastic asceticism in both rejecting earthly attachments and pursuing heavenly ideals, the centrality of the Mass and Eucharist, and the ultimate experience of beatific vision.

Chapter 2 presents the first case study on “The Design of Heaven: Gothic France,” examining the Gothic movement as it relates to making the experience of heaven present and perceivable. Gothic architecture is perhaps the most self-conscious expression of celestial design, order, proportion, and grandeur, and it emerged in and around Paris in the twelfth century. Paris and its environs are therefore a natural starting point for exploring the concept of “heaven on earth” in late medieval life. Though some found Gothic architecture repulsive for its extravagance, it captured the imaginations of many and prompted expanding visions of how heavenly ideals might be expressed in material forms. Not only did Gothic architecture and iconography seek to reflect a heavenly design in sacred structures; it also created something of a mental template for other expressions of heavenly forms, some of them outside of the church.

The second case study, “The Pageantry and Artistry of Heaven: Low Country Aesthetics,” examines the devotional culture and visual and musical expressions that flourished in Burgundian, Flemish, Netherlandish regions. Much of this creativity focused on sacred themes, among them altarpieces and liturgical events that were part of an integrated ritual
experience incorporating all senses in imagining, experiencing, and performing the heavenly environment—even to the point of mimicking the beatific vision at the climax of the Mass. Low Countries devotional culture produced one of Europe’s most popular feasts in the thirteenth century; the Burgundian court later patronized artists and musicians who explored innovative visual and auditory techniques to heighten sensory experience of the transcendent. These aesthetic values employed a heavenly template not only in sacred spaces but eventually outside of them.

Chapter 4 presents the third case study, “The Society of Heaven: Civic Italy.” Research of northern Italian cities, particularly Florentine society, often gives little attention to heavenly themes, and for good reason: the political and social maneuverings of these city-states were often anything but heavenly. Even so, observers were known to remark on how ceremonial or social arrangements mimicked Dionysian hierarchies; the materials and colors of clothing and formal occasions were said to evoke celestial images; feast days dramatized the calendar of heaven; and oaths and contracts were necessarily formalized in the sight of heaven. This chapter seeks to understand this contrast between the patently profane and ostensibly holy, exploring competing streams of thought, the discrepancy between social ideals and actual behavior, and the discernible longing for a heaven-like experience even amid (or because of) evident corruption. The celestial template that shaped ecclesiastical governance, which at times combined with thought from classical authors, echoed in earthly society, government, and urban design or aspirations. The ideal of heavenly experience and enactment found expression in a variety of ways even when formal structures fell far short of the ideal.
One purpose of this chapter is to look at Richard Trexler’s sources through a theological rather than sociological lens. Though sociological approaches are invaluable in helping us understand the dynamics of early modern societies, they risk distancing us from the mindset that produced them, which was often at least as theological as it was social. This approach is not intended as an argument against any sociological and psychological interpretations but rather as a supplement to them.

Chapter 5 explores the implications of the three case studies. It seeks to integrate the observations of previous chapters, identify trends and patterns, draw larger conclusions, and suggest further ways these mentalities might play out in other regions, periods, or expressions. The mentalities discussed in these regional studies shaped society in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to create a coherent picture of a religious mindset on the eve of and in early decades of the Reformation. The case studies demonstrate a variety of ways in which a sense of the immanence of heaven in the church and at the altar found expression there and elsewhere, shaping other settings in an effort to recreate the environment of heaven on earth. The degree to which Latin Christians made their faith sensory and experiential may have shaped the opposition of Reformers and intensified the polemics that focused on visual and other sensory themes. The discovery of new worlds both stretched and invigorated understandings of the created universe. The conceptual understanding of heaven (and “the heavens”) as identified in this study also had implications for scientific developments and debate later in the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. Reformation thought, new worlds, and scientific discoveries at times were seen not just as innovations or new knowledge but as threats to a near-universal understanding of the cosmos and the divine order of things. The conclusions of this research help us understand why.

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Just as modern embassies are the official territory of their represented countries rather than of their host countries, early modern sacred spaces were sometimes seen as heavenly territory rather than earthly territory, and experiences connected to them were sometimes considered to be encounters with the heavenly realm. This study begins with this phenomenon and asks how it applied to social life. Did people attempt to build earthly society around heavenly models and representations? How contiguous were those two worlds? If views of heaven changed during the late medieval and early modern periods, how did society change with it? Were social factors driving the change in theology, or vice versa? In what sense did beliefs about the afterlife shape social dynamics and construct a material culture of heaven? All of these questions are interrelated, and they have significant implications for early modern life and the religious and philosophical controversies that would erupt in the sixteenth century—both in revealing what was believed and in explaining the nature of debate. In an era when worldly existence was often tenuous, contentious, and in flux, many fixed their hopes on heaven. Some, however, sought to bring some semblance of heaven to earth and to model their lives—and their society—after divine designs.
2 THE MEDIEVAL HEAVEN

The interior view of the Ghent altarpiece is a complex assemblage of scenes and symbols (Fig. 2.1). On the top level, Christ is enthroned, flanked immediately by Mary and John the Baptist, then angels singing and playing instruments, with Adam and Eve at the far ends. The central scene of the lower level contains a city and a garden with a fountain and fruit, filled with groups of worshipers including colorfully winged angels (holding censers and instruments of the passion), prophets, patriarchs, apostles, martyrs, saints, ecclesiastics, virgins, pagan philosophers, all surrounding Christ as lamb, who is standing on an altar and bleeding into a chalice. Above is the Spirit as dove, radiating the light of glory. In neighboring panels, warriors of Christ and righteous judges arrive from the left, hermits and pilgrims from the right. It is an eclectic but coherent drama, rich with meaning. The new heaven and earth, the restored creation of biblical prophecies, is occupied with an eternal Mass surrounded by hints of last judgment and a holy wedding. Heavenly hierarchies and earthly social groups are all gathered in the same scene, transcending time and space. It is a composite picture of an extraordinary diversity of long-developing heavenly themes.

The iconography of this fifteenth-century altarpiece skillfully depicts the nature of heavenly consummation as both future and timeless, human destiny and the present church in universal and ideal form, an ongoing reality that people on earth can enter into and participate in through liturgy, sacraments, and sensory experience. The painting effectively captures a widely shared ethos: that much of life was lived with reference to heaven. At times, that reference point

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meant lamenting its earthly contrasts; at other times, it meant attempting to experience some
evidence of it in the present. Either way, it seems to have been embedded deeply into the psyche
of medieval and early modern European Christians. As with ideals in any age, enormous
incongruities in actual experience were ubiquitous, but the sense of oscillating between earthly
spaces that were closer to heaven or closer to hell appears almost universal. How conscious this
oscillation was for most people is another question entirely—and a difficult one to answer—but
many expressed it openly, whether formally in writings and sermons or informally in the context
of their participation in processions, pilgrimages, prayers, worship, and devotional practices. The
mentality of the age allowed for and even encouraged heavenward orientation.

![Image of Jan van Eyck's Adoration of the Lamb, Ghent altarpiece center panel, 1432.](image)

*Figure 2.1. Jan van Eyck, Adoration of the Lamb, Ghent altarpiece center panel, 1432.*

Richly symbolic, this central image (and the two smaller panels that extend it on each side) includes representations of each member of the Trinity, angelic hosts, the “church triumphant” (in heaven) and the “church militant” (on earth) in the same scene, with both rural and urban elements conveying the dual imagery of paradisiacal gardens and the city of God. Social and religious strata mingle but retain distinctions commensurate with divine order; time and eternity merge, bringing together contemporary, historical, and supernatural figures. As an altarpiece, this image stood as a backdrop to the Eucharist, reinforcing its convergence between heaven and earth. (This image is in the public domain [US-PD].)
The longing for an immanent heaven was expressed in myriad ways, most consciously in overtly sacred spaces and rituals. Earlier bishops once expected the elements of the church’s central sacrament to be carried by angels to the heavenly altar of God—the earthly shadow of reality being elevated into the real substance, away from human flesh.² Officiants in the later Middle Ages envisioned the real substance coming down to the earthly realm, taking physical form. The idea of heavenly things entering into, being embodied by, and being represented in the stuff of creation had always stood at the heart of the faith; it was expressed in increasingly tangible and creative ways in late medieval and early modern practice.

Perceptions of heaven had accumulated over the centuries from biblical texts, literary tradition, visionary impressions, contemplative exercises, and theological constructions. It would be fruitful and illuminating to examine how earthly experience shaped perceptions of heaven; theology did develop out of the conditions of churches, monasteries, and social and cultural trends like urbanization and intellectualization. But in most cases, ideas about heaven were adapted from preexisting material. They changed shape; different emphases emerged, expanded, and were embellished at different times. But aside from a growing concept of purgatory and a few metaphorical additions to the terrain of hell and paradise, otherworldly themes were rarely invented. Late medieval and early modern views of the universe were drawn from a deep and varied philosophical and theological tradition, and they allowed for a long history of believing and imagining heaven to be translated into material, social, here-and-now experience.

² Theodulf wrote in the 790s about the upward movement of the sacrament in Opus Caroli regis contra synodum (Libri Carolini) 2. 27, in Monumenta Germaniae historica: Concilia, vol. 2, supplement 1, ed. Ann Freeman with Paul Meyvaert (Hannover: Hahn, 1998), 290-294; quoted from Carolyn Walker Bynum, Christian Materiality, 47.
2.1 Biblical Heavens

The Christian Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city, and both became images of heaven. Quite a few other images appear between Genesis and Revelation too; the biblical heaven is varied and somewhat elastic, allowing for all sorts of thematic iterations and recapitulations. The medieval view of heaven drew freely from the abundant literary and visionary creations that flowed out of this variety of images, which in turn had flowed from earlier Hebraic, Persian, and Greek streams of thought. The idea of heaven was a composite, hardly confined to the pages of scripture. But whether accurately or not, regardless of diverse influences behind views of the afterlife, most medieval Christians believed their perception of heaven to be thoroughly grounded in the Catholic canon.

Perhaps the clearest images of heaven—or at least heaven-like scenes—in Hebrew scriptures are in the prophetic books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Isaiah wrote of a vision in which God appeared on his throne in the temple with six-winged seraphim standing, hovering, flying above him, each calling out incessantly, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”—a phrase that would be echoed in some form or another in liturgical settings throughout the following centuries. It is portrayed as an earth-shaking vision, with the thresholds of the temple wavering at the sound of heavenly voices and its rooms being filled with smoke. Even more dramatic was Ezekiel’s theophany involving storm winds, dark clouds surrounded by brightness, flashes of fire, burning coals, gleaming bronze, creatures with faces and forms both human and animal, and lightning-fast movements. Ezekiel described wheels within wheels made in the appearance of chrysolite gems; their gyroscopic movements defied known laws of physics. The throne itself appeared as emerald, and the glory of the human-like

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form on the throne shone like fire, glowing bronze, and the colors of the rainbow. Ezekiel was later given a heavenly template for an earthly construction project: an idealized temple to be rebuilt at least symbolically, if not literally, in Jerusalem after its exiles returned. The angel-led tour he was given involves precise, uniform, and impossibly symmetrical measurements. The specific measurements were not nearly as important in medieval thought as the fact that he was commanded to measure; apparently geometric precision was of interest to God. The idea of constructing earthly buildings according to heavenly templates, reflecting divine proportions, would resonate strongly beginning in the twelfth century.

This vague form of Isaiah’s and Ezekiel’s visions of God becomes more specific in Daniel, where the “ancient of days” sat on a throne of flames and burning wheels, wore garments as white as snow, had hair like the purest wool, and was surrounded by countless thousands as streams of fire poured forth from the throne and books of judgments were opened before him. Here the God figure is accompanied by “a son of man” who is given glory and dominion over earth’s kingdoms. Three chapters later, Daniel again sees a man dressed in linen and girded with gold. His appearance is described again with gems, lightning, fire, and gleaming bronze, and his words sound like the voices of multitudes.

These encounters with the presence of God incorporate the language of theophany, intended to give the impression that what is described is actually beyond description. But heaven and a restored creation are also portrayed in Hebrew prophetic literature apart from theophanies. Isaiah’s throne-room vision at the temple was exceptional in his work; he elsewhere envisioned

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4 Ezek. 1-2.
5 The temple of Ezekiel’s vision was based on the original temple of Solomon that had been destroyed in Babylon’s siege of Jerusalem in 587-586 BCE. The original came to be seen in the Christian era as a representation of the New Jerusalem and symbolic of heaven; Ezekiel’s vision was thought to point toward that more exalted fulfillment.
7 Dan. 7.9-14.
8 Dan. 10.
swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks as wars end and wolves and 
lambs, calves and lions lie down together in peace.⁹ In later sections of Isaiah, which are so 
different in tone, language, and content that they are usually attributed to later authors, images of 
a new heaven and a new earth, redeemed and restored creation, depict abundance and peace, the 
end of untimely death (but not of death completely), and all nations being drawn to the glory of 
God, which makes the light of sun and moon unnecessary.¹⁰ Regardless of whether these images 
are interpreted as heaven, paradise, or something else, they informed perceptions of heaven from 
the earliest centuries of the church, into medieval and early modern eras and beyond.

This biblical imagery, then, makes heaven a place of peace and abundance, but also, 
wherever God is found in it, accompanied by supernatural sights and sounds that can only be 
approximated by the richest and most dazzling elements and materials. It is filled with lightning, 
fire, and smoke, thundering voices, unusual creatures and movements, the appearance of 
precious metals and gems, brilliant light, garments of purity, and multitudes of inhabitants; yet it 
also allows for restful, peaceful, pastoral scenes. The apostle Paul would much later defer to 
speechlessness because the glories of heaven were inexpressible.¹¹ Even so, Hebrew prophets 
had already gone to great poetic and dramatic effort to express them in visual and material terms.

The New Testament counterpart to this visionary literature is the book of Revelation, the 
Apocalypse, which builds on these visual and material elements at considerable length. In this 
apocalyptic vision (or series of visions), we see theophanies similar to those of Isaiah, Ezekiel, 
and Daniel, with nods to Zechariah as well; activities of heaven reminiscent of Ezekiel’s and 
other temple imagery from Hebrew scripture; and promises of rest, restoration, abundance,

⁹ Is. 2.4; 11.6.
¹⁰ Is. 60.19-22; 65.1-25; 66.22.
¹¹ 2 Cor. 12.1-4.
healing, and peace—primarily after epic battles between good and evil have been won. The Apocalypse’s portrayals of God and his throne room utilize familiar images: a throne with the appearance of precious stones (jasper and carnelian); a rainbow as bright as an emerald surrounding his presence; lighting, thunder, flashes of light, and flames of fire; incense and smoke; a sea of crystal; books or scrolls with judgments and decrees within; multitudes of heavenly beings and white-robed humans, many of whom are saying, “Holy, holy, holy,” as the angels in Isaiah continuously repeated; and a measuring rod, as in Ezekiel.\(^\text{12}\) New additions to these scenes include twenty-four elders, who are constantly casting their crowns before the throne, and martyrs under the heavenly altar.\(^\text{13}\) But in spite of all this energetic activity among throngs of earthly and unearthly beings, heaven is still a place of promised rest and satisfaction with no hunger, thirst, oppressive heat, persecution, or tears.\(^\text{14}\)

The scene in the Apocalypse turns from exhilarating activity in the throne room to tumultuous cosmic battles and earthly plagues and devastations that will play out in front of the righteous in heaven, many of whom are playing music and singing a new song amid sounds of thunder and rushing water.\(^\text{15}\) The conflicts increase in intensity until they climax in victory, after which vast throngs sing “alleluia,” the righteous dressed in white linen celebrate an enormous wedding feast, the king of all kings rides in on a white horse, an angel calls birds to come and eat, the dragon is locked away, and books of judgment, including the book of life, are opened before the one who sits on a great white throne.\(^\text{16}\) The new heavens and earth appear, and a new Jerusalem comes down from heaven into the newly recreated earth, appearing as a bride. It

\(^{\text{12}}\) Apoc. 4-7.  
\(^{\text{13}}\) Apoc. 4.8; 6.9.  
\(^{\text{14}}\) Apoc. 7.15-17.  
\(^{\text{15}}\) Apoc. 14.1-5.  
\(^{\text{16}}\) Apoc. 19-20.
radiates God’s glory with the glow of precious substances (jasper and crystal), has an extremely high wall with twelve gates (three on each side), is measured with cube-like dimensions (an expansion of the square temple in Ezekiel) by an angel bearing a golden measuring rod. The foundations of the wall are adorned with priceless jewels, its gates are made of pearl, the streets are made of translucent gold, and the whole city shines like gold and crystal. Nothing foul or polluted remains within. There is no longer any need for a temple (though God remains as a spiritual temple), nor for the sun, moon, or stars. The kings of the earth bring their splendor or tribute through gates that never need to be shut. Mourning and tears are gone, and springs and fountains gush with the waters of life. The river of life flows through the middle of the city, the tree of life standing next to it bearing year-round fruit and leaves for healing. Multitudes from every nation and language on earth stand before the throne and the sacrificed Lamb of God, all clothed in white and waving palm branches, with loud voices declaring the salvation of God.

These images are not confined to the Apocalyptic vision. Jesus told parables about a great wedding celebration and feast at the end of the age. He foretold his own return, accompanied by angels to sit on his glorious throne. The writer of the letter of Hebrews urged his readers to draw near to the heavenly Jerusalem, “to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” Hints and references of prophetic and apocalyptic portrayals of heaven are scattered throughout the canon. The graphic portrayals, however, are

17 As in Augustine, De civitate dei 20.14 on the non-literal “book” and Bede, Explanatio Apocalypsis 21.19 on the deeper meaning of colorful stones, many of these materials would be interpreted allegorically or metaphorically by early Christian and medieval commentators, but the images would remain useful in sermons and material representations of heaven.
18 Apoc. 21-22.
19 Matt. 22.1-14; 25.1-3.
20 Matt. 25:.1.
21 Heb. 12.22-23.
most extravagantly expressed in the unrestrained visionary literature that seems to grasp for
earthly language that might describe unearthly ideas.

These many and varied descriptions and details captured the imagination of later
visionaries, contemplatives, and theologians. Virtually every feature itemized in the previous
paragraphs, nearly every element in this symphony of sensory perceptions, figures somehow into
medieval representations of heaven. Not everyone interpreted them literally; medieval thinkers
had a strong affinity for allegory. But even when seen as symbolic, they would be represented as
literally as written, with the same symbolism that is imbedded in the biblical texts. These details
find their way into altars, liturgies, tympana and portals, book illuminations, reliquaries,
altarpieces, stained glass, vestments, censers, songs, processions, baptisteries, architecture, and
more. At times these expressions are freely and fluidly adapted and expanded by extrabiblical
concepts, frequently defying rigid interpretations of texts. But even the elaborations are grounded
in ancient sources. Sensory depictions of heaven and paradise from the Bible became a widely
understood language in medieval religious thought and practice.

Heaven and paradise are not always understood to be the same thing, but they overlap
more closely in biblical imagery than they do in later thought. Throughout Christian history,
distinctions between them have been blurred, largely due to their treatment in the scriptural
sources themselves. The dominant biblical image of paradise is Eden, the garden in which the
first humans were placed before sin, decay, futility, and corruption entered the world. It was
characterized by fruitfulness, unburdensome labor, naked shamelessness, compatibility between
humans and animals, and four flowing rivers. Though the pleasures of Eden were lost in
humanity’s fall, they were projected forward by prophets and visionaries, sometimes
unambiguously present in end-time consummations of heaven and redeemed earth. The last two
chapters of the Apocalypse, for example, blend several images from Eden with otherworldly themes, as if to suggest a return to original design, the restoration of something lost, but also something greater gained in the end. The biblical narratives allow and even invite this fusion, with Jesus telling a crucified thief they would be together in paradise and the envisioned Jesus early in Revelation promising the fruit of the tree of life in the paradise of God, even as that tree was already standing in the heavenly Jerusalem of later chapters. This “new Jerusalem” was the primary model for medieval imagery of heaven, and it comfortably employed images of Eden. Medieval imagery therefore employed them too. Regardless of later distinctions between the two concepts, they shared common sights, sounds, scents, and pleasures in the medieval mind. For most, with the exception of some scholastic theologians, the delights of paradise were just as validly applied to heaven.

The city of God, however—the new Jerusalem, the “bride” adorned for her Bridegroom and descending to establish heaven on earth—was much less ambiguous. It represented heaven itself, even when incorporating motifs of paradise, and became a dominant influence in medieval literature. As Europe urbanized, monks and theologians began gravitating toward biblical imagery of the city as a frequent symbol of heaven, not as a replacement for garden imagery but alongside it. Bernard of Cluny, for example, agreed that the earth would be restored as a luxurious garden of paradise but would also include Revelation’s gleaming city surrounded by huge walls, precious stones, golden roads, jeweled gates, and multitudes of saints feasting—a vision accommodating both Cluniac preference for towns and Cistercian preference for remote

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22 Luke 23.43; Apoc. 2.7.
settings. The latitude provided by diverse biblical metaphors gave space for shifting medieval concepts and experiences.

Closely related to the question of what heaven is like was the issue of who is there. The biblical visions provide plenty of clues: angels and believers, multitudes from every nation and language, and martyrs who are given a voice from under the heavenly altar. More specific categories were prompted by the medieval social landscape. To martyrs were added “saints” in general (itself an evolving concept from the early to medieval church), as well as virgins, and, of course, the spiritual elites of the day: monks and clergy who faithfully lived up to their commitments. (Those who did not were envisioned by some as worse off than corrupt laity who had never taken vows to begin with.)

Some, like John of Fécamp (d. 1079), saw heaven as a social experience shared by angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, monks, virgins, and the faithful of all ages and both genders. Some, like Honorius of Autun (d. 1151), based likelihoods of getting there on the social categories of his time and ruled out almost everyone other than simple, guileless farmers, children under five, and faithful monks and priests (only a small portion among their profession, in Honorius’ view).

For many scholastics, including Thomas Aquinas, the social aspects of heaven were minimal; the point was not to give attention to fellow human beings or even angels but to gaze upon God in everlasting contemplation. For most people, however, including those like Dante who were deeply indebted to scholastic

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conceptualizations, it was virtually impossible to envision the afterlife without also envisioning names, faces, and classes of people who might be there.

In sum, biblical texts—themselves informed by various influences in and around the ancient Mediterranean—served as primary informers of medieval concepts, images, hopes, and representations of heaven. They provided an orthodox framework with wide latitude within it to speculate about the nature of the afterlife, which could be represented by peace and rest in a garden, the stillness of contemplative vision and light, social constructions and reconstructions of earthly experiences, the trauma of supernatural encounters with divine power, and a city teeming with life and radiating the colors and permanence of precious metals, stones, and jewels. All of the biblical texts that fed these perceptions were in currency throughout the Middle Ages, with varying emphases (the garden early on and the city later, for example). Some of these images and metaphors were portrayed more prominently than others, but all influenced the composite picture of heaven in the medieval mind.

2.2 Literary and Visionary Heavens

Tundale was an Irish knight who fell sick and lost consciousness for three days. During this deathly experience, an angel took him on a journey to hell, where Tundale witnessed the ravages of sex, food, and other excesses, which included decay, corruption, and death, with plenty of wailing and torment described in excruciating detail. This vision alone would likely have motivated Tundale to convert upon awakening, but before he did, he was treated to a vision of heaven, where the wildness of nature and sexuality gave way to hierarchical order,
architectural forms, and beautiful scenery.\(^{30}\) He saw there a meadow filled with flowers, the fountain of life, a silver wall within which a white-clad throng rejoiced and praised God, a golden wall containing bejeweled seats for martyrs and the sexually pure, a fruitful tree around which men and women joyfully worshiped, and another wall made of precious stones (many of which match those in the Apocalypse), behind which nine orders of angels dwelled. There was no sadness in this place; multitudes lived happily with hearts full of gratitude and praise.\(^ {31}\)

Tundale’s tour of the afterlife is primarily visual, as a “vision” would imply. But it is also a thoroughly sensory experience, with ample references to sounds, scents, tastes, and touch. As Tundale moves through lands of paradise toward heaven, from one *locus amoenus* to a more indescribable one, he hears the harmonious, melodic sounds of choral voices, stringed instruments, angels’ wings, and singing birds; in contrast to the nauseating odors of hell, he inhales aromas of scented fields and righteous souls; he sees their radiant garments and faces; he feels the cool breeze across the meadows and tastes the delicious fruits of the flourishing tree of the church, under which those who forsook the world and founded churches and chantries rest.\(^ {32}\) His senses are “bathed in delight.”\(^ {33}\) It is also a social experience, in which the unity of marriage represents the unity of all believers in the heavenly city, as it did with Augustine, and the faithfully married are young, dressed in white, always laughing, and always praising.\(^ {34}\) Tundale experiences a heavenly paradise, or a paradisaical heaven, that is pleasing to every bodily sense and every moral and social sensibility.


\(^{32}\) *Vision of Tundale,* Gaudia 3-6, in Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems,* 237-246.


So goes the story written in the mid-twelfth century by an Irish monk by the name of Marcus. Unsurprisingly, Marcus fills the *Visio Tnugdalis*, or vision of Tundale (Tnugdal, Tondalus) with monastic values; monks have a long history of avoiding food and sex in order to be more “heavenly,” and the importance of keeping vows of obedience, submission, unity, and silence in the body and harmony after leaving it, comes through clearly. But this is not exclusively a monastic worldview. It is a more generally medieval Christian one, with elements of a classical Elysium and Irish mythology mixed in. Oddly constructed literarily, it nevertheless lauds the mathematical precision, order, harmony, and rhythm that Augustine found theologically vital to a well-designed cosmos. It is sensory in its expressions, but the senses in question are spiritual—the perceptions of the soul that correspond to but do not cater to the sensations of the body. The story may be written as a reflection of monastic and generally Christian values, but it is also written as a vision to embrace and a lesson to follow.

Late antique and medieval Christianity are filled with such stories, a literary genre that preoccupies itself with otherworldly journeys and concepts of spiritual destiny. Often these stories were meditational devices for “remembering” heaven, or contemplating it memorably, leading the contemplator on a path designed for spiritual elevation. The travelers in these stories, often through near-death experiences and angelic guidance, explore the vast unknown of hell, purgatory, paradise, and/or heaven. Many of the visionary images in this literature were in currency in medieval thought, though not always everywhere; reception was uneven and scattered. But as a broad corpus of popular narrative, they were nevertheless influential at every level of religious life, endorsed in principle by figures like Gregory the Great and embraced by

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contemplatives and layfolk who loved telling tales. They served as embellishments, recapitulations, and expansions of biblical themes, supplementing divine revelation with what were presented as—and sometimes believed to be—actual experiences in other realms allowed by God to warn the wayward and encourage the faithful.37

In contrast to later writers like Dante, writers and redactors of medieval visionary literature were far more interested in creating vivid impressions than in identifying clear distinctions between sections of the other world. Specific locations of heaven, hell, and purgatory were often (but not always) ambiguous and difficult to define.38 Nor were writers particularly concerned with spelling out the nature of a vision, whether it was a genuine voyage of the soul, a dream, mystical vision, penance-inducing literary device, pure entertainment, or something else.39 Their descriptions of heaven often paled in comparison to their dramatic and terrifying depictions of hell, perhaps because heaven was more predictable, more ineffable, or simply less interesting.40 Nevertheless, these literary creations reflected a growing interest in and understanding of the afterlife.

Medieval otherworldly travelogues had roots in ancient visionary literature and would climax in Dante’s Commedia. The books of Enoch, pseudepigraphal works with near-canonical status in Judaism’s Second Temple period, drew heavily from Ezekiel and Daniel and surely had some influence on the New Testament Apocalypse.41 Though few medieval concepts of heaven

37 Otherworldly literary visions were not received universally at face value; some rejected them outright, others embraced them as allegory, and some treated them as fabulous (and possibly true) stories.
40 Gardiner, Medieval Visions, xiii; Gurevich, Medieval Popular Culture, 115. Descriptions of heaven were sometimes specifically avoided from a conviction that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2.9).
41 1 Enoch, compiled over two centuries (300-100 BCE), predated Christianity; 2 Enoch, which seems to have more in common with medieval visions and concepts of heaven, was roughly contemporary with New Testament writings.
were taken directly from Enochic literature, many—angelologies and levels of heaven, for example—possibly influenced medieval thought indirectly through patristic sources like Tertullian and Origen. This literature was certainly rediscovered, studied, and valued by Jewish scholars at least from the twelfth century onward. A compilation of texts by several authors over several centuries, the books of Enoch describe the subject’s journey into multiple heavenly realms. Much of the imagery is clearly derived from biblical texts—bright lights, radiant glory, white robes, shining faces, streams of fire, multitudes around the throne—but it also introduces high mountains, winds stretching out the vaults of heaven and forming its pillars, columns of fire falling from heaven, and fountains not just of life but specifically of goodness and wisdom. It emphasizes angelic hosts in levels of authority that are only hinted at in canonical texts.

Whether followed directly or indirectly over the centuries, these texts were instrumental in setting a precedent for imaginative speculation of otherworldly phenomena.

Inspired by (and in some cases influencing) Jewish and Christian canonical writings and interacting richly with Gnostic and Neoplatonic thought, visionary literature like the books of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Sibylline oracles, the Apocalypse of Baruch, and The Testament of Abraham refer either to angel-mediated visions of human destiny (as a whole) or potential destinies (of individuals). The third-century Visio Pauli, though rejected by Augustine, was enormously influential on later thought and was utilized by Dante and known to Chaucer. Gregory, likewise influential throughout much of the next millennium, justified these kinds of

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44 Howard Rollin Patch, The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 91-92. Based on 2 Cor. 12.4, where Paul is “caught up to the third heaven” but will not attempt to describe what he has seen, the Visio Pauli (and other literature) attempts to fill in the blanks for him and express the inexpressible.
visions as theologically valid and practically encouraging, incorporating one into his *Dialogues*. With such backing, many believed them to be true accounts.\(^{45}\)

The otherworldly travels of privileged saints, sinners in need of a spiritual awakening, and other assorted visionaries in the Middle Ages built on this earlier literature but adapted and embellished their themes. In most cases, the desired land—whether heaven or paradise or some blend of the two, and whether on a mountain or an island or some other remote and restricted location—was full of angelic beings, sensory pleasures, harmonious relationships, flowing streams, fruitful trees, flowery meadows, and shining or jeweled materials. Missing were any sicknesses, corruptions, and decaying material.\(^{46}\) In some stories, birds were prominent—a feature absent in biblical visions apart from one brief mention in Apocalypse 19.17—making sweet melodies, representing angels or souls, and in one case singing the canonical hours.\(^{47}\) The well-known, twelfth-century *Legend of St. Patrick’s Purgatory* combines pastoral and urban imagery, Eden and the New Jerusalem, in a composite portrayal of the earthly paradise, here clearly distinct from heaven, which Patrick is also allowed to see. But the scene is equally ecclesiastical, as archbishops lead a procession to meet him amid meadows and flowers and throngs of people. When the gates to paradise open, fragrant air rushes out “as if the whole world were turned to perfume.”\(^{48}\) Those gates are adorned with the jewels and precious metals prominent in the Apocalypse’s vision of heaven, which emphasizes the opposite balance between city and garden—the city of God as dominant and images of Eden incorporated within it.


\(^{46}\) *Life of Saint Brendan; Vision of Drythelm; Vision of Alberic; Legend of St. Patrick’s Purgatory*.

\(^{47}\) *Voyage of Hui Corra; Voyage of Bran; Vision of Baront*; Patch, *The Other World*, 54-55; Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, 134.

\(^{48}\) Patch, *The Other World*, 114-115.
We see in medieval literature, then, a trend of reinforcing distinctions that are not clearly made in biblical texts. If the relationship between paradise and heaven was complicated and conflated in the Christian canon, it is less so in otherworldly travelogues, which drew heavily from diverse inherited sources, including renewals and revisions of the *locus amoenus* theme from classical and late antique literature. The Garden of Eden was almost universally believed in the Middle Ages to exist somewhere on earth—remote, like other distant and inaccessible wonders, but theoretically available to the daring adventurer or privileged saint before death, and ready to receive any saint after death until final judgment came. It had been believed by some earlier authorities (like Tertullian) to be separate from earth and by others (like Theophilus of Antioch) between heaven and earth, and the fact that it shared characteristics of both made for tantalizing speculation about the highest mountains, distant islands, or far reaches of the east. For some, largely due to Augustine’s influence, paradise was an ante-heaven, the place where righteous souls waited until the last judgment. This was a common portrayal in the genre of otherworldly travelogues, where it was usually on earth or between heaven and earth. It could represent the redeemed, restored, new earth God would recreate after the last judgment—Eden-like, with pleasant flowers and no thorns, much like a monastic garden. There was certainly a technical distinction between heaven and paradise—the latter usually being on earth, occasionally conflated with heaven, and sometimes somewhere in between—but paradise had a history of being an especially ambiguous concept and versatile term alternately (or even simultaneously) pointing backward to Eden, up toward the present heaven, or forward to the new

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49 Patch, *The Other World*, 134.
50 Patch, *The Other World*, 134-135. Some, like Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, interpreted either spiritually or allegorically; others conflated it with heaven itself.
52 Honorius of Autun, *Elucidarium.*
heavens and new earth. Where the Garden of Eden and the City of God coexisted in the biblical Apocalypse, the earthly paradise came to be seen by the twelfth century as a distinct location guarded by deep ocean waters, high mountain cliffs, or the impenetrable cultures of the east.

Heaven and paradise continued to share characteristics, however, even when seen as different places. Heaven was often blindingly white but otherwise might resemble the sensory experiences of paradise: colorful light, beautiful clothes, fragrant aromas, sweet music, precious gems, many happy people, abundant trees and flowers and fruit, and urban details resembling those in the biblical Apocalypse. In contrast to real urban experiences but in keeping with later urban ideals, the city of heaven was clean, orderly, open on all sides, and governed by righteous leaders. It fit the description of paradise because few writers seemed to be able to find more superlative words for it.

To what degree visionaries genuinely had some sense of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling the glories and pleasures of heaven is, of course, unanswerable. In many cases, these were transparently invented messages designed to move people toward some penitent or devotional end. But they are at the very least “literary interpretation(s) of what the visionary said that he or she saw,” and for that they are quite revealing about common perceptions of the afterlife. For as much as they demonstrated creative attempts to provoke a response (as well as to entertain), they also shared a generally consistent set of assumptions about what heaven ought to look and feel like. They effectively communicated the medieval believer’s ideals, and in turn helped contribute to a culture of religious experience that would find expression in many other ways.

An entirely different class of visionary images—in this case not a literary convention but ecstatic experiences provoked by contemplation of divine mysteries—also falls, like otherworld literature, somewhere between biblical authority and theological formulations, drawing from claims of personal revelation rather than approved doctrine. Mystical visions increased from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, especially among devout women. The reasons for this make for fascinating study, but what concerns us here is how they portrayed heaven in their encounters with God. The biblical images of Jesus as Bridegroom, the church as his bride, and heaven as a wedding feast were prominent. So was the conviction that the quite graphic sensory language used to describe their visions could only produce weak approximations of what they claimed to see.55 Their visions tended to be exhilarating and traumatic, not unlike those reported in Isaiah and Ezekiel. Some used conventional images and hierarchies (a garden paradise, a heavenly city, levels of heaven populated by orders of angels), though not always in conventional arrangements (Fig. 2.2). Hadewijch of Antwerp’s descriptions of heaven might feature imagery normally associated with hell as easily as with heaven, a dark abyss and fiery love contrasting the immutable heaven of theologians with a much more restless and dynamic picture.56 For Mechthild of Magdeburg, the decorum of the court of heaven is undone by the heart of divine love glowing “like red gold in a great fire”; she is overwhelmed in their embrace, and he is overpowered with love for her.57 Hildegard’s visions of heaven are bursting with colors,

55 Gertrude, for example, begs indulgence for assigning color to something that cannot be compared to anything visible; The Revelations of St. Gertrude, part II, VI, in Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature, ed. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 227; and Hildegard, confident in her ability to see and remember, nevertheless offered a caveat about her rudimentary Latin by pointing out that the words in her visions, after all, “are not as words sounding from a human mouth, but as flashing flame and as a cloud moving in clear air”; from a letter to Guibert of Gembloux, quoted in Petroff, Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature, 30-31.
56 Mary Suidam, “Hadewijch of Antwerp’s Dark Visions of Heaven,” in Emerson and Feiss, Imagining Heaven, 122.
fragrances, sounds, tastes, and touch, many of them combined in unexpected, synesthetic ways (Figs. 2.3, 2.4). Elizabeth of Shönau’s visions begin in a conventional green meadow but then incorporate colorful rays of light and extended conversations with God, maidens, apostles, Mary, and departed kinsmen. Mystic conceptions of heaven are richly varied, much more than those of otherworldly literature and theological treatises, which are certainly not uniform themselves. They present a more fluid, dynamic, relational understanding—heaven as encounter rather than as belief, aimed at creating an impression and prompting devotion above all.

Figure 2.2. “Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden,” illumination on parchment, c. 1400. Fire comes from heaven at the moment a priest raises the Eucharistic host during the Mass, while St. Bridget sits at her desk and translates a simultaneous heavenly vision into her book. The image connects Bridget’s vision with the ranks of angels in heaven and the moment of transformation of the host, a triad of divine power bridging heaven and earth through conventional (Mass) and unconventional (mystical vision) means. (This image is in the public domain [US-PD].)

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Figure 2.3. Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias I.6: “The Choirs of Angels,” from the 
Rupertsberg manuscript, fol. 38r., c. 1150.
Hildegard conventionally shows nine orders of angels in three triads, but 
unconventionally places God (invisible) at the center, not above, and bright, patterned, angelic 
colors around his white light. (This image is in the public domain [US-PD].)
The cosmos is pictured in extremely unconventional forms—not symmetrical, circular, or in Ptolemaic-Aristotelian arrangements, but highly interpretive with bright colors and a mystic’s imprecision. (This image is in the public domain.)

The diversity of mystical visions and visionary literature, from the spiritual adventures of legendary otherworld travelers to the deeply contemplative ecstasy of the rigorously and passionately devoted, demonstrates concepts of heaven that can be stretched to the boundaries of orthodoxy, and sometimes a little beyond, while maintaining at least some grounding in biblical
revelation, formal theology, and accepted doctrine. Some heavens were static, others pulsating with movement. Some were an idealized city, others idealized nature. Some were intensely emotional or even traumatic, while others were peaceful and calm. Some were journeys into the unknowable darkness, others into the brightest light. They usually had elements both of the there-and-then hopes and the here-and-now possibilities, were simultaneously accessible to the visionary but inaccessible to almost all other people at almost all times, and could prompt both overwhelming fear and overwhelming joy. In spite of these paradoxes and tensions, they consistently made connections between this life and the next and drew attention to the soul’s upward call into something fuller, greater, and ultimately purposeful—the telos of human existence. Yet in those paradoxes and tensions, they begged for resolution and invited inquiry. They raised issues and provoked questions that theologians felt compelled to address.

2.3 Doctrinal Heavens

Theologians and contemplatives felt obliged to address questions of human destiny and the afterlife quite apart from the notions of visionary literature—scholastics through formal quaeestiones or disputations, monks through pastoral sermons, letters, or hagiographies. But the creation, spread, and reception of the diverse biblical, literary, and visionary encounters with heaven largely shaped formal theology and prompted much of the precision with which many thinkers approached their formulations. Interpretations of the afterlife remained rooted in tradition but grew. The analytical approach to this world of celestial images refined, synthesized, and formalized them—and in some cases, took them in new directions. In the later Middle Ages, many themes that had long been present received greater emphasis while others became more peripheral.
The fourth-century Latin hymn *Te deum*, which declined in usage in the tenth century and was then revived during movements to return to Benedictine roots in the twelfth, expresses much of the basic theology of the late medieval heaven. It was often illustrated outside of time and space, with the Trinity, orders of angels, the author (possibly Ambrose of Milan), martyrs, prophets, apostles, and other heavenly worshipers, and the church on earth, all of whom are mentioned in the hymn. The thrice-repeated *sanctus* or “holy” echoes Isaiah 6.3 and Revelation 4.8. The possibility of heaven and earth singing and acting in unison is clear, both in the ancient hymn and its medieval representations.

This portrayal is contemporaneous with Augustine, perhaps the most prominent figure from late antiquity who influenced medieval thought (and is proposed as another possible author of the *Te Deum*). Augustine’s view of heaven, threaded throughout many of his extensive writings, cannot be thoroughly explored here, but his understanding of citizens of the earthly “city of God” living simultaneously in the heavenly Jerusalem with the angels is particularly relevant. This dual presence or citizenship, supported by select biblical texts, appears repeatedly in medieval images that depict the “church triumphant” (believers in heaven) and the “church militant” (believers still engaged in earthly struggles) in the same time- and space-transcending scenes. Citizens of the city of God could draw closer to God by imitating angels in their “noonday knowledge” and love of God. Augustine’s categorization of spiritual destinies (of the good, the not entirely good, the not entirely bad, and the bad), which would eventually evolve into three (of the good in heaven, the evil in hell, and the in-betweens in a time

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61 Saints (i.e., all believers) and angels are positioned together in the same spiritual realm in *De civitate dei*; David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.
62 This overarching theme in *De civitate dei* is drawn from Phil. 1.27; 3.20; Heb 12.22, among other biblical texts.
63 *De civitate dei* 11.28-29.
of purgation), and his spiritual epistemology—a hierarchy of corporeal, spiritual (imaginative), and intellectual vision, of which the intellectual is primary and most reliable—were also enormously influential. Augustine’s heaven had elements of being distant and future but, in the language he used to describe the relationship between earthly Christians and city of God, the heavenly realm was remarkably present in both time and space.

The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on medieval understandings of heaven was even more direct and specific. He was likely a late fifth- or early sixth-century Syrian monk, but he wrote in the name of a once-mentioned figure in the book of Acts, a convert of Paul in Athens, and was almost universally assumed throughout most of the Middle Ages to have carried near-apostolic authority, having been personally taught some of those “things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” from Paul’s mystical experiences. His apophatic, hierarchically structured approach to experience of the divine was given currency in the ninth century by the translation and commentary of John Scotus Eriugena and then in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries by the Victorines—concurrent in this latter period with the rise of Gothic forms, expanding papal authority, and increasingly complex ecclesiastical structures, all of which influenced and were influenced by Dionysian mystical theology. His profound impact on medieval contemplatives, theologians, architects, and mystical writers (Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, John van Ruysbroeck, Jean Gerson, Denis the Carthusian, Nicholas of Cusa, the author of the Cloud of Unknowing, and John of the Cross), extending well into the Italian and northern European Renaissances, is important for at least three reasons relevant to this study: his

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65 Acts 17.34; 2 Cor. 12.4. The connection is reinforced in Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda aurea, “Life of St Denis.”
Neoplatonic epistemology, heavily indebted to Plotinian philosophy; his repeated emphasis on hierarchies, with triads of triads being imbedded in the structure of the universe; and his insistence on the soul’s ability to transcend earthly existence in mirroring heavenly patterns and expressing heavenly symbols.

Dionysian mysticism was based on negation of senses, on “unknowing” rather than knowing. Because God is beyond all external perceptions—the mystic can know what God is not better than what he is—mystical theology was ambivalent toward physical senses. They could be hindrances, but through appropriate symbols, they could also be helps. Because God is beyond anything we could envision, the union of human minds with the Light was thought to occur through cessation of intellectual activity. Reason was not valued in Neoplatonic mysticism as a means to knowing God.

Human beings could, however, work their way up an internal hierarchy in the soul that mirrored the hierarchical design of the cosmos. On the Celestial Hierarchy envisions nine categories or orders of angels with specific roles and a clear structure. Each of these orders corresponds to particular human roles, ministries, and functions, and each corresponds to an interior way of knowing or contemplating to be awakened in the soul’s spiritual journey. Dionysius’ ranks of men, angels, and creation were philosophically and mathematically precise and divinely immutable, with implications for political and ecclesiastical power in later centuries. The celestial hierarchy had a counterpart in the church, and some applied the same logic of correspondence to temporal power.

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In the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, it was impossible for human beings to rise up in immaterial ways to imitate and contemplate heavenly hierarchies. Material means were required: beautiful scents, lights, orders and ranks, the sacred bread and cup, the ritual kiss, and manifold divine symbols representative of unseen things.\(^6^9\) The orders of heaven precluded disorder, disharmony, and confusion in their earthly shadows; the clerical powers, activities, and consecrations manifested “the order, the harmony and the distinction proportionate to the sacred orders within it,” mirroring heaven on earth.\(^7^0\) While many might look at the symbols and see symbols, the clear eye was lifted by the divine Spirit through those symbols into their source. Intelligent beings were able to be molded into the image of the divine through earthly manifestations of divine realities, even if those realities were ultimately invisible. Such ethereal principles would contribute to the foundation of massive Gothic cathedrals and their corresponding iconographic programs more than six centuries later.

Two phrases from the last of Pseudo-Dionysius’ ten letters summarize his literary works and resonate throughout medieval works of art, literature, theology, and contemplative practices: “the visible is truly the plain image of the invisible” and “some [are] already united here and now with God.”\(^7^1\) The intersection between the visible and invisible—or more accurately between the things that are perceived by physical senses and those perceived by spiritual senses—with all its simultaneous contrasts and connections is not only found throughout his corpus but was widely accepted in fact, if debated in its nature, in late medieval thought. And the idea that some living human beings were already united with God in heaven not only recalls the biblical and Augustinian concept of dual citizenship but foreshadows both the ambition of medieval

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\(^6^9\) Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Celestial Hierarchy* 1.3, 146-147; *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3.2, 210-211.

\(^7^0\) Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 5.1, 233.

contemplatives and the motivation behind many enacted ideals in religious and social spheres. In drawing mysterious links between the sacred and the mundane in living beings and symbolic things, the Areopagite anticipated massive tensions between transcendent beliefs and here-and-now experiences.

Pseudo-Dionysius is exceptionally prominent in drawing connections between heaven and earth that would influence medieval beliefs and practice, but other figures made similar observations. Benedict’s Rule pictures both monks and angels ascending and descending the ladder between celestial and earthly realms and singing the divine office together.72 Gregory the Great, whose hierarchy of angels was similar but not identical to that of Dionysius, thought of angels as fellow citizens of heaven, examples of union with God and works of ministry for human beings to emulate, even suggesting that human beings should find their vocation in works that correspond with certain orders of angels.73 His Dialogues describe numerous occasions of angels interacting with people in ecclesiological, sacramental, or devotional settings.74 And Maximos the Confessor, another figure from the east translated and made accessible to the west by Eriugena, followed Dionysius’ example of earthly symbols representing spiritual realities by interpreting specific elements in the liturgy and associated rituals with the wedding feast to come.75 The church was an image or figure of God; the bishop and congregation who entered it represented Christ and the converted; the closing of the doors after the gospel readings represented that transition from material things to the spiritual world, “the nuptial chamber of Christ,” and the end of deception in our senses; the procession of the symbol of faith represented

74 Keck, Angels and Angelology, 43.
75 Rorem, Pseudo-Dionysius, 122.
eternal gratitude; and the doxology of the Trisagion (the thrice-repeated “holy”) was a divine hymn being sung with audible voices. In other words, the invisible and eternal realm was being acted out in the material realm through symbols, rituals, words, and processions. This sampling of authoritative voices does not capture the full landscape of potential contact points between heaven and earth, but it does establish a foundation for how they would be sought and perceived. Through the influential concepts of earlier authorities, medieval Christians understood themselves to be living in the presence of angels and God, increasing in their knowledge of invisible realities, and capable of manifesting those realities in the visible world.

Angelology became an increasing complex area of study from around the twelfth century onward. Much of the fascination with orders and ranks derived from Pseudo-Dionysius, recently repopularized through Victorine mystical theology, and scholastic inclinations toward precision produced attempted definitions of angelic populations, natures, roles, and interactions. The varying hierarchies of Dionysius and Gregory were embellished, especially by Alan of Lille, Bonaventure, and the author of *De sex alis cherubim (On the Six Wings of the Cherubim)*, adding detailed description and mapping attributes that corresponded with the journey of human souls and the arrangement of earthly roles. Where Dionysius had focused on angelic illumination of divine attributes, later theologians made explicit connections between angelic and human ministries. In addition to expected correlations between angelic and human authority, contemplation, passion, teaching, miracle-working, and virtues, angels might also be seen as warriors who could join battles on earth (or be joined in their heavenly battles), with Michael,

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77 Maximus, *Mystagogia* 24, 206-213.
leader of the celestial army, as the prime example.\textsuperscript{80} The peace of heaven could give way to the militance of heaven’s hosts, a useful image in an age of crusading.\textsuperscript{81} Angels were present—in visual representation and liturgical participation—in churches, abbeys, and cathedrals themselves, often pictured bearing instruments of worship and invoked as members of the universal choir before God’s throne.\textsuperscript{82} They were seen as members of the heavenly court, guardians of paradise, assistants in attaining beatific vision, mediators of prayer, deliverers of messages, cosmic warriors and protectors, and lights illuminating the nature and attributes of God. There were vast numbers of them—by some accounts equal to the number of people in the world, by others far more numerous—and they participated in God’s rule over the universe and his work of restoration in the world.\textsuperscript{83} They joined humans on earth, and humans could join them spiritually in their ascending ministries and reflections of their Creator.

The ministry of angels included assisting the soul’s upward journey toward God (the subject of Bonaventure’s \textit{Itinerarium}, for example), the end of which was to behold God in a direct but difficult-to-define gaze of knowledge or experience. This \textit{visio Dei}, the beatific vision, had roots in biblical aspirations of seeing God face to face and becoming like him upon seeing him.\textsuperscript{84} But other biblical statements were equally emphatic that no one has seen God or could see him and survive.\textsuperscript{85} Debate focused then on whether God could be seen in his essence or only through the mediation of some outward manifestation or representation, whether he could be seen by fully restored human beings but not by fallen humanity, if there was any possibility of seeing God in contemplation or mystical vision while still living on earth, and if so, to what

\textsuperscript{80} Keck, \textit{Angels and Angelology}, 45.
\textsuperscript{81} Gurevich, \textit{Medieval Popular Culture}, 170.
\textsuperscript{82} Keck, \textit{Angels and Angelology}, 43.
\textsuperscript{83} Keck, \textit{Angels and Angelology}, 34-35; Bonaventure, \textit{Itinerarium mentis in Deum (The Soul’s Journey into God)} 2.2, ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 70.
\textsuperscript{84} 1 John 3.2; 1 Cor. 13.12.
\textsuperscript{85} Ex. 33.20; 1 John 1.18.
degree and for how long. These were not peripheral questions. They aimed at understanding humanity’s ultimate purpose, expressed in biblical thought but carried forward in both philosophical and theological Neoplatonism. But the Christian version of Neoplatonic vision had to somehow accommodate corporeality—resurrected bodies rather than simply the immortality of the soul—which, if possible in the soul’s journey after death, would theoretically also be possible in the soul’s journey before death. Such mystical encounters were attainable, then, but not permanent; for Augustine and later theologians, visions of ultimate destiny were the inheritance of the citizens of the city of God, here and now in hints and glimpses but only lasting in the hereafter.\textsuperscript{86} Mystics actively sought such vision in this life, or at least prolonged or repeated tastes of it; Thomas Aquinas emphasized intellectual vision now and experiential vision in eternity.\textsuperscript{87} Both made everlasting contemplation the \textit{telos} of human existence. Whenever it was to be seen—and virtually all theologians allowed for the possibility of momentary glimpses or at least a sacred awareness of it in this life—it became central in the overall understanding of qualities and experiences of heaven, even defining human purpose.

The issue of seeing God, or more generally of understanding and encountering divine mysteries, has always intensified the tension in religious communities between competing ideas of what can be known and how human beings bound within physical senses can know it. Christian tradition had long embraced the idea of five spiritual senses that correspond to the five physical senses, perceptions or intuitions in the spirit that can discern transcendent sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and tactile experiences. Some contemplatives and theologians prioritized the


visual over all else, echoing a hierarchy that went back at least to Augustine, but sensory language was liberally employed by visionaries and numerous commentators. Even Bernard of Clairvaux, always insistent on mortifying the physical senses, wrote in highly sensory terms in his commentary on the Song of Songs.\footnote{Bernard of Clairvaux, \textit{On the Song of Songs (Sermones super Cantica Canticorum),} trans. Kilian Walsh (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1980). Bernard was perhaps not given to such language, but the text he was working with is highly sensory to begin with, and he demonstrated little aversion to it.} Platonic reasoning, which emphasized the unreliability of material expressions of immaterial forms, provided ample support for deferring to spiritual senses. Exactly how those senses worked and what they could perceive remained debatable. Allegory and biblical imagery were useful tools for making the unseen “seen,” but whether material expressions could point to immaterial realities was an ongoing point of contention. Abbot Suger gave an emphatic yes, Bernard a qualified no, and virtually everyone else who commented on such things fell somewhere on the spectrum between, sometimes with excruciatingly precise reasoning. The Pseudo-Dionysian legacy, even with Neoplatonic emphasis on the insufficiency of created forms, nevertheless insisted that material human beings needed the aid of material symbols to ascend into immaterial contemplation.\footnote{Pseudo-Dionysius, \textit{Celestial Hierarchy} 1.3, in Luibheid, 146-147.} For commentators like Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor, visible forms were able to demonstrate invisible realities through the spiritual eye, even if imperfectly.\footnote{John Scotus Eriugena, \textit{Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy of Saint Dionysius?}, in Chase, 182; Hugh of St. Victor, \textit{Commentariorum}, in Chase, 187.} Well into the fifteenth century and long after scholastic influence would permeate medieval intellectual life, mystics like Denis the Carthusian would maintain this balance—the possibility of seeing God, though not face to face and only through created forms that always fall short.\footnote{John Saward, \textit{Sweet and Blessed Country: The Christian Hope for Heaven} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 28.} But layers of Aristotelian epistemology, much more trusting of material creation in pointing to the immaterial and the divine, coincided with
dramatic increases in material expressions and religious art from the twelfth century onward. The increasing intellectualism of that period brought questions of knowability to center stage, at times seeming even to usurp the importance of what was supposed to be known.

This intellectual movement after 1100 coincided with increasing subjectivizing mysticism, both “reinventions” of Christianity that sought to understand the soul’s union with God, one through theological understanding and the other through personal encounter. These movements had differing ways of knowing, to be sure, but were not as distinct or conflicting as might appear, being incorporated or synthesized in figures like Thomas or Bonaventure. Peter Lombard, whose Sententiae became a foundational textbook for generations of students to come, focused less on the nature of heaven than on the nature of beings within it, solidifying Dionysius’ triadic arrangements as the preferred paradigm. Commentaries on the Sententiae followed suit. Heaven itself was hardly controversial, and though questions of its corporeality and spirituality came up quite often in scholastic quaeestiones, descriptions of it did not. As heavily Aristotelian as Thomas’s thought was, he quoted Pseudo-Dionysius some 1,700 times. Neoplatonic and Aristotelian approaches often posed as competitors but sometimes functioned as different currents in the same conceptual streams. While the Neoplatonic had always positioned humanity’s relationship with higher spiritual forms analogically, moving upward from the material to the immaterial, Aristotelian perspectives allowed for analogies between the outward beauty of art and architecture and the inward state of the viewer’s soul. The awkward relationship between spirit and body in Neoplatonic and early monastic thought became less

94 Rorem, Pseudo-Dionysius, 37.
awkward in scholastic materiality; Kirk calls Thomas the first Christian philosopher to take the
corporeality of humanity calmly. Rather than attempting to live like angels, human beings were
encouraged to live as human beings, embodied souls with flesh that can sin but isn’t sinful in
itself. Human desires, however imperfect, could then fuel the vision of God as their true and
complete satisfaction. A Neoplatonic perspective sees materiality as essentially neutral (a
necessary aid, though at times deceptive); an Aristotelian perspective sees it as a means to
partner with God in his creation. Where Neoplatonic thought drove human aspirations beyond
the world toward a vision of heaven, Aristotelianism enhanced human ability to see it as present
in the material world. But both employed physical substance as a potential revelation of eternal
truth, a signifier of greater realities behind the scenes.

These greater realities were envisioned within a variety of cosmological structures. As
both mystical subjectivism and scholastic precision were beginning to intensify, Hildegard’s
highly sensory cosmology, though not inconsistent with biblical imagery, reflected medieval
affinities, through which “the cosmos blazes forth in multisensory splendor: the heavens ring out
with music, the planets radiate scents and savors, the earth springs to life in colors, temperatures,
and sounds.” Here the senses were not the gateways to sin, as they had often been portrayed,
but rather gateways to sacred experience. But intellectual movements began to formalize and
codify structures of the cosmos. Early medieval depictions of a ladder between heaven and earth
gave way not only to hierarchically ordered beings but to a hierarchically ordered universe of
multiple levels comprising the divine, the heavenly, and the human. One of the purposes for

98 Classen, The Color of Angels, 1.
education in the liberal arts was to understand the harmony and order of creation.\textsuperscript{100} And it was an increasingly complex order.

Based on an Aristotelian/Ptolemaic model and reinforced by the significance of circular motions in Pseudo-Dionysius, the world was surrounded by spheres for which perfect movement and shape were essential. The number of spheres could range between eight and twelve—Dante’s nine were common for his time—and were moved either by their own inherent tendencies or by angelic force.\textsuperscript{101} Surrounding the spheres was the \textit{primum mobile}, which governed their motion, and beyond that the empyrean, which emerged as a distinct entity in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{102} The \textit{caelum empyreum} was understood to be pure ether, filled with brilliant light from the fiery angels within it, full of splendor, though itself invisible. It served as a semi-physical locus for resurrected, corporeal souls, the place where both angels and blessed human beings lived with God and beheld him in beatific vision. By the thirteenth century, it was almost universally accepted among theologians; a century later, Thomas of Strasbourg would attempt to identify all of its properties in quite specific terms.\textsuperscript{103} At times, it was thought by some to be the universal cause of all inferior spheres (rather than the \textit{primum mobile}), suggesting at least the possibility, however subtle, that earth responds to heaven and a heavenly object can serve as a template for less pure, less noble, less perfect forms. In fact, many natural philosophers were of the opinion that heaven and other spheres influenced the terrestrial realm—not human behavior, per se, which was governed by free will, but earthly substances and conditions.\textsuperscript{104} In any case, hierarchy was unequivocally imbedded in the design of the universe, with the material and

\textsuperscript{102} Grant, \textit{Planets, Stars, and Orbs}, 372.
\textsuperscript{103} Grant, \textit{Planets, Stars, and Orbs}, 372, 374.
\textsuperscript{104} Grant, \textit{Planets, Stars, and Orbs}, 380-388.
immortal included in the same conceptual package, the celestial exerting authority over the terrestrial as the superior over the inferior, Dionysian spirituality blended into scholastic formulations, and everything in its ordained position.

This cosmology served as powerful underpinning for human hierarchies, which, their misuses aside, were at least in theory only imitating celestial spheres and the created order. Spatial, chronological, behavioral, administrative, and other sorts of disorder in human activity could be seen as affronts to divine design; by implication, human behavior should comply with heavenly norms. Compliance could take various forms—heaven was not uniform by any means, with seraphim representing the affective, passionate, burning, fiery pursuit of God and cherubim representing the contemplative, philosophical, intellectual understanding of him. But the world was still an outlier, a disordered chaos that should rather conform to heavenly ideals than remain in rebellion to its created purpose. As various orders of angels at lower hierarchical levels governed and guarded cities and nations, the leaders of those cities and nations were, ideally, to emulate their rule.

At this point, in the fully developed cosmologies of the later Middle Ages, we see a refiguring of paradise again, now less the separate entity that it was in earlier visionary literature and more often conflated with heaven, or at least figured into the ascent through the spheres to the empyrean. Thomas Aquinas defined paradise in three ways: as the Garden of Eden where Adam was first placed; the empyrean, the corporeal heavenly paradise where God dwells; and the spiritual paradise, the glory of the vision of God. In the fifteenth century, Nicholas of Cusa had to look into paradise from beyond its wall to see the Father, Son, and Spirit—a vision that

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105 This was, in fact, argued by Eriugena in chapter 7 of his *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy of Saint Dionysius*.

106 Saward, *Sweet and Blessed Country*, 16.
could only happen if paradise and heaven occupied at least some of the same space.\textsuperscript{107} Renaissance affinity for Greek pastoral imagery accommodated this conflation well; many fifteenth-century artists would depict heaven as a \textit{locus amoenus} within sight of the city, both urban and garden elements in the same scenes. The garden of paradise and the heavenly abode of the redeemed shared identical traits—light, color, floral landscapes, flowing fountains—in visual representations of late medieval years.

As in the Ghent altarpiece, this diverse cosmic imagery is synthesized brilliantly in an altarpiece by Enguerrand Quarton, whose contract specified that the Holy Trinity must be pictured in paradise putting a crown on “our Lady in front” (Fig. 2.5).\textsuperscript{108} All of the critical scenes and players are there: the three persons of the Trinity plus Mary in the heart of the empyrean paradise; brightly colored angels in hierarchical order; prophets, apostles, and martyrs in appropriate proximity; other saints enjoying the beatific vision with them; Gregory representing the papacy and Jerome representing cardinals. Beneath the vault of heaven is the cross of Christ, a kneeling Carthusian monk, the holy innocents, an altar where Gregory is offering Mass at the moment of consecration, Rome (with purgatory beneath) and Jerusalem (with hell beneath), and a limbo to the side for unbaptized children. The geometric composition of the altarpiece reflects scholastic precision; the vision itself evokes mystic passion; and the hierarchies of angels and saints, along with the entire array of symbolic elements, represents the cosmology of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{109} Most importantly for understanding how the medieval concept of heaven interacted with earth, Christ is appearing both in heaven and in the Gothic structure where the Mass of Saint Gregory is taking place, and the empty tomb, church altars, and the cross itself are in

\textsuperscript{107} Nicholas of Cusa, \textit{De visione dei} 17.70-75.
\textsuperscript{108} Saward, \textit{Sweet and Blessed Country}, 38. The “Coronation of Our Lady” was commissioned by clergyman Jean de Montagny and painted in 1453 for the Charterhouse of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon.
\textsuperscript{109} Saward, \textit{Sweet and Blessed Country}, 27-28, 38, 48, 94-95, 126-127.
varying ways opening up heaven’s gates to the viewer.\textsuperscript{110} This is not a distant, unreachable, theoretical heaven but an inviting one that is thoroughly connected at multiple points and through multiple actions and symbols with life on earth.

\textbf{Figure 2.5.} Enguerrand Quarton, \textit{Coronation of the Virgin}, altar of the Charterhouse of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, 1453-1454.

Like the Ghent altarpiece, Quarton’s Coronation brings together diverse elements to present heaven and all its key figures and groups. Christ appears simultaneously in heaven and the Gothic church and its Mass, and numerous gateways to heaven are suggested for the viewer. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)

\textsuperscript{110} Saward, \textit{Sweet and Blessed Country}, 56.
The idea of a united community of believers both in heaven and on earth extends back through Augustine and into New Testament literature. The heavenly Jerusalem, an image of the “church triumphant,” the city of God where saints and angels dwell, is not only a destination; it is also present, watching, interceding for its offspring, the “church militant” still going through earthly struggles. A monastery is seen as a kind of heavenly Jerusalem, situated in a world of struggle and pilgrimage, fighting against the fire of hell, but anticipating heaven and conformity to flame of divine love. The soul not only conforms to the characteristics of angels in hierarchical ascent; it follows human beings who have gone before and now behold those angels in the brightness of glory. The heavenly hierarchy itself is a model of the church militant, with seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, and other orders of angels modeling appropriate character for popes, archbishops, bishops, and other church offices. In other words, the church in heaven is imitating angels just as the church on earth should be imitating angels, and both are conforming to the same values and characteristics in a united upward journey. This is reflected in abundant imagery that formally depicts angels, departed believers, and the earthly church in the same scenes and in less-hierarchical Italian images of the sacra conversazione, in which living human beings converse with ancient prophets, apostles, and saints as members of the same community of faith. Images may have served as a Bible for the illiterate, as Gregory once proposed, but they also seem intended to create a heaven-like environment in which believers of all eras participate beyond the bounds of time and space. These images do not necessarily portray a fully consummated fellowship between human and divine; that would happen when departed

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111 Bonaventure saw the growth of the soul and the formation of the church on earth in terms of conforming to heavenly Jerusalem as its offspring. Itinerarium mentis in Deum 4.3, in Cousins, 89.
112 Saward, Sweet and Blessed Country, 122.
113 Bonaventure, Hexaemeron 21.16; 22.2, in Keck, Angels and Angelology, 43.
souls regained their physical bodies as completed beings. But even before that final judgment and fulfillment, the church triumphant, souls in purgatory, and pilgrims still among the church militant on earth were all understood to be members of the mystical body of Christ.

2.4 The Experience of Heaven

The idea of intersections between heaven and earth, then, was not a contentious issue. Exactly how heaven and earth intersected was. If God and heaven and angels were knowable, and if material representations, however insufficient, were important in both Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought for envisioning the divine, in what ways could spiritual realities be expressed in material form? Were they merely symbols and representations of truths or embodiments of them? The characteristics of heaven showed up often in altars, reliquaries, architectural features, art, and many less expected ways, but whether these material expressions were legitimate, and what they meant, were thorny issues. Neoplatonic views of material made it always suspect, but sometimes useful; Aristotelian views of material made it a potential agent of revelation. Between the two, it was possible to have heavenly wisdom, spiritually ascend according to heavenly hierarchies, “see” and sense heavenly things with spiritual senses, and mirror those spiritual senses with physical ones.

Philosophical nuances aside, material expressions of faith increased dramatically in the late Middle Ages, representing an increasing need for holy objects that was accompanied by a growing distrust of them. There was always a fear that images might be worshiped, violating commandments against idolatry, yet Christianity itself was founded on the idea of the immaterial

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114 Saward, Sweet and Blessed Country, 37.
operating in matter (the incarnation of Christ) and the redemption of the physical into something holy (the bodily resurrection), and medieval belief and practice insisted on the repeated transformation of physical substance into something thoroughly divine (the Eucharist). Medieval Christians had ambivalent views about the body, equating it with corrupt and decaying flesh but also seeing it as a vehicle of revelation, its physical sensations becoming an often-necessary prompt for the spiritual senses to embrace immaterial things, and the physical remains of martyrs and saints able to radiate sacred power. How these foundational understandings might be applied to other materials and their connection with unseen realities was always the subject of much debate, but the issues were almost always matters of how this connection was to be defined, what it meant, and how far to take it rather than whether to accept it at all. Or, as Caroline Bynum succinctly puts it, “Everyone condemned everyone else for misunderstanding how the divine intersected with the material, but no one denied that it did.”

Liturgies and the Mass therefore became unapologetically sensory; many church structures sought to overwhelm the senses with evocations of an entirely unearthly realm; reliquaries were made and embellished with the substances most associated with biblical descriptions of heaven and eternity; visual images were utilized not merely for teaching but also as gateways into visionary encounters; objects could serve not just a reflective role but constitutive one, embodying more than illustrating, representing and defining beliefs and

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117 Bynum, Christian Materiality, 165. Because matter could be seen as active rather than inert, materials might be used not just as a medium for the image but as bearer of meaning for the image itself. For example, see Nygren’s intriguing discussion on Titian’s use of slate to express the eternality of his Ecce Homo, in which, citing Foucault’s assertion that the concept of resemblance was loaded with metaphysical possibilities, Nygren argues (among other things) that the materiality of the image built on beliefs about fresco and mosaic but gave it richer and more durable expression; Christopher J. Nygren, “Titian’s Ecce Homo on Slate: Stone, Oil, and the Transubstantiation of Painting,” The Art Bulletin 99 (2017): 41-49.
practices; music resonated with heavenly singing and instruments; the “odor of sanctity” would provide testimony of the purity of a holy life; hosts and images might shed blood or tears; and the host came to be understood as an effective means of grace not only by ingesting it but simply by seeing it from afar. As much as monks sought to control, mortify, and transcend their senses, and as much as the senses were perceived as distorted, corrupted pathways to sin, “the senses were the primary means by which believers encountered, explored, and experienced a religiously ordered and sacralized world.”

This experience of a sacralized world tied most directly into the Mass and Eucharist, which became increasingly imbued with otherworld mystery as the idea of transubstantiation was increasingly defined, but which also became less accessible to laity as church leaders created buffers between holy objects and the unsanctified touch. Many people only took communion at Easter but attended Mass more frequently because the event itself had powerful effects for those present. Though lay participation was somewhat marginalized, the singing of the Te Deum and the Sanctus was understood to dissolve boundaries between earth and heaven and between time and eternity, bringing the Mass on earth and the eternal Mass in the heavenly Jerusalem together in one celebration. Around the turn of the twelfth century, as lay participation in communion decreased, elevation of the host and gazing upon it were increasingly emphasized. Around the

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121 Sheingorn, “The Te Deum Altarpiece,” 179.
fifteenth century, practice began to swing back toward physical reception of the elements.\footnote{Bynum, Christian Materiality, 128.}

Regardless of the degree of lay involvement, the environment and the elements were always believed to be heavenly, and presence at the Mass was assumed to be presence among heavenly company.

The connections between the earthly Mass and the heavenly realm are numerous. The Eucharistic host was often called “the bread of heaven” or “the bread of angels,” even as it was consumed and viewed by human mouths and eyes.\footnote{Examples of these phrases abound in Latin and vernacular texts, including the liturgy itself; several are given in Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 100, 136.} The bread was understood to operate on earthly and heavenly levels, as were the eyes that saw it, perceiving the elevated host as well as the Christ thought to be in it.\footnote{Ann Eljenholm Nichols, “The Bread of Heaven: Foretaste or Foresight?” in Davidson, The Iconography of Heaven, 44.} In other words, the Eucharist brought heaven to earth and gave those on earth a glimpse of the heaven in their midst.\footnote{Saward, Sweet and Blessed Country, 83.} The wording of the Sanctus specifically joined earthly singers to angelic choirs. Incense was inhaled as the aroma of heaven, the purifier of souls, the prayers of human beings mingling with the ministry of angels.\footnote{E. G. Cuthbert F. Atchley, A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1909); Rupert of Deutz, De Divinis Officiis 1.29; Keck, 174-179.} The movements, postures, and clothing of priests and officiants at many points seemed to mimic the elders around the throne and the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse.\footnote{C. Clifford Flanigan, “The Apocalypse and the Medieval Liturgy,” in Emmerson and McGinn, The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages, 338.} Angels were abundantly present as co-worshipers, observers, and aids in ritual performance. All in attendance at most churches, especially from the twelfth century on, would have seen angels all around in sculpture, glass, painted vaults, and altarpieces, and would have assumed heavenly voices synchronizing
with earthly ones. In myriad ways, the liturgy on earth was carried out in tandem with the heavenly liturgy, incorporating mood and sensory cues accordingly. The sacred act at the altar was presented as a blend of drama and reality evoking the entire history of redemption. The remarks of a tenth-century Russian ambassador witnessing a Greek liturgical service could just as well have applied to later Latin context: “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it.” One of the primary goals of the performance of the Mass, only sometimes stated but always evident, was for human participants to enter into the heavenly environment or bring the heavenly environment down into their world.

The Mass and its liturgy were universal experiences of an immanent heaven, but specialists had additional ways of connecting with it. The structure and culture of monasteries and convents—their physical design, communal life, and hospitality—served as both an anticipation of the heavenly Jerusalem and a means of “remembering” or meditating on it. Monks and nuns entered into something more than a mental exercise of contemplating heaven’s glory; heaven and Eden were “made present” in their environment through its trees and fountains, the art and arrangement of devotional spaces, and their meditative memory work. Outside were Babylon, Egypt, and the civitas mundi, metaphors for the adversity and corruption

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129 Special effects were sometimes employed to heighten this awareness, including mechanical devices lowering angels to the altar at the time of consecration and leaving them there until the Paternoster. Rubin, Corpus Christi, 62; Edward Foley, From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 198-199.


133 Saward, Sweet and Blessed Country, 21, 92; Carruthers, The Craft of Thought, 269-276.

of the world; inside were Jerusalem, Sinai, the paradise of God, the *civitas Dei*, all metaphors for the kingdom of God and the environment of heaven.135 Entryways might be treated as gateways into the heavenly city.136 Treatises like *On Celestial Desire, For the Contemplation and Love of the Celestial Homeland, Praise of the Celestial Jerusalem*, and *On the Happiness of the Celestial Homeland* testify to the supernal preoccupation of the cloistered.137 The meditative paths might vary—patterns of light and shadow in Cistercian churches, sculptures and glass in others—but the goal of meditation was often focused on the eternal home.138 Monks understood themselves to be not merely within view of angels but actually praying with them, joining their praises and requests to those of heavenly hosts.139 Angelic orders were models for contemplation and templates for the construction of the human soul.140 In monasteries and churches, virtually every literary, ritual, visual, sensory path in some way represented and reenacted the spiritual journey, the end of which was the heavenly city.141

The monk’s perception of the abbey as an outpost of heaven naturally cast all of life as a mission to embody heavenly values and norms on earth. Like angels, those under vows would remain celibate, united and harmonious, obedient to their station (though unlike angels, they could advance), always contemplating and beholding God, praying and praising, thoroughly detached from worldly influences. If angels were engaged in the eternal Mass, monks should celebrate it as often or as “eternally” as possible. If angels were praying and singing round the

clock, monks should do so too, as far as physically possible. If the daily sacrament contained the real presence of the King of heaven, it essentially joined earth to the empyrean and all those who had already arrived there. Though heaven was biblically portrayed as a wedding feast, it was interpreted as a thoroughly spiritual one, and the sacrament represented it well enough, no matter how hungry the monk might happen to be. Living a spiritual life meant living a heavenly one, Augustine’s dual citizenship coming to life in actual practice, with both feet simultaneously in the world and in the city of God.

This heavenly citizenship seems to be the vital force behind the ascetic impulse. The ascetic fled from the physical to embrace the spiritual—a “spectacular inversion” of overindulgence, “cuisine with a minus sign,” a protest against the flesh and its demands, in Piero Camporesi’s words, though it was lived in varying degrees. Asceticism was not just as an escape from worldly desires but an escape into a heavenly nature free from self and sin, where in more extreme expressions of it, bodily functions became as irrelevant as a human could make them. If much of the monastic journey was positioned as flight from the world—an apophatic definition of life consistent with Pseudo-Dionysius’ journey toward God—the cataphatic response necessarily defined life in celestial terms. It aimed at inward delights, visions of heaven, the scents and sounds of heaven in the Mass, and a taste of heaven as often as possible in liturgical feasts. For some, like the mendicants, disciplining the flesh against appetites enabled one to better feed the poor or care for the sick—an earthly, social expression of heavenly values. For others, it was simply meant to turn the heart toward the transcendent and miraculous.

Numerous interpreters of the devoted life saw it in terms of angelic, otherworldly ministries,
even sharing identical missions with supernatural beings. Monastic aversion to worldly indulgences implied an embracing of otherworldly things, even when those things were represented in paradoxically material ways.

The lay experience of heaven was decidedly more material. It is also more difficult to uncover, but differences between “elite” and “popular” religion have been overestimated, and the material and ritual culture came from a shared worldview and was not nearly as esoteric as might be imagined. Theologians and clergy surely thought about meaning and interpretations more, and they had much more time to do so, but nearly everyone understood the basic significance and meanings of the Mass, relics, visual art, prayer, and the sacraments, whether or not they understood the liturgical or academic Latin that went along with them. Saints, the human citizens of heaven, were always available in the churches dedicated to their honor, especially on their feast days. The church or monastery’s land was seen as the property of the patron saint, therefore deeded by another realm, and saints’ graves were venerated as contact points between heaven and earth. Guardian angels, the ministers of heaven, were always present and attentive to their wards’ prayers. Images, the representations of heavenly beings and things, were central to lay devotion, catalysts for prayer, and invitations into personal sacra conversazioni with saints. Relics were seen as bridges between earth and heaven, were revered in much the same way that

144 Bernard of Clairvaux, Apologia pauperum 3.13; Alan of Lille, Hierarchia, in Chase, 199, 204; Bonaventure, The Soul’s Journey Into God; Keck, 29, 52, 117-119, 125-126; Meredith Gill, Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24-25. Boccaccio, Chaucer, and plenty of other commentators pointed out ample failures to live up to these ideals, but the ideals are nevertheless revealing (and were successfully followed by many).

145 Most recent scholars believe clear distinctions between elite and popular religion are unwarranted and insist on a shared and layered religious culture. Bynum, Christian Materiality, 129; Smoller, “Popular Religious Culture(s),” 341; contrasting Gurevich, Medieval Popular Culture, 2.


147 Smoller, “Popular Religious Culture(s),” 347. Gregory the Great once suggested that images were the Bible of the illiterate, and though most medieval commentators agreed, a substantial amount of evidence points to their being much more than that.
images and the eucharistic host were, and were housed in reliquaries decorated in materials that underscored the saint’s permanent residence in the heavenly Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{148} For many who embarked on them, pilgrimages represented a journey from temporal life toward something more transcendent and eternal. The “bread of heaven,” the “restoratyff celestyal manna,” not only drew the gaze of the faithful at Mass but was taken out of the church and into the town in festive processions from the thirteenth century forward.\textsuperscript{149} Confraternities and other charitable enterprises might base their programs of feeding the poor on the belief that they made heaven’s feast visible on earth.\textsuperscript{150} Religious life was filled with opportunities to leverage materials, words, and actions for spiritual gain.

One of those opportunities most loaded with accessible trappings was the feast of Corpus Christi. Its processions, which began in thirteenth-century Liège and spread widely thereafter, involved an array of sacred elements—flags, crosses, incense, relics, monstrances displaying the host—many of which carried the symbolism of biblical images of heaven.\textsuperscript{151} They grew increasingly costly and hierarchical, giving every appearance of a competitive arena for social status and power.\textsuperscript{152} But at a feast imbued with such ultimate, cosmological significance, something more than social status and power seems to have been at play—a sense of identity and a visceral need to establish one’s place in the universe, perhaps, or to reinforce what groups already believed about their place in the universe (and were therefore offended when that place was not recognized by others). It is not difficult to envision in these processions a human drama

\textsuperscript{150} Augustine Thompson, Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325 (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press), 417.
\textsuperscript{151} On the materials of Corpus Christi processions, Rubin, Corpus Christi, 244-245.
\textsuperscript{152} Rubin, Corpus Christi, 247-248, 263.
that reenacts, often but not always unconsciously, the divine order of heaven in earthly society. They were filled with images of paradise: routes strewn with flowers, children embodying innocence, joyful singing, antitheses of political maneuvering. Lives ordered around heaven’s calendar, the rhetoric of biblical imagery of paradisiacal gardens and heavenly cities, and rituals filled with otherworldly scents and sounds all point decisively toward a pervasive mentality that longed for heaven and sought ways to make it immediate and present.

Everyone understood that the immediate and present glimpses and tastes and sounds of heaven were impermanent. For most people, they were an extremely distant hope; the doctrine of purgatory, solidifying in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and being formalized in the thirteenth, offered hope more democratically but put it off for unimaginable ages.\textsuperscript{153} Even so, the hints of harmony, light, and joy were a welcome contrast to the discord, darkness, and miseries of earth.\textsuperscript{154} The sensory contradictions of earth must have energized the reach for heaven and paradise and all their aromas, tastes, sights, and sounds. Heaven was dreamed as the \textit{speculum inversum} of the world.\textsuperscript{155} That dream was actually the impetus for the purgatorial system, Le Goff proposes, and “the energizing force of Christian doctrine.”\textsuperscript{156} The melodious song, the exquisite fragrances, the radiance of divine colors and light, the fountains of baptism and paradise, the sustenance of heaven’s bread, the rich textures of garments and canopies, the priceless materials of permanence and glory—these ushered believers into the empyrean, or the empyrean into the believer, at least for a moment, leaving behind a lasting hope.

\textsuperscript{154} Hugh Feiss, “John of Fécamp’s Longing for Heaven,” in Emerson and Feiss, \textit{Imagining Heaven}, 71.
\textsuperscript{155} Camporesi, \textit{The Incorruptible Flesh}, 155.
\textsuperscript{156} Le Goff, \textit{The Birth of Purgatory}, 358.
2.5 Giving Shape to the Unseen Realm

In principle, it should not be possible to express the immaterial with materials, the transcendent with the mundane, the invisible through visible, earthbound creatures. And there was biblical justification for such resignation. When Paul was “caught up” into paradise, he heard things that could not be told.\footnote{2 Cor. 12.3-4.} Heaven was shrouded in mystery, and no eye had seen, no ear had heard, no heart conceived “what God has prepared for those who love him.”\footnote{1 Cor. 2.9.} Yet the same Paul wrote of gazing at the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, and the anonymous author of Hebrews (thought then to be Paul) wrote of earthly shadows of heavenly things.\footnote{2 Cor. 3.18; Heb. 8.5; 9.23.} The inexpressible \textit{had} been expressed in the imagery of prophets and apocalyptic vision. The Paternoster itself, the most fundamental prayer in Christendom, advocated a petition for the divine will to be done visibly and tangibly, “on earth as it is in heaven.”\footnote{Matt. 6.10.} Both sides of this paradox were embraced by medieval theologians and contemplatives, but it was not difficult to see a material, ritual, or social mandate in them, even if “earthly shadows” fell far short of the real thing. The incarnation of Christ had made corporeality and materiality inescapable aspects of the faith, and the Eucharist gave repeated license to incarnational expressions. In a multitude of ways, even if debated and contested, human actions and material objects gave shape to the unseen realm.

Those actions and objects might be understood as symbolic, but they were also widely received as more than symbolic. Objects of art were not always analogies of what they portrayed but disclosures of the divine, making sacred realities present. Holy images were meant to be touched, and people behaved as if they were actual, efficacious embodiments of whatever they
represented (Fig. 2.6). Materials could serve as allegory or metaphor, or they could make the immaterial manifest. Sensory experiences allowed the one who sensed them to respond however he or she was moved to respond.

Figure 2.6. Unknown German artist, "Measure of the Side Wound and the Body of Christ," Yale University Art Gallery, ca. 1484-1492.

This image was believed to create a tactile, portable connection with a heavenly reality—a wound of Christ emblematic of his resurrected body. The text on either side of the wound offers an indulgence: “This is the length and width of Christ’s wound which was pierced in his side on the cross. Whoever kisses this wound with remorse and sorrow, also with devotion, will have, as often as he does this, seven years’ indulgence from Pope Innocent.” Evidence of handling suggests frequent acceptance of this invitation. (This image is in the public domain [US-PD].)

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If, for the believer, religious experience transcends time and space, religious expression resists fitting into them. As van Eyck’s and Quarton’s altarpieces demonstrate, images of the heavenly Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, and the city of paradise might converge in a single motif with choirs of saints and angels together surrounding Christ or still being guided into the city.\textsuperscript{162} Apocalyptic motifs might be allegorized and dehistoricized, often taking on a timeless character in post-Constantine art, as though the eschatological triumph had already been realized.\textsuperscript{163} The path to heaven could be visual or tactile, mapped into a given space, whether within a church, in urban design, or shaping any other shared environment.\textsuperscript{164} Medieval Christians certainly understood some places to be more sacred than others—a sense of sacredness increased the nearer one got to the church doors and, once inside, to the altar—but ultimately human beings and sacred objects sanctified the place, not the other way around.\textsuperscript{165} Churches could be used for nonsacred purposes (although we should wonder if they sanctified the secular activities that were brought into them), and the sacred objects in churches could be taken outside of them to sanctify external experiences.\textsuperscript{166} Some artists and craftsmen considered their work to be a priestly mediation between heaven and earth for such purposes.\textsuperscript{167} Interpretations of images, texts, and spaces were adaptable to a point, resisting natural boundaries and ecclesiastical control, repeatedly connecting inherited beliefs with new expressions.

\textsuperscript{162} Peter K. Klein, 166.
\textsuperscript{164} Emerson and Feiss, \textit{Defining the Holy}, xvi.
\textsuperscript{165} Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton, “Defining the Holy: The Delineation of Sacred Space,” in Spicer and Hamilton, 7; E. H. Kantorowicz, \textit{The King’s Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 204, n. 35.
\textsuperscript{166} Jeanne Nuechterlein, “The Domesticity of Sacred Space in the Fifteenth-Century Netherlands,” in Spicer and Hamilton, 77-78.
\textsuperscript{167} Bagnoli, “The Stuff of Heaven,” 143.
Such expressions are revealing. If the heavenly environment of divine presence, angels, saints, and otherworldly images is described biblically and theologically in terms of certain lights, shapes (like concentric circles), structures (like hierarchies of beings), proportions, colors, and precious materials, and then we see human creations, institutions, and activities imbued with these same characteristics, we are likely witnessing more than just a common understanding of sacred artifacts and space. We may be witnessing efforts to recreate the heavenly environment in certain earthly spaces and behaviors.

Heaven was therefore not just a concept. It was an envisioned reality that carried with it the potential of experience—invitations and opportunities to enter into it not vaguely with modern distillations of “the divine” or “the sacred” but with living beings from beyond and with material expressions, substances, and manifestations on earth. The conceptual belief was important, but it was just one aspect of the medieval mentality, and for most people not the most prominent or relevant one. A graphic belief in the existence of another realm beckons the believer to envision it, glimpse it, taste it, connect with it in whatever ways possible. Those connections took various forms, but they all pointed to a widely shared, life-shaping desire. Heaven was a one-day hope—a faint one for some, perhaps, but nevertheless real—but almost always with right-now implications. The various streams of thought inherited from earlier periods—all the biblical, literary, visionary, theological images and ideas—created a template for church and abbey and the religious life of the faithful, but also the makings of a template that could be adapted for so much more.
3 THE DESIGN OF HEAVEN:
GOTHIC FRANCE

When Abbot Suger spoke at the dedication of his new choir at St. Denis, he did not
directly quote the abbey’s patron saint, according to his own account of the event. But he
certainly seems to have utilized the thought and language of Denis, and for obvious reasons.
Most in attendance took great pride in this heritage—this convert of the apostle Paul who had
written such marvelous, mystical insights before traveling to Paris and converting the Franks to
Christianity. Denis was martyred for this gift of faith to the French, and his legacy was treasured
at the abbey that bore his name and the kingdom that appealed to his protection and favor. His
writings were among the most profound in all of Christendom, almost equal to those of Paul and
other New Testament writers. In the eyes of some, they were foundational for the dynasty, the
theology of the region’s greatest scholars, and the church as a whole.

This Denis was actually three people scattered across the first five centuries of Christian
history, though few other than Abelard dared to utter such a threatening suggestion. Dionysius
(Denis) the Areopagite was one of only two converts identified in the biblical account of Paul’s
visit to Athens, and nothing is known about him other than this passing mention of his name in
the apostolic record.\(^1\) St. Denis, the martyred bishop of Paris who led its residents to Christianity,
came some two centuries later. He was celebrated as the patron saint of the French kingdom and
its dynasty, and the abbey that housed his relics was named for him. More than two centuries
later, probably around the end of the fifth century, an unknown Syrian monk left numerous hints
in his works that he was the Areopagite discipled by Paul in the first century. His Neoplatonic,

\(^1\) Acts 17.34.
mystical theology was innovative and long influential in shaping the medieval metaphysics of light and color, the ordering of heavenly hierarchies (a word he invented), and the anagogical contemplation of God through visible images of invisible realities. But the near-apostolic authority almost universally attributed to him throughout most of the Middle Ages was based on pure fiction. The only things these three people allegedly named Dionysius/Denis had in common were their name and identification as Christians.

Even so, for most twelfth-century influencers at the time Gothic forms developed, including Suger, the Victorines, and Paris theologians, the Pseudo-Dionysius of the late fifth century was assumed to be the bishop who had founded French Christianity, and his metaphysics of light, symbols, and order seem to have contributed to the development of the new style. A Greek manuscript of his works had been sent to Pepin the Short in the eighth century, and Louis the Pious later arranged for the abbot of St. Denis, Hilduin, to compile and translate the Dionysian corpus, to which Hilduin also added a biography that conflated the three Denises into one anachronistic personage. John Scotus Eriugena retranslated the works less than a generation later and wrote a commentary to go along with them, advancing the awareness and popularity of Dionysian thought in the West. The theology of Hugh of St. Victor, a contemporary of Suger, was profoundly influenced by Dionysian metaphysics; his commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy was dedicated to Louis VII and circulated among his contemporaries. These works were still archived, studied, and esteemed at the royal abbey of St. Denis at the time of its partial renovation in the new Gothic style.

The degree to which Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought directly influenced Gothic architecture and expression is debated. Whether intentionally or not, however, the emphases of this mystical

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theology on angelic hierarchies, visible representations of invisible truths, and light as a symbol and even a substance transcending spiritual and material realms, enabling interaction between them, are echoed in the renovations at St. Denis and then more fully in the visual programs of Sens, Chartres, and other cathedrals. The new style presented the light and colors that were associated with heaven to observers, at the very least to engage them in contemplation of divine things, but likely even to reflect the belief that heavenly activity was going on within the sacred space. Gothic architecture and art made the theology of heaven visible. With that increased visibility, representations of heaven increased, became more “present” and laden with meaning, and eventually took form and had influence outside the church.

3.1 Toward an Unearthly Church

Reconstruction of the west façade of St. Denis was completed around 1140, and the renovation of the choir was finished and dedicated about four years later. Both drew on features that seem to have been developing in Romanesque architecture, but at St. Denis they were integrated in a coherent design that allowed significantly more light into the interior and in colors symbolic of the heavenly city described in biblical apocalyptic visions. The stained-glass windows inspired others at Chartres, Bourges, and Angers. Its statues and architectural features were copied or adapted in Noyon, Laon, Paris, Soissons, and Senlis. Though the first manifestations of design we now call Gothic were this partial reconstruction of St. Denis, the first complete Gothic cathedral was at Sens. From the Île-de-France into much of Europe, in various phases and styles, it remained influential for at least the next three centuries.

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3 Duby, The Age of the Cathedrals, 108.
5 Simson, The Gothic Cathedral, 64.
The twelfth century was certainly not the first period in which heaven was represented in art and architecture as a present reality. From the sixth century, churches had placed relics under altars in imitation of the souls of the martyrs crying out from under the altar in heaven and organized space around that central connecting point with the divine.\footnote{Apoc. 6.9-11.} The idea of the church as a locus of the heavenly environment was prominent in the work of Augustine and Maximos the Confessor, among many others.\footnote{Augustine, \textit{De civitate Dei}; Maximos, \textit{Mystagogia}.} Early church buildings were constructed to represent symbolically the heavenly throne room or the heavenly city, with Christ and his angels entering in and the faithful symbolically following the path to heaven toward the altar.\footnote{Reinhold Hammerstein, \textit{Die Musik der Engel: Untersuchungen zur Musikanschauung des Mittelalters} (Bern: Francke, 1962), 35.} The Romanesque church had long been associated with the symbolism and presence of heaven, as had the cloister, the liturgy, and the Eucharist. As Byzantine art had done, Romanesque expression incorporated precious gems, metals, tones, fragrances, and carved images in representation of or ascension toward that apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem in the last chapters of the Apocalypse.\footnote{Duby, \textit{The Age of the Cathedrals}, 83.} Cathedral doors and façades were often engraved with Jesus’ words in John 10:9: \textit{Ego sum ostium per me si quis introierit salvabitur et ingredietur et egressum et pascua inveniet} (“I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture”)—an invitation into heaven, figuratively but with heavy material reinforcement of the message. Romanesque shrines often incorporated motifs depicting the heavenly Jerusalem, with twelve apostles lining the sides to represent the foundation of the eternal city.\footnote{Peter K. Klein, “Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” in \textit{The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages}, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 185.} The early twelfth-century monk Theophilus wrote of the ceilings and walls reflecting the work and colors of
Bernard likened Clairvaux to the heavenly Jerusalem, where spiritual kinship and devotion were complete. Processions in abbey churches mimicked entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The abbey, church, and cathedral as foretastes, representations, or experiences of heaven was nothing new.

But where Romanesque and its predecessors had emphasized the theology and activity of heaven on earth and accented it visually, Gothic placed much greater emphasis on visual representation and ritual embellishments of these themes, making the heavenly atmosphere more patently manifest. Light, color, shape, proportion, and figures were given greater importance and tied more plainly to the theological program. Gothic expression made a clearer statement that the space in which liturgy and ritual took place was not only sacred; it was a reenactment of heavenly realities in earthly forms.

Some precedents for this concept were already imbedded in the social structures of northern France. This was, after all, an age in which the king was anointed as a representative of God, with social hierarchies serving as an accessible analogy of Pseudo-Dionysius’ angelic orders. Human beings who were assumed already to be in heaven or headed in that direction corresponded to perceived spiritual status on earth, with the religious highly ranked and merchants and peasants much lower in most schematic assessments. The earthly city and its governance were understood by some to be arranged much like that of the heavenly city, with the

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12 Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistola 64 Patrologia Latina 182.169. Robert of Arbrissel, William of Malmesbury, Miro of Ripoli, Gilbert of Holland, and many others also wrote of monasteries resembling paradise.
13 Duby, The Age of Cathedrals, 80.
14 Biblical expressions of this idea of earthly copies of things in heaven (Heb. 8.5; 9.23-24) were foundational and applied broadly in Neoplatonist thought and the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius.
church at its spiritual center. The “monasticization” of society transferred monastic values from
the monastery to regular clergy to the laity in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Recruitment for crusades often appealed to the model of militant heavenly hosts, with earthly
warriors fighting alongside and in service to their angelic counterparts in the cosmic spiritual war
that was playing out on earth. It was not unusual to think of earthly society conforming to
celestial norms, in spite of conspicuous contradictions in experience.

Mystical strains of theology in the twelfth century were also leaning toward the
interpretation of material representations as experiences of invisible things. Hugh of Saint Victor
defined a sacrament vaguely and broadly as “a corporeal or material element sensibly presented
from without, representing from its likeness, signifying from its institution, and containing from
sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace.” For Hugh, in interpreting Augustine’s
presumed definition of a sacrament as the visible form of an invisible grace, sacraments could
consist of things, acts, or words. Peter Lombard would soon define sacraments much more
precisely, but even when visible forms were not categorized specifically as sacraments, they
could easily be perceived as signifying other invisible truths.

The strong hints of Dionysian mystical theology Suger included in his dedication of the
choir at St. Denis therefore suggest an intentional effort to make the interior of the abbey church
seem more “heavenly.” The emphasis on light, color, order, and expansive space appealed to two
levels of vision soon identified by Richard of St. Victor: the ability to see mystical significance
allegorically in the outward appearances of things and the ability to see the truth of hidden things

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18 Hugh of Saint Victor, *De sacramentis Christianae fidei* 1.9.2.
19 Elizabeth Frances Rogers, *Peter Lombard and the Sacramental System* (Merrick, NY: Richwood Publishing, 1976), 54. This “Augustinian” definition, only similar to Augustine’s actual words, was falsely attributed to
Augustine by Berengar but was commonly accepted as accurate.
with the eyes of the heart through forms, figures, and similitudes. These elements, the antecedents of which are often present in Romanesque architecture and art, are majestically amplified in Gothic expression. The sacrament of the Eucharist itself served as a model for spiritual vision, inviting the contemplation of the realities behind the visible forms. The growing popularity of the illustrated Apocalypse, with John pictured in the process of spiritual vision of ultimate events, suggests increasing interest in aids to envisioning heaven. The introduction of Gothic style seems either to have provoked and cultivated this interest or at least to have benefited from it.

This observation lies at the heart of studies of Gothic art and architecture in the mid-twentieth century and earlier. Scholars like Emile Mâle, Georges Duby, and Otto von Simson were unequivocal in their assertions that the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, assumed in the twelfth century to be that of the biblical Dionysius and the patron Saint Denis, influenced Suger, who incorporated it into his visual program at St. Denis, which then influenced the building of Gothic cathedrals in the Île-de-France and beyond for the next two centuries. Hans Sedlmayr proposed the entire Gothic cathedral as an integrated picture or embodiment of the heavenly Jerusalem, and this understanding has been revived in recent years by Stephan Murray, Anne Prache, and others. This cluster of interpretations and assumptions is probably an overstatement—there is a difference between containing iconography that evokes heaven and


22 Camille, *Gothic Art*, 17. Camille identifies picture books of St. John’s vision of the Apocalypse as the most popular books of the thirteenth century.


being an embodiment of it—and has been questioned and critiqued at numerous points. Yet good reasons remain for gleaning from it a persuasive if partial explanation for the course of Gothic developments and their emphasis on signs and symbols of heaven.

Seeing Gothic expressions as evocative of heaven is not dependent on seeing them as Dionysian, but that current of mystical theology seems to be one of the prominent forces behind the emphasis on light and space that emerged in the twelfth century, despite objections. Peter Kidson in particular has argued strongly against the suggestion that Suger was influenced significantly by the corpus areopagiticum and against the possibility of Suger having much say in the artistic and architectural creativity that occurred at St. Denis during his abbacy. He insists that the new style came about through the genius of the unknown architect and his logistical and geometric accommodations to the existing structure, not through the genius of Suger, and that Suger was at any rate not a serious follower of Pseudo-Dionysius but rather an orthodox churchman determined only to honor the saints of his abbey. Of course, Denis/Dionysius was the premier saint of his abbey. But in Kidson’s view, the novelty of Gothic architecture, which immediately caught on and spread to other projects, had little to do with the abbot-patron who commissioned the work at St. Denis.

In the sense that Suger never called himself a Neoplatonist or systematically studied the work of Pseudo-Dionysius in order to implement its concepts into the abbey’s design, Kidson is probably right. But the assumptions behind that assertion ignore how mentalities work. Conceptual worlds are absorbed, evolve, and subtly work their way into the thought processes of those who are exposed to them, even when those embracers of a system of thought cannot identify or have no interest in identifying its origins. Worldviews are breathed air, not explained

phenomena. It is quite reasonable to assume that Suger read Pseudo-Dionysian writings at his abbey—written in the name of its patron saint and at that moment being explored in a commentary by an abbey monk even as construction was being planned—and, agreeing with and being influenced by them, allowed them to shape his thought in semi- or subconscious ways that he took no pains to identify, explain, cite, quote, or otherwise bring into the open. Few human beings cite the influences that have gone into our thinking every time we speak. Mentalities are a blend of lifelong influences, and they are quite often unconscious. Panofsky, for example, may have overstated his case for the associations between Gothic architecture and scholastic thought, but the idea that he needed to find scholastics writing about architecture to have a case at all is flawed from the start. Would scholastics really have to identify and articulate their shared modes of thinking with architects (and vice versa) in order to have them? If overt, self-conscious references and explanations are necessary to demonstrate a mentalité, not much can ever be demonstrated about a mentalité.

In any case, whether Suger was influenced by Pseudo-Dionysian theories of light or not (and if he had read the texts at all with the idea they were written by the founder of his abbey, he certainly would have been to some degree or another), he did have a detailed, biblically and theologically derived perception of heaven, as all medieval religious did. And, not merely coincidentally, much of what is described in the Gothic reconstructions and additions at St. Denis happened to echo that perception. And, also not merely coincidentally, those constructions

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happened to emphasize color and light just as Pseudo-Dionysius did, and were later interpreted with scholastic, Aristotelian understandings that complemented Neoplatonic origins.

Panofsky and Simson may well have overestimated Suger’s role in the design of St. Denis, but rebuttals of their work seem likewise to have underestimated it.27 It is not hard to imagine the architect and builders receiving significant instruction from those who envisioned the theological and aesthetic program of the new structure, nor of the architect and builders having significant latitude to adapt the plan out of logistical and structural concerns. Building projects have always involved considerable give and take between the vision or agenda of patrons and the aesthetics and technical capabilities of those who implement their instructions. Discerning the degree of anyone’s contributions may at this point be impossible, but it almost certainly always lies somewhere along the points of difference between original input and ultimate outcome. Ascribing full responsibility to (or denying it from) either party seems unrealistic.

Kidson seems bent on separating Suger from the *corpus areopagiticum* readily accessible at his own abbey; from the Pseudo-Dionysian enthusiast Hugh of St. Victor, a contemporary of Suger who lived nearby and had surely interacted with him; and from the builder responsible for renovations at St. Denis, even though patrons and artisans have a long history of engaging in detailed conversations about the vision, direction, and logistical issues of their projects.28 But Suger cannot be separated from his own words, which are filled with both oblique and at times direct references to Dionysian concepts—perhaps in justification of his art program more than as

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27 Kidson’s argument seems to have been persuasive among many scholars who now minimize Suger’s role in the renovations at St. Denis, though none would deny that he claimed responsibility for them and had at least some input in the plans.

28 Kidson suggests that if we are looking for Dionysian influence in this period, the canons of St. Victor, Hugh among them, are much more likely candidates than Suger (p. 17). He also insists that Suger had little to do with the new design of St. Denis, and that its genius is attributable to the unknown builder (p. 11). Yet Suger was undoubtedly in dialogue with both the Victorines and the builders.
inspiration for it, yet still with awareness of Pseudo-Dionysian thought. His *De consecratione* begins with the theme of accessing the divine through contemplation of the material world. He wrote, for example, of the entire church “radiating with magnificent, uninterrupted light pouring through the sacred stained-glass windows that illuminated its interior beauty,” echoing values prominent in the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus. He wrote of the loveliness of many-colored gems calling him away from external cares, of contemplation transferring him from the material to the immaterial, and of seeing himself transported from the slime of earth into the purity of heaven in an anagogical manner. The foundation was laid “in imitation of divine things.” The royal and ecclesiastical dignitaries in attendance “were so piously celebrating the wedding of the eternal Bridegroom that it seemed to the king, as well as to the nobility standing nearby, that they were seeing a choir more celestial than terrestrial, a ceremony more divine than human.”

Engraved on St. Denis’ bronze doors (now lost) were the words, *Mens hebes ad verum per materialia surgit* (The dull mind rises to truth through the material). Suger’s prayer, as he recorded it, presented the sacraments and the ceremony as a mystical connection between heaven and earth:

> With the sacramental anointing of the most holy Chrism and the reception of the most holy Eucharist, *You uniformly join the material world with the immaterial, the corporeal with the spiritual, the human with the divine.* You sacramentally return the purified to their original condition; and by these and similar visible blessings, *You invisibly restore and miraculously transform the present church into a heavenly kingdom.* So when you have given over the kingdom to God the Father, may *You mightily and mercifully*

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31 Suger, *De consecratione* 4, Cusimano and Whitmore, 45.
33 *De consecratione* 5, Cusimano and Whitmore, 48.
34 *De consecratione* 6, Cusimano and Whitmore, 55.
35 Russell, “‘A Similitude of Paradise’. “
fashion us, the angelic creation as well as heaven and earth into one principality; and
may You live and reign, being God, forever and ever. Amen.36

The language and thought of the Areopagite can hardly be extricated from these
descriptions and inscriptions widely considered to have been written by Suger himself.

Nor can Gothic style be distanced from its contemporary interpreters who, though their
extant literary comments are relatively few, seemed quite conscious of the thought behind the
new forms. Though adamantly opposed to dependence on visible images in monastic buildings,
Bernard of Clairvaux nevertheless acknowledged the benefits of visual aids to anagogical
contemplation in secular cathedrals.37 Hugh of St. Victor’s allegorical architecture in The Moral
Ark of Noah and The Mystical Ark of Noah were “startlingly close” in meaning and purpose to
later twelfth-century architecture.38 He noted that the celestial hemisphere rotated in twelve
equinoctial hours, which the rose windows at Chartres seem to acknowledge with their twelve
spokes.39 Peter of Roissy, chancellor at Chartres in the early thirteenth century, wrote of stained-
glass windows as “divine writings” shining the light of the true sun into the hearts of the
faithful.40 Thomas Gallus’ Extract on the Celestial Hierarchy, thoroughly saturated with
Dionysian thought, expounds on imitating the heavenly environment that is filled with light and
knowledge and hierarchical beings ordered by the Creator.41 The church was widely seen by
many simultaneously as a replacement for the Jerusalem temple and an earthly representation of

36 De consecratione 7, Cusimano and Whitmore 58-60, emphasis added.
37 Bernard, Apologia 12, PL 181, 914.
38 Paul Crossley, “Ductus and Memoria: Chartres Cathedral and the Workings of Rhetoric,” in Rhetoric Beyond
Words, ed. Mary Carruthers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 234.
40 Herbert L. Kessler, Experiencing Medieval Art (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 112; Elizabeth
Pastan, “The Torture of Saint George Medallion from Chartres Cathedral in Princeton,” Record of the Art Museum
of Princeton University 56, no. 1/2 (1997), 11-34.
41 Thomas Gallus, Extractio 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, in Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Ways of
the heavenly city.\textsuperscript{42} None of these thoughts were twelfth-century inventions or unique to Gothic expression, but they were given fresh and creative emphasis in the first two generations of the newly developing forms.

It can be argued that leaders of Gothic innovations, in responding to strong opposition from Paris theologians who thought the style to be wasteful and ostentatious, employed the theme of otherworldliness in order to justify their massive building programs—that the incorporation of heavenly symbols served as a defense against critics who would otherwise condemn the large cathedrals as irrelevant.\textsuperscript{43}

In any case, the most critical point here is the visual program of heaven woven into these projects, not who originated it or even which theological sources those originators drew from. The fact of this understanding in the mid-twelfth century is well attested by the sources. Someone, whether Suger, a builder, or a collaboration among them and others, filled the new style with visual references to heaven. And those visual references are significantly consistent with the vision theory of the times and the streams of mystical theology that led up to them.

### 3.2 Mirrors of Heaven?

All medieval churches, then, whether pre-Romanesque, Romanesque, or Gothic, were to some degree evocations of the heavenly Jerusalem, but Gothic churches were richer in sensory

\textsuperscript{42} Kessler, \textit{Experiencing Medieval Art}, 139.

\textsuperscript{43} John Onians, \textit{Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 113-114. Onians calls Sainte-Chappelle “the ultimate expression of this approach,” representing “the final reduction of the church to a miraculous prefiguration of the Heavenly City, its foundations marked by twelve crosses, the one divinely approved building which would last forever,” providing a model for the rest of Europe. Likewise, Santa Maria Novella in Florence, supported on twelve piers, each decorated (at least at the time of its dedication) with twelve images of the apostles, established the style for Italy.
expression of imagery of heaven. They were not always intended as literal portrayals, and they conveyed a variety of other meanings, but all of their imagery—the cruciform design, the victorious Christ at last judgment, the dwelling place of Mary, the portrayals of salvation history, the deeply symbolic meanings of light, gems, precious metals, spatial proportions—could arguably fit within an imagined vision of the eternal city. This celestial imagery does not make for a holistic, all-encompassing, elegant explanation of the Gothic program, but it is an always-present element that finds many expressions in Gothic structures and relates to a discernible worldview. Gothic cathedrals and churches were not only representations of heaven or connecting points between heavenly and earthly realms, but they were representations nonetheless.

Wilhelm Schlink insists that this is a fiction. He does not rule out the presence of celestial imagery in Gothic cathedrals, but borders on ad hominem reasoning in trying to minimize it. Some Romanesque and pre-Romanesque buildings were already modeled on the New Jerusalem—squared, with three arcades on each side—so the idea of a Gothic intensification of this theme was no novelty. Margot Fassler is correct in balancing Schlink’s view with those of Sedlmayr, Murray, and Prache: the cathedral-as-heaven “is an idea that

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45 Wilhelm Schlink, “The Gothic Cathedral as Heavenly Jerusalem: A Fiction in German Art History,” *Jewish Art* 23/24 (1997-98), 275-285. Schlink suggests something much worse than mere fiction by tying those who see the cathedral as the heavenly city to Austrian Catholicism and national socialism. Despite Sedlmayr’s repugnant political associations, the idea that each and every element of a cathedral must be interpreted in light of where it fits in heavenly imagery, though surely overstated, would not have had the same political or anti-Semitic undertones in medieval thought (though there were certainly anti-Semitic sentiments among medieval theologians). Neither is it “a rather heretical idea” (p. 283). Schlink is correct that the heavenly Jerusalem stands at the end of salvation history, but few would argue that it was not also invoked as a present reality in the art and sculpture of cathedrals, in the words of the liturgy, and in the signs and symbols of the Mass. Medieval Christianity did not see the biblical past, the eschatological future, and the experienced presence as either-or, exclusive, chronological temporalities but as converging in an eternal-yet-present union of salvation history, just as the Eucharist was thought to bring the historical crucifixion and eternal presence of Jesus into each experienced Mass.  
46 Yves Christe, “The Apocalypse in the Monumental Art of the Eleventh through Thirteenth Centuries,” in Emmerson and McGinn, 251.
should not be assumed to be operating consistently in medieval Christian architecture and its
decoration. Every church and every community had unique ways of embodying this theme,
although it grows primarily from the liturgy, most notably from the feast of the dedication of a
church.\textsuperscript{47} Surely not everyone immediately envisioned or appreciated the celestial imagery
written into Gothic structures and decorations, and it certainly took different forms in different
places, but its presence is undeniable and makes strong theological statements that would be
missed in a simple comparison with manuscript illustration.\textsuperscript{48} The role of the cathedral, the Mass
and liturgy within it, and its symbols as manifestations of heavenly presence are not completely
disable, especially in the context of mystical theology and strong literary references to this
interpretation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but also even before.\textsuperscript{49} The cathedral may
not have been universally perceived to be an expression of heaven, but neither was that
perception uncommon. There seems to be a generally consistent pull toward contemplation of
heaven—whether the “heavenly Jerusalem” or more generally the beatific state—in virtually
every Gothic program of design, and in many cases that design is intended to help the
contemplative sense a perceived, present reality.

Creation of an immanent heaven, the celestial Jerusalem, as an intentional theme in most
Gothic cathedrals is well supported by the weight of evidence. Gothic architects and artists
liberally employed imagery from John’s apocalyptic vision “to remake the world in heavenly
terms,” utilizing multiple arts to create an otherworldly environment.\textsuperscript{50} Descriptions of the

\textsuperscript{47} Margot E. Fassler, \textit{The Virgin of Chartres: Making History Through Liturgy and the Arts} (New Haven, CT: Yale
University Press, 2010), 526.
\textsuperscript{48} One of Schlink’s key pieces of evidence is a \textit{Bible Moralisée} illustration that depicts the heavenly Jerusalem as a
city, not as a cathedral, which in most cases was referred to figuratively only as the Jerusalem temple (p. 282).
\textsuperscript{49} Russell, \textit{A History of Heaven}, 149. Russell identifies artistic rendering of elements of the heavenly Jerusalem,
specifically examining early twelfth-century churches, but also points out (as many others have) that the idea of the
heavenly city as the church goes back to Augustine and was affirmed by ninth-century bishop Haymo of Halberstadt
among others.
\textsuperscript{50} Camille, \textit{Gothic Art}, 40.
biblical tabernacle and temple, both said to be evocative of heaven in biblical texts as “copies of heavenly things,” entered into writings of Suger and twelfth-century art.\textsuperscript{51} Peter of Celle’s mystical exegesis of the tabernacle of Moses refers to the truer tabernacle of celestial, spiritual origins, yet the material tabernacle can serve as a guide to the invisible one.\textsuperscript{52} The circle surrounding the chandelier at Aix-La-Chapelle in the 1160s was adorned with gate towers and given an inscription that identifies it as the celestial Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{53} Cathedral altars became the matrix from which all else evolved; mystical and allegorical interpretations of the New Testament and descriptions of Old Testament tabernacle and temple as shadows of heavenly things contributed to new visions of the church and the meaning of time and the sanctuary.\textsuperscript{54} The massive scale, the colored light, the use of precious stones and metals identified in biblical visions of heaven, the geometric symbolism, the arched canopies, and a multitude of iconographic elements collaborate to transport the viewer into an awareness of the invisible realm that had traditionally been described in such vast, ordered, iridescent terms. Attention given to the apocalypse by Paris theologians, manuscript illuminators, and later Franciscan commentators paralleled the visual explosion of visionary themes in the architectural revival.\textsuperscript{55} Reliquaries, increasingly embellished with gold and gems that evoked eternal life and the new Jerusalem, often took the form of the new cathedral style, as if to suggest that both churches and relics carried the same heavenly glory.\textsuperscript{56} Images and relics were not only seen to invoke a saint’s

\textsuperscript{51} Heb. 9.23. These could include not only the physical iterations of tabernacle and temple described in Hebrew scripture but also the visionary ones of Ezekiel, Zechariah, and John. 
\textsuperscript{52} Peter of Celle, \textit{Mosaici Tabernaculi mystica et moralis expositio}, PL 202, 1047. 
\textsuperscript{53} Mâle, \textit{Religious Art in France}, 20. 
\textsuperscript{54} Fassler, \textit{The Virgin of Chartres}, 178. 
\textsuperscript{55} Christe sees an increase in apocalyptic interest from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries but a decrease in the use of some prominent apocalyptic themes in monumental art, such as the \textit{maiestas domini} (Christ in Majesty) that was common in Romanesque sculpture. 
\textsuperscript{56} Bynum, \textit{Christian Materiality}, 73.
power but to bring the saint’s presence.\textsuperscript{57} An “explosion of materiality” from the twelfth to the mid-sixteenth centuries endowed sacred objects, and presumably the structures that housed them, with a new vitality.\textsuperscript{58} Regardless of formal theories and purposes of art, people behaved as if visible images were actually what they represented, a response that conceivably could apply as much to grand portrayals of heaven in a cathedral as to more personal devotional items.\textsuperscript{59} With such perceptions, any lines between the contemplation of heaven and an assumed experience of it become much less discernible.

This is why firm distinctions between terms like signs, symbols, representations, and meditational or mnemonic cues are elusive. One monk’s exercise in cognitive/spiritual contemplation might be another’s visionary, mystical theophany. Or, in the lay experience, one viewer’s appreciation for the biblical narrative visually portrayed might be another viewer’s sense of fellowship with and participation in the church triumphant. The Neoplatonic perspective may not have always seen the cathedral as a simulation or replica of heaven, but it would have interpreted its images, symbols, and prompts as analogical signs of invisible truths. The Aristotelian perspective would have viewed these same images, symbols, and prompts as analogies—material references that make the immaterial more knowable. But both saw something of heaven in them. Suger’s references to the building as a symbol of the living church and the heavenly Jerusalem appeal to a biblical passage in which Paul envisions each Christian as a stone in the spiritual temple in something more than symbolic language.\textsuperscript{60} Suger mentioned

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} One of the clearest illustrations of establishing the presence of heaven and saints in materials is the fourteenth-century chapel of St. Wenceslas of Charles IV in Prague, which combined gold- and gem-encrusted walls with numerous panel paintings, all containing relics of saints represented in them, mimicking descriptions of the heavenly Jerusalem. Beth Williamson, “Material Culture and Medieval Christianity,” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity}, ed. John H. Arnold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Eamon Duffy, \textit{Royal Books and Holy Bones: Essays in Medieval Christianity} (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 141; Bynum, \textit{Christian Materiality}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Bynum, \textit{Christian Materiality}, 125.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Eph. 2.19-22.
\end{itemize}
the heavenly Jerusalem only in passing, but he did mention it—and had the new choir structured symbolically as Zion, with twelve columns representing the apostles (as the foundation stones of the eternal temple) and twelve representing the prophets, together equaling the number of elders around the throne in the Apocalypse.\footnote{Wilson, \textit{The Gothic Cathedral}, 32; Suger, \textit{De consecratione} 5; Rev 4.4.} Here and in other Gothic structures, “acoustically wonderful sanctuaries, redolent with the odor of incense . . . provided enclosed space where the harmony of the voices and instruments would . . . join with the harmony of heaven.”\footnote{Davidson, \textit{The Iconography of Heaven}, 23.} The actual perception of that harmony, whether conceptual or experiential, surely varied from person to person and resists clear definition then and now.

The mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and the figures he influenced from the time Gothic developed in the 1140s and beyond—Suger, Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), Johannes Tauler (d. 1361), John van Ruysbroeck (d. 1381), Jean Gerson (d. 1429), Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464), Denis the Carthusian (d. 1471), and numerous Renaissance creators—emphasized the experiential. The sensory language of heaven communicated in art, architecture, and ritual was not merely aesthetic or illustrative. It was an invitation into some sort of experience of the eternal realm. “The art of light, clarity, and dazzling radiance” encouraged an ascent of the created and visible back to the uncreated and invisible through the light emanating from that original source.\footnote{Duby, \textit{The Age of Cathedrals}, 100.} Pseudo-Dionysius wrote that “we use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God” in order to be “raised upward toward the truth of the mind’s vision, a truth which is simple and one,” and be lifted up in the spirit “through the perceptible to the conceptual”—not for the sake of simply understanding the conceptual but for enacting, performing, or mirroring it on earth, as, for
example, human hierarchies mimicking the hierarchies of heaven and visible light emanating from and displaying a purer, heavenly light.⁶⁴

Eriugena’s interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius on these points profoundly shaped medieval concepts of light, symbols, and beauty as representative not just of the sacred but of the heavenly.⁶⁵ The theologians at St. Victor were perhaps the clearest advocates of Dionysian concepts, but strains of the *corpus areopagiticum* seem to permeate the mentality of Gothic innovators’ work. Angels—beings of light—were understood to emanate from and participate in the light of God, drawing human beings into participation in that same light through the heavenly presence in the liturgy and its rites (and were duly incorporated more prominently in the windows and art of Gothic structures).⁶⁶ The source of light, order, harmony, and beatific joy seems to have become relevant in many places beyond the walls of the abbeys in which a sense of the heavenly environment had long been cultivated.

We see this shift from contemplation of Christ to contemplation of the order of the universe in the contrast between Bernard and the Victorines. Clearly contemplation of Christ never waned; in fact, the Franciscans in particular and medieval religious thought in general would turn increasingly to contemplation of Christ’s human experience in the coming decades. But the current of Dionysian concepts that flowed from Eriugena through the Victorines seems to have prompted emphasis on light and divine order in scholastic theology, which often echoed the hierarchical nature of the universe and the beatific state of envisioning the divine through symbols and contemplation. For many, precious materials and brilliant colors came not only to

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⁶⁵ Implied from Chase’s comments on Eriugena’s influence, 161-165.

prompt contemplation but to reflect real characteristics of eternal values and conditions. What may have been merely representative in earlier medieval art seems to have taken on more substantial meaning, particularly with regard to the heavenly city. Bernard made concessions for these visual displays outside the monastery, but only reluctantly. He found them completely unnecessary and even detrimental to the monk’s inner occupation with divine truths. For him and in Cistercian practices, heaven was, like other divine realities, “an interior craft” rather than a truth mediated through the senses. Yet his work, especially his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, was filled with figurative language that evoked visual imagination. Far from rejecting the upward pull of images, he insisted on their interior nature and resisted their visible expressions.

3.3 Stimulating the Spiritual Senses

Christianity in the twelfth century developed in two directions, often complementary but at times conflicting. On one hand, the rise of scholasticism marked an intellectualization and systemization of faith. On the other, the mystical union of human hearts and spirits with God subjectivized it. For scholastics, visions of the hereafter became cognitive exercises, not far removed in method (if not in purpose) from the monastic contemplation advocated by Bernard. The ultimate goal of human existence, in scholastic thought, was to gaze at God in the empyrean, his dwelling place where completed, blessed souls eventually arrived. The beauty and symbols of art and architecture drew the soul by analogy—seeing heavenly forms visibly corresponded to sensing them inwardly—even as the liturgy appealed to much more concrete and substantial

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signs. Despite some tension with Neoplatonic epistemology, in which the viewer moves
analogically (not analogically) from the material to the immaterial into a higher spiritual form,
these differing means of encountering the divine were both served by representations of heaven
in Gothic imagery. Everlasting contemplation was both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic, as
evidenced in the thought of Thomas, who, as noted, referred quite often to the works of Pseudo-
Dionysius in his otherwise Aristotelian approach. While Neoplatonism invited the soul into the
unknowable, the true forms behind the material shadows, Aristotelian scholasticism invited the
soul to see the divine as a present reality through the mediation of material things. For the
former, Gothic images and iconography seemed to pull the soul toward heaven; for the latter,
they seemed to pull heaven toward the soul.

These complementary epistemologies complicate Panofsky’s thesis that scholasticism
and Gothic art and architecture sprang from the same “mental habit,” a shared compulsion to
order and systematize the universe.\(^\text{71}\) The elegance of his theory is appealing but the evidence for
it often questioned, though common mental processes do seem to be at work to some degree.\(^\text{72}\) It
is possible for diverse thinkers and craftsmen to breathe the same conceptual air without
recording their connection in writing. Even though many Gothic elements seem to derive from
pre-scholastic thought, they were easily adapted to Thomist emphases on the visio dei, the
experience of seeing God later explored so creatively by Dante. In fact, defining all the mental,
philosophical, devotional, ideological influences that flowed into and then out of this mentality—
or of any mentality—is inevitably inexact and frustrating. The senses of heaven embodied in

\(^\text{71}\) Panofsky, *Scholasticism and Gothic Architecture*.

\(^\text{72}\) Crossley sees no plausible connection between scholastic thought and the masons who constructed the cathedrals,
in Lane, Pastan, and Shortell, *The Four Modes of Seeing*, 164. Radding and Clark agree that disciplines did not share
these often-unconscious approaches with each other but nevertheless emerged from similar ways of thinking, in
Gothic expression and influenced by it form a cultural mix that cannot be separated into original elements again, if they ever had been. The spiritual milieu of Gothic France was simultaneously a development from Romanesque expressions, a departure from them, a Neoplatonic mysticism, an Aristotelian formulization, an upward pull of the soul, a downward pull of the divine, and a combination of signs, symbols, aesthetics, mnemonics, pedagogy, visionary encounters, and contemplative cues, all defying clear distinctions.

The same is true of attempting to distinguish which arts contributed most to Gothic sensibilities. Architecture and art are by nature visual and therefore the most recognizable forms of Gothic expression, yet the full quadrivium was incorporated into the aesthetics and meaning of twelfth- and thirteenth-century design, as were the existing sensory communications associated with the Mass and liturgy. Monastic chanterers had always assumed they sang in the hearing of heavenly choirs, and in fact saw themselves as singing with them throughout the Middle Ages, a theme deeply embedded in the liturgy itself.73 Musicians of the age compared their work to the architectural projects going on around them.74 Hugh of Cluny (d. 1109) had represented musical tones on the capitals of the choir because of their relation to the seven planets and the harmony of the universe.75 Villard de Honnecourt (d. 1250) blended the sacred geometry of architecture in his book of theoretical architectural principles with Augustinian musical proportions and ratios.76 The Augustinian and Boethian beliefs that the relationships between numbers, tones, intervals, rhythms, and spiritual and physical harmony were woven into

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73 Benedict, Rule 19; Salisbury, Medieval Latin Liturgy in English Translation; Daniélou The Bible and the Liturgy, 128;
74 Simson, The Gothic Cathedral, 191.
75 Duby, The Age of Cathedrals, 74.
foundation of the cosmos resonated throughout the Middle Ages as theological truth and desirable sensory experiences, an opportunity to align with the order of the universe.\textsuperscript{77}

Geometry was therefore a divine art as much as a builder’s language, especially in Gothic design. Following Augustine, beauty mirrored the regularity of the divine order.\textsuperscript{78} Following Euclid, the golden ratio framed, organized, and presented divine order and pleasing aesthetics. Math could unveil and express the secrets of heaven. The Gothic cathedral was, in a sense, an architectural expression of the ordered universe—divinely proportional, hierarchical, and integrated.\textsuperscript{79} Yet sacred geometry, always an integral part of the building plan, was often not noticeable, not discussed, and not interpreted by observers.\textsuperscript{80} Far from having a didactic function, hidden elements were much likelier to emulate divine design than to send a message. It was apparently considered much more important at times to harmonize with the heavenly order than to display that harmonization prominently, which strongly suggests a spiritual program of making heaven immanent rather than a visual program of merely representing it.

Even so, heavenly imagery served multiple purposes. Like Hugh of St. Victor’s treatise on Noah’s Ark, Bernard’s sermons on the Song of Songs, and ordered liturgical processions, the arrangements of Gothic elements and images often led viewers into a well-planned, mnemonic journey of spiritual contemplation that progressed station by station throughout the structure.\textsuperscript{81} Like Suger at St. Denis, Peter of Celle redesigned the choir at St. Rémi with “a program of windows that made the space into a jeweled \emph{cella} within which to remember the heavenly Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{82} But the purposes of design went well beyond memory work. Peter, though a

\textsuperscript{77} For Boethius, numbers were always in the mind of the Creator in his designs. \textit{De institutione arithmetica} 1.2.

\textsuperscript{78} Augustine, \textit{De natura boni}; Tavinor, “Sacred Space and the Built Environment,” 23.

\textsuperscript{79} Foley, \textit{From Age to Age}, 193.

\textsuperscript{80} George Lesser, \textit{Gothic Cathedrals and Sacred Geometry} (London: Alec Tiranti, 1957), 156.

\textsuperscript{81} Carruthers, \textit{The Craft of Thought}, 224, 258.

\textsuperscript{82} Carruthers, \textit{The Craft of Thought}, 258.
disciple of Bernard, advocated the building of sanctuaries on earth that would mirror the true sanctuary that lies beyond for analogical purposes.\textsuperscript{83} The organization of the cathedrals at Bourges and Chartres created “an overall vision . . . of an intelligible and perfectly ordered universe.”\textsuperscript{84} Chartres Cathedral was referred to as the “celestial court of the Mother of God.”\textsuperscript{85} Peter of Roissy, chancellor of the school at Chartres 1200-1213, devoted a section of his \textit{Manual on the Mysteries of the Church} to allegorical interpretation of its elements.\textsuperscript{86} His understanding of geometric symbolism and the central role of the square as symbolic of human moral perfection is not about heavenly immanence, unless in the sense of heaven being the place where that moral perfection is finally realized. But, in spite of its human connotations, the \textit{ad quadratum} design carries hints of the four living creatures and four evangelists of apocalyptic vision. Likewise, the “last judgment” of the west façade at Chartres is better interpreted as the present Christ in his divinity rather than the future Christ at his second coming.\textsuperscript{87} The angels in the last judgment on the southern portal are arranged as the Pseudo-Dionysius had ordered them in his literary works (Fig. 3.1).\textsuperscript{88} Liturgy consistently identified church buildings with the heavenly Jerusalem; William Durandus associated liturgical singing with entering into “the fatherland” and saw chanters in their white robes as angels.\textsuperscript{89} Most medieval visitors would have understood the imagery to suggest that they were entering a heavenly place.\textsuperscript{90} Almost all the

\textsuperscript{83} Peter of Celle, \textit{Mosaici Tabernaculi mystica et moralis expositio}, \textit{Patrologia Latina} 202, 1047ff.
\textsuperscript{84} Jean Bony, \textit{French Gothic Architecture of the 12th and 13th Centuries} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 245-246.
\textsuperscript{86} Simson, \textit{The Gothic Cathedral}, 195.
\textsuperscript{87} Christe, “The Apocalypse in the Monumental Art,” 254.
\textsuperscript{88} Images at Mapping Gothic France, Media Center for Art History, Columbia University, and Art Department, Vassar College, http://mappinggothic.org; Simson, \textit{The Gothic Cathedral}, 201.
\textsuperscript{89} McDannell and Lang, \textit{Heaven: A History}, 79.
iconography, design, monumental program, window images, and symbols of a Gothic cathedral pointed to these structures as earthly embassies of the heavenly realm.

Figure 3.1. Last Judgment, south portal, Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres, early thirteenth century.

Surrounding Christ on his throne are Mary, the apostle John, and the nine orders of angels. Beneath his feet are the blessed (left) and the condemned (right). The “pillars” on each side of the doors are apostles, who were understood to be among the pillars of the heavenly temple mentioned in Apoc. 3.12. (This image is in the public domain.)
So did the activity within the structure itself. While church buildings condensed sacred
time into one moment and sacred space into one location, the liturgy translated eternal life into
observable instances of embodiment.91 The signs of the Mass and liturgy were not mere
representations or symbols but were understood to make the invisible visible, the intangible
tangible through the physical senses.92 Even as the heavenly liturgy was continually being
carried out according to the apocalyptic vision—the book of Revelation depicts the heavenly
throne surrounded by twenty-four elders, each of whom wears white vestments and golden
crowns, sometimes prostrating themselves amid smoldering censers and the ritual movements of
many participants—medieval liturgical commentaries prescribed mirrored performance in
earthly sanctuaries, in which participants were surrounded by angels and saints in sculpture,
glass, painted vaults, and altarpieces, all while singing liturgical hymns in sync with heavenly
voices.93 The Mass was “a stimulation of the senses—the aromas of incense, the sounds of
music, the taste of the Eucharist,” the images of angels all around—all of which made the
atmosphere a seemingly present reality and accessible experience (Figs. 3.2a-c).94 As Jungmann
expressed in his classic and authoritative study of the history of the Latin Mass, the sacred action
at the altar became a play in which drama and reality mysteriously merged.95 Heaven was not
just being invoked in the Mass. It was being performed—and on a stage that powerfully
reinforced the setting with stone, glass, wood, vestments, sounds, and smells.

91 Spicer and Hamilton, *Defining the Holy*, 10. In exploring the kinds of temporality implicit in Jacobus de
Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, Le Goff emphasizes the importance of liturgy in constructing Christian time, making
manifest God’s time within human time. Jacques Le Goff, *In Search of Sacred Time: Jacobus de Voragine and the
93 Apoc. 4-5; Flanigan, “The Apocalypse and the Medieval Liturgy,” 338; Sheingorn, “The Te Deum Altarpiece,”
181.
94 Keck, *Angels and Angelology*, 176. Keck is focused primarily on angelology, not heaven per se, but captures the
sensory experience of the Mass as it relates to the heavenly liturgy that was understood to be continually carried out.
Figures 3.2a-c. Angel sculptures, Lincoln Cathedral, second half of thirteenth century. Thirty carvings in the spandrels of Lincoln Cathedral’s bay arcades demonstrate the awareness of angelic presence in the Mass.

Top left: angel holding scroll and palm, representing the eternal word and the new Jerusalem. (This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license, Jules and Jenny, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lincoln_Cathedral,_Angel_holding_a_scroll_and_pal m%3F_(32262454615).jpg.)

Top right: angel swinging censer, representing heaven’s aroma and the prayers of the saints ascending to heaven. (This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license, Jules and Jenny, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lincoln_Cathedral,_Angel_with_censer_(n.6)_%(32142 983081).jpg.)

Bottom left: angel playing pipe and tabor, representing heaven’s music in concert with earthly songs. (This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license, Jules and Jenny, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lincoln_Cathedral,_Angel_with_Pipe_and_Tabor_(32 224168216).jpg.)
The liturgy of and commentaries on the Eucharistic Mass referred often to the *panem angelorum* or *panem cœli*—the “bread of angels” or “bread of heaven.” After an appeal to the Christ worshiped by the heavens and heavenly hosts, and to the “powers that stand in awe” and the “blessed seraphim,” the liturgical script turned to human participants: the supplicants who join with those heavenly beings and sing praises in unison with them. The human side of this drama sought to pull the divine side into its experience by way of signs and sacraments, material appeals to the eternal source as a model for here-and-now experience. Or, in other words,

one can argue that one of the major issues of the liturgy consists of the lived, phenomenological experience of the sensory world, because it and it alone—by means of the effective performance of the liturgy within its ‘sensory space’—permits the ‘placing in action’ of sensory reality, which must reveal the invisible within the sacramental *signum* and make it possible ‘in presentia.’

The immaterial realm became very tangible in experiences of sight, sound, smell, touch, and, for some, even taste. Ample light and images filling the space of the church and the liturgical power of suggestion turned the nebulous idea of an immanent heaven into a dramatic encounter with it.

In this sensory-rich space, celebrants and observers entered into the encounter by joining angelic activity as they understood it. Angels’ voices as portrayed in Isaiah 6.3, Luke 2.14, and Apocalypse 4.8 were echoed in the *Sanctus*, *Gloria*, and *Alleluia* (sung at every Eucharistic Mass) as well as the *Te Deum* (often sung at Matins). These hymns were not understood to be *about* angelic choirs. They represented an active participation with those choirs, earth’s chorus joining with heaven’s in this overlapping common space. The liturgy itself called for earthly voices to engage with those in heaven. This singing “dissolved not only the boundaries

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separating heaven and earth, but also those separating time and eternity, for they participated in the eternal Mass in the heavenly Jerusalem.” Though lay participation in these songs waned in the twelfth century due to increasing emphasis on clergy, belief in the union of heaven and earth in their singing remained.

Celebrants and observers understood themselves to enter into the presence of heaven through the use of incense too, which was considered not only a purifier of souls but also represented the descending aroma of heaven (as opposed to the stench of earth) and the ascending prayers of humans into the hands of angels. This is portrayed frequently in Gothic imagery, including the rose windows of Chartres, which represented eternity in their circular design and heaven in their translucence and brilliant colors, the invisible world made visible in beings, activities, light, and symbolism (Figs. 3.3a-b).

Figures 3.3a-b. Rose windows, north and south transept, Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres, early thirteenth century.

The circular design represents eternity; the light and colors represent heaven; the imagery within adds connotations of accessibility. (These images are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Photos by PtrQs.)

100 Sheingorn, “The Te Deum Altarpiece,” 179.
101 Laity sang with celebrants throughout the early Middle Ages but became spectators about the same time Gothic style developed, though it was still in practice when Honorius of Autun (d. 1151) wrote the Gemma animae. The idea of heaven and earth singing together remained in the text of the liturgy, however.
102 Apoc. 5.8; Ps. 141.2; Rupert of Deutz, De divinis officiis 1.29, PL 170, 27; E. G. Cuthbert F. Atchley, A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909); Jungmann, The Mass of the Roman Rite, 318.
The Mass became increasingly allegorized throughout the Gothic period, with meaning ascribed to details that may have been merely incidental in earlier periods. Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129) had already seen Christ symbolized in sacerdotal vestments, and Gothic developments solidified these meanings and elaborated on them as interpreters found connections between earthly and heavenly realms in each article of clothing. In the thirteenth century, ringing bells during the Sanctus became common practice, perhaps to signal the moment of elevation for congregations separated from the host by a rood screen, but possibly to signify the simultaneous worship of God in heaven and earth, just as the *Gloria in Excelsis* was sung with every available instrument on Holy Saturday. Layers of meaning were added to signs and gestures that already symbolized significant themes in earlier centuries, and many of those additions pointed toward the merging of heaven and earth in the visible sanctuary.

The joining of heaven and earth is nowhere more evident than in the rite of the Eucharist. The doctrine of transubstantiation, debated in various forms in the eleventh century, was in a process of becoming more clearly defined in the twelfth. The mystical union of the material and immaterial, the earthly elements and the body of Christ, was not in itself controversial. But the nature of this union certainly was, and the Aristotelian metaphysics that began to reemerge in the latter half of the twelfth century brought this connection between heaven and earth into the forefront of theological awareness. The “bread of angels” or the “bread of heaven” represented a meeting between the two realms, heaven being brought down into the earthly sanctuary, or the earthly sanctuary being taken up into heaven, especially in that moment.

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105 John Saward, *Sweet and Blessed Country*, 83.
Gazing at the host at the moment of elevation, when the priest held the elements up and consecrated them, gained importance and efficacy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As lay participation in the Mass decreased, the significance of observation increased. Congregations paused and stared, often competing for a glimpse of the critical moment, as means of receiving the grace offered in the sacrament. For many, this may have been simply that—an effort to receive the grace imparted in the act of observing. But if the bread really had become the body of Christ, and if Christ really was an incarnation of God, and if the ultimate goal of human existence was to gaze at God for eternity, as many scholastics came to believe, then gazing at this material host on earth at the moment of its transformation would represent for many a here-and-now experience of a there-and-then state—i.e., either heaven being brought into the present for each observer, or each observer pulled forward into heavenly bliss. In other words, the Eucharist prefigured and perhaps even created a foretaste of the beatific vision. With multiple visual and verbal references to angelic participation, the sights, sounds, and smells described in visionary literature being performed and represented all around, and the literal body of Christ supposedly in the room at the moment of elevation of the host, the empyreal state must have been easily imagined as a present reality.

This liturgical drama, then, was seen as much more than visible reenactment or ritual. It was a “making present” of the eternal, invisible realm in a particular place and moment in time, a “re-presentation of a sacramental reality.” In the Mass, boundaries between the earthly world and the heavenly had been done away with, “the baptized mingling with the angels,” together

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106 This is the compelling argument of Ann Eljenholm Nichols in “The Bread of Heaven: Foretaste or Foresight?” in Davidson, 40-68. Her study focuses on manuscript illumination and stained glass from 1300 to 1500 but likely reflects thought that developed earlier.

taking part in the liturgy of heaven.\textsuperscript{108} It had been understood that way in the Latin West long before the advent of Gothic style and scholastic reasoning, but that understanding intensified and was accented and embellished with the new forms and systematization of theology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{109} Every sensory experience in church and Mass became a vehicle to transport the soul to heavenly experience.\textsuperscript{110}

3.4 Layers of Time and Space

With all these representations in place—these cues to contemplation of heaven, evocations of its presence in the Mass, the Eucharist, and the liturgy—it becomes reasonable to see the biblical images in a cathedral as something more than narratives or didactic reminders of the past. Gregory the Great had referred to images as biblical instruction for the illiterate, and they surely served that purpose, at least to whatever degree the illiterate could understand them without extensive teaching and storytelling.\textsuperscript{111} But the vast majority of sacred art needs ample explanation to all but the initiated, and the initiated relied on these images for contemplation.\textsuperscript{112} In Gothic art, time is multi-layered, with past, present, and future converging in images and all of it happening within an eternal moment.\textsuperscript{113} In light of the ample sensory experiences and their meaning in the church and Mass, the “history” in a cathedral cannot just be the divine story being retold. Among other functions, it is the eternal, God’s-eye perspective imparted to the church, the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Daniélou, \textit{The Bible and the Liturgy}, 130.}
\footnote{This is reflected in the thought of Amalarius of Metz and Rupert of Deutz before the Gothic era and by Jean Beleth, Sicard of Cremona, and William Durandus, among others, during it.}
\footnote{Emerson and Feiss, \textit{Imagining Heaven}, xvi.}
\footnote{Gregory the Great, Book 11, Letter 13 (letter to Serenus of Marseilles). This was cited by William Durandus in the \textit{Rationale Divinorum Officiorum}, and as late as the fifteenth century, images were called “the laity’s books” by Eustace Mercadé, in Duby, \textit{The Age of Cathedrals}, 235. This function of images was assumed throughout the Middle Ages, though additional layers of meaning were ascribed to them.}
\footnote{Carruthers, \textit{The Craft of Thought}.}
\footnote{Camille, \textit{Gothic Art}, 72ff. Russell, \textit{A History of Heaven}, 119. Also portrayed in the frequent \textit{sacra conversazione} theme of Italian Renaissance painting.}
\end{footnotes}
view from the end as it is pictured in the apocalyptic text, the ultimate overview of the entire procession from the dawn of time to the consummation of the ages. It is a heavenly vista.

If heaven is the summation of the story, the culmination of history, the testimony of redemption in fulfillment, then all that goes into the iconography of a cathedral—Old Testament prophets and kings, New Testament apostles, history’s saints, and so on—can be interpreted as a picture from this heavenly perspective. The imagery as a whole, not just the specific depictions of heaven as isolated elements, can be interpreted as the scene from above. In the book of Revelation, for example, the martyrs, saints, and multitudes of believers from every nation are all together; their experiences and advances are celebrated in totum. Just as this summary scene in the apocalyptic vision depicts history from a heavenly point of view, so does the integrated scene of cathedral art, in sum, in that moment, in that place. In Christian theology, heaven itself has never been interpreted only as a destination. It is seen as a summation, a culmination of everything, the coming together of all things in Christ. That is precisely what a cathedral’s images, furnishings, and structural arrangements depicted, no matter how seemingly haphazardly they had been accumulated over time.

It is difficult to imagine the human psyche so saturated in the imagery of heaven inside the church not also translating its consciousness of heaven beyond it. That consciousness may have grown imperceptibly, and at first not far removed from its origins. A century after the first renovations at St. Denis, Louis IX had the royal chapel of Sainte-Chapelle constructed to house his collection of relics of the Passion. This ostensibly devotional function had predictable political effects, consolidating Louis’s reputation as a saintly leader and solidifying the reach and centrality of the Capetian monarchy. The convergence of spiritual and secular power in Louis—not unusual in itself, as kings had long been anointed as servants and representatives of the
heavenly King—perhaps cultivated a growing sense of the heavenly environment in other arenas of life. Angels were represented at Sainte-Chapelle not only in their more common roles but as executors of divine justice. Statues of apostles were placed against the twelve columns of the choir, authenticating the royal chapel as a true temple of God. Gothic and heavenly imagery spilling from cathedrals into a royal chapel may seem to be a subtle shift, yet the concept of the *civitas Dei* was being consciously applied to the urban environment as a whole—the church no longer as a stronghold against the outside world, as in the Romanesque perspective, but with open cathedrals and royal chapels radiating their environment of heaven into the city surrounding them.

The portability of the holy was not new. Relics had crossed continents, after all. At least in theory, the supernatural realm was not contained in enclosed spaces, regardless of the iconography built into them. Heaven filled spaces because of the holy relics, rituals, songs, and prayers that took place in them, with iconographic elements presenting the unseen realm that had been invoked there. So small altars had been made for celebrating open-air Mass and were recommended to priests by Hincmar of Reims in the ninth century. But as these small “images” of the church began to take on Gothic shapes, embellishments, and symbolism, they began to carry the same intensified connotations of the heavenly environment with them. As material devotional objects became increasingly spiritualized, animated, and plentiful, they

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114 For centuries, France’s kings had been anointed with what was believed to be holy oil from heaven, given by an angel at Clovis’ coronation, representing authority came directly from God and not mediated by the pope. Graeme Small, *Late Medieval France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), 8-9. The language of the Mass conflated earthly and divine kingship, reinforcing themes of earthly and heavenly realms in tandem. Jean Gerson compared the bell-ringing of the Mass to news of the king’s arrival (Small, 23).
became more widely accessible and personally desired. Incrementally over time, “by building a well-planned city or legislating a model environment, a community’s leaders become God’s partners in recreating a paradise on earth.”

Jean de Jandun used the language of paradise in describing Paris in 1323. His response to an unknown writer who praised Paris for being like paradise may have been part of a series of academic jests, but his commentary on the city’s features are still revealing. He praised Paris for many of its features, but focused on Notre Dame cathedral, Sainte-Chapelle, and the palace of Philip the Fair. Jandun compared the ascent of a visitor to Sainte-Chapelle from the first floor to the second as being like the spiritual ascent from earth to heaven. Notably, he also used language normally applied to sacred architecture for the secular palace of Philip the Fair, and his description of the justice carried out within the royal hall—“sentences like unopposable thunderbolts”—is loaded with divine terminology. As Inglis points out, the understanding of the role of religious art and imagery had evolved over the centuries, from Gregory’s view of pictures as “the Bible for the illiterate” to Suger’s symbols that lift the soul higher toward their source of meaning to William Durandus’ view that paintings move the mind and are more memorable than words, and finally to Jandun’s focus on form and beauty stirring the soul. We can also perceive an evolution in the location of sacred imagery in these figures’ perspectives: from church and abbey to the cathedral, around which cities were oriented to the religious and secular seats of influence and even that of the city as a whole. Two centuries earlier, talk of

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119 Emerson and Feiss, *Imagining Heaven*, xvi.
120 Inglis, “Gothic Architecture and a Scholastic,” 63-85. Inglis suggests this correspondence as academic jesting and conventional exchange of praise but still sees links between the Aristotelian Jandun’s descriptions and those of the Augustinian Neoplatonic Suger a century and a half earlier.
121 Jean de Jandun, *Tractatus de laudibus Parisius* 2.1; Inglis, “Gothic Architecture and a Scholastic,” 71.
122 Jean de Jandun, *Tractatus* 2.2; Inglis, “Gothic Architecture and a Scholastic,” 72.
123 Inglis, “Gothic Architecture and a Scholastic,” 71.
anything but an abbey or garden being heavenly would be hard to imagine. Hints of paradise within a city were now the subject of speculation.

Not long before Jandun’s *Tractatus*, Philip the Fair commissioned a work to give to his son: *Vita et miracula sancti Dionisii* on the original St. Denis—the life and works of the conflated three-in-one Dionysius as founder of French Christianity. A monk named Yves from St. Denis composed the work in three books, the second of which was filled with illustrations of Paris as paradise. The illustrations are idyllic—not surprising for a hagiographical work—and may have actually pointed to the abbey of St. Denis as paradise rather than the city as a whole. But they also depict aspects of Paris in paradisiacal, heavenly terms—perhaps not merely St. Denis (the abbey) as paradise but Paris as paradise-like because of the blessings that St. Denis (the person) brought, as if the presence of heaven in the abbey had also overflowed into the city. Regardless of the intent of Yves of St. Denis, Jean de Jandun, and the unknown writer to whom Jean was responding, they all recognized the possibility of a city outside the church bearing the appearances of heavenly blessing and paradisiacal bounty. At least conceptually, even if playfully or hagiographically, the environment of heaven was not contained within abbey or cathedral walls.

These thoughts of heaven within and beyond the church cannot have been lost on common observers. They were surely more conspicuous to those who spent their time focused on such things—monastics, secular clergy, and scholars—but medieval people had long understood the contrasts between the decay and stench of earthly sensory experience and the radiance and fragrance that filled heavenly aspirations. Only the initiated could fully interpret the iconography within a cathedral or recognize the power of materials to lead toward beatific vision, but anyone

124 Elizabeth Brown makes a compelling argument that this was the author’s intent in “Paris and Paradise: The View from Saint-Denis,” in Lane, Pastan, and Shortell, 419-461.
could recognize the proliferation of angelic images and understand the dazzling gems and gold as signifiers of the heavenly city. In the twelfth century and beyond, material devotion was becoming more abundant, more personalized, and more accessible. In spite of vast, inescapable, earthly contradictions to the blessed state, the iconography of heaven kept beckoning toward it.

This was certainly true in the Île-de-France, but then more broadly throughout northern Europe. The mystical concepts of Pseudo-Dionysius, the emergence of Gothic style, scholastic thought that blended Aristotelian epistemology with existing theology, the systematization of ideas and the search for universal order—all developed from a confluence of earlier streams that also sought the presence of heaven in at least some earthly forms. Yet the explosion of sacred materiality, artistry, technical skill, and defining theological impulses formed these beliefs and longings into creative expressions aimed at cultivating sensory experiences of what had once been considered inexpressible. With the spread of Gothic and scholastic concepts of cosmic design and human destiny, a new appreciation for the immaterial expressed in the material, and waves of crusading fervor, the heavenly landscape in northern France, where church and kingdom overlapped much more significantly than they did to the south, carried at least the tantalizing possibility of a pervasive movement of heaven on earth.
Nicholas Champion’s *Mass for Mary Magdalene* was performed in a familiar environment at the Habsburg-Burgundian court chapel in the early sixteenth century. Surrounding iconography would have made the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin, and numerous saints and angels “present” at the scene. As the choir began to sing the Eucharistic phase of the Mass, the text turned toward the role of Mary Magdalene as one of the first witnesses of the resurrection. Champion’s sequence of texts was designed to synchronize Mary’s declaration, “I have seen the Lord,” with the priest’s elevation of the Eucharistic host. At the moment when attendees were meant to gaze at the raised “body of Christ” in the element, they also would have heard the heavenly-sounding climax of the Mass, seen robed singers facing the altar just as angels were gathered around Christ’s throne, and likely smelled the scent of lingering incense, the fragrance of heaven, as they took in the candlelit scene.

Perhaps to many in attendance, this was merely the reenactment of a common ritual. But to those who consciously allowed their senses to absorb all the artistry and meaning of the event, while understanding the theology of the feast and the timing and composition of the music, it was much more than a ritual. This was rather a presentation of the heavenly environment so often depicted in art of the period. The canonical Apocalyptic vision of heaven’s worship told of a golden altar before a throne in heaven surrounded by angels and twenty-four elders clothed in white, with flames of fire all around, angels receiving earth’s prayers like rising incense, and

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1 Jennifer Bloxam, “A Saint’s Translation: Reading Musical and Visual Relics of Mary Magdalene from the Renaissance,” presentation at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University, March 28, 2019; and personal correspondence, April 9, 2021.
multitudes of the elect clothed in white and constantly singing songs of worship. This heavenly liturgy was always going on, and earthly liturgies were to mirror them, not only because the divine template was seen a mandate but also because the church was understood to exist in two simultaneous and connected parts: the heavenly, triumphant church and the earthly, contending church. A Mass was not meant merely to remind the earthly of the heavenly but to make their fellowship palpable. Champion’s Mass and many other visual and musical works sought to accomplish that purpose in ingenious and creative ways. They reflected a distinguishing and influential attribute of the rich religious culture of the Low Countries, where expressions of the convergence of heaven and earth advanced with remarkable innovation and depth.

4.1 The Promised Lands

Before Champion’s time, the Low Countries had become “the promised lands,” at least according to one former Flemish diplomat. The most immediate reason for that assessment was a period of relative peace, prosperity, and creativity under Philip the Good, the third of four Burgundian dukes to rule the Low Countries in the fifteenth century. But the rich devotional and artistic culture that contributed to this sense of wellbeing was the product of much earlier influences, not least of which were Gothic sensibilities and expressions that had spread to the region from France more than two centuries earlier and soon took on a “Brabantine” character.

The Low Countries had already been developing a unique and fertile devotional environment that would produce influential movements like Beguines and devotio moderna, the Feast of Corpus Christi, and flourishing mystical thought; Gothic emphases and imagery seemed

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2 Apoc. 4-5, 7.
to enhance and give fuller expression to that spiritual environment. In addition, artists and artisans in this region developed distinct innovations and styles that would rival those of Italian artists of the fifteenth century. Religious and aesthetic impulses combined to promote a sense of otherworldly ideals not only in the context of sacred space but also beyond it, and the Burgundian court fueled them with extravagant patronage. Heaven’s immanence was increasingly manifest—and at times leveraged for secular agendas—in many religious practices and sensory expressions throughout the late Middle Ages.

Gothic influence in this region is unsurprising. Movements tend to spread beyond their origins, and the embrace of Gothic forms in the Low Countries is easily explained by proximity, relational networks among secular and regular clergy, and political and cultural connections with northern France and, to a lesser degree, England, where Gothic forms also found early expression. These territories shared, along with most of northern Europe, a common material and liturgical language that readily communicated new thoughts and perspectives. The symbolism of the Mass crossed cultures and, as elsewhere, carried much more than symbolic meaning. In all of Latin Christianity, the host and chalice were considered the “bread of heaven” and “celestial drink,” prayers of earthly and heavenly saints mingled together and rose like incense into the nostrils of Christ and his Mother, and participants sang with the angels in heaven. The liturgy for the dedication of a church was filled with imagery of Jacob’s ladder and the Temple of Solomon, biblically established representations of heaven on earth (or intersections of the two realms),

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4 The Eucharist was seen not merely as a symbol of the presence of Christ but as the actual presence, and its uniqueness precludes us from applying the same sort of interpretation to other “symbols” in the liturgy and the sacred space in which it was performed. Liturgy (and everything surrounding it) did present invisible truths visibly, and therefore symbolically, but modern interpretations often reduce medieval representations only to symbolic meaning, as if the medieval eye (or other senses) read them with a modern view of materiality or sense of detachment. More likely, medieval understanding of signs and symbols assumed that material objects and physical space intersected with the divine in real ways—not just as symbols, but as vehicles filled with power, presence, and potential for actual experiences with the realities they were thought to represent.
identifying the new church as a place where the divine and mundane coexisted and where spiritual ascent and descent from one to the other would occur.\textsuperscript{5} Common elements like these reflected a shared religious culture with few firm boundaries within it.

But other aspects of Netherlandish devotional culture, though flavored by Gothic values, seem to have had exceptional qualities, among which was a “grass roots” impetus. The Beguine movement, for example, which may have had twelfth-century origins, took shape in the thirteenth century and long persisted without formal papal recognition and, at times, against vocal critics. The \textit{devotio moderna} movement promoted by Geert Groote, a scholar and deacon who was extraordinarily popular among laity and much less so among many of his clerical peers, challenged ecclesiastical structures in the late fourteenth century and called for a return to spiritual piety and simplicity. Mendicant preaching, increasing use of vernacular languages in devotional literature, the organization of confraternities, participation in pilgrimages and processions, and formal recognition of the prayer cycle for the rosary contributed to increased religious activity among laity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{6} Processions, festivals, and widely celebrated religious holidays had been regular fixtures for generations. By the time of Burgundian governance, the institutional church was embedded in and surrounded by a robust devotional culture that transcended sacred-secular, clergy-laity, and elite-common divides.

The building of churches became something more than a religious program, profoundly shaping and expressing a town’s identity. It is true that the creation of impressive structures was “a matter of civic pride” and a “means by which urban communities expressed their self-

\textsuperscript{5} A prayer from the dedication liturgy made this connection explicit: “May the ladder of peace and charity soar, and raise all your orthodox to heaven. May this pavement be a place frequented by your holy angels, and commended to us by your blessing; and allow that whosoever should call upon you in prayer upon it may there be made worthy to praise you where, in the church of heaven in your most solemn presence, the festal multitude forever keep the Sabbath to you.” Salisbury, 98. Solomon’s Temple was widely considered to be an earthly prefiguring of the heavenly Jerusalem; Simson, \textit{The Gothic Cathedral}, 11.

\textsuperscript{6} Blockmans and Prevenier, \textit{The Promised Lands}, 224-225.
image.” But as is often the case with modern sociological readings of earlier eras, this explanation does not fully capture the context and significance of civic religion in the Low Countries. It is equally plausible to see the flurry of construction in the fifteenth century—and even the competitive spirit surrounding it—as driven by the desire of a city’s inhabitants to understand or affirm their place in the universe, their spiritual position in the hierarchy of God’s creation. This cosmological perspective reflects a premodern mentality and must be considered at least as relevant as the idea of jockeying for social position, a Durkheimian emphasis that may not have been foremost in medieval minds. Both are accurate; neither stands alone as a sufficient interpretation.

In any case, this fertile devotional climate combined with creative, economic, and political forces to make the invisible visible in Netherlandish religion. The Burgundian dukes poured ample resources into visual and musical arts—to enhance their standing, to be sure, as is so often posited, but perhaps also to convince or reassure themselves of their own place in God’s hierarchies—but they, along with the nobility, merchants, and clergy who followed their example, did not invent this creative environment. They had entered into a fertile “breeding ground” of spiritual and aesthetic imagination that extended back for generations. The desires of elites and citizens for status and prestige among other royal houses and cities, however earthly or heavenly in orientation, worked together to cultivate a flowering of innovative expression that preceded and lasted well after Burgundian rule and, in fact, reached even further under later Habsburg expansion.

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To this point, hardly any of the most prominent artistic innovators in the Burgundian Low Countries were singularly tied to court patronage or any particular genre. Several painters, including Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Memling, and Pierre Coustain, moved to Bruges in the mid-fifteenth century and were commissioned by the court as well as by a variety of other patrons, and composers Gilles Binchois, Antoine Busnois, and Guillaume Dufay transitioned easily between religious and secular music. Burgundian dukes were the most prominent patrons of the arts, but works as varied as stained glass windows, altarpieces, portraits, tapestries, and illustrated manuscripts were commissioned by wealthy citizens, confraternities, monasteries, and a rising bourgeois clientele. The emergence of such a diverse market for arts was unprecedented in northern Europe.

This market was both benefactor and beneficiary of the Burgundian “theater state,” which borrowed heavily from French models and also involved wealthy citizens, institutions, and associations. Lavish festivals served multiple purposes and encompassed entire communities and their interests. For example, the “joyous entry” of Philip the Good into Ghent in 1458 became a spectacle of decorations and dramatizations, as streets filled with colorful draperies, banners, torches, and tableaux vivants carried numerous subtle and not-so-subtle political and religious messages. One tableau vivant dramatized The Adoration of the Lamb, the Ghent altarpiece painted by the van Eycks, which had been commissioned by Philip and was loaded with themes of heavenly and earthly authority that certainly had spiritual implications but might also be read with political undertones. The event simultaneously promoted royal power and prestige, religious

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devotion, spiritual and cultural identities, class cooperation, artistic expression, and civic pride. We might rightly view such a spectacle as propaganda, but it would also be appropriate to ask whether this propaganda was purely an underhanded attempt to secularize the sacred and leverage it for political purposes or, at least in the minds of some participants, the other way around: to sacralize the secular and make the earthly a bit more heavenly. To assume both would not be unreasonable; the former is well attested, but there are hints of the latter in some of Philip’s other actions—for example, his habit of dressing his religious and historical books up to look like liturgical manuscripts, raising them to “a quasi-sacral level.” The spiritual, aesthetic, social cultures of the Burgundian Low Countries were uncompartmentalized and are therefore apt case studies on expressions of heaven on earth.

4.2 The Mobility of the Sacred

Long before Burgundian rule, when Gothic expressions were a relatively new phenomenon in the Low Countries and devotional currents were deepening and turning in new directions, the meaning embedded in liturgy and Eucharist served as rich but limited prompts for contemplation. Though symbolism was accessible to all, participation was not. Liturgy and rituals privileged male clergy above women and laity, whose devotion might run as deep as (or deeper than) that of many secular and regular clergy but had fewer outlets for expression. This is one reason for the multiple mystical experiences and expressions of late medieval women; unable to encounter the presence of Christ as directly as a priest could through conventional means, they discovered means of encountering him outside of prescribed norms. Thirteenth-century religion was significantly less democratic than it became in the following centuries.

13 Blockmans and Prevenier, The Promised Lands, 137.
These gaps between clergy and laity and between male and female created room for several spiritual movements, some of which were mentioned above. The Mosan Psalters, a group of thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century psalters from Liège, and especially the vernacular poems within them, illustrate the deep piety of the times and the increasing fervor for eucharistic experience.\textsuperscript{14} These vernacular texts refer to a paradise indistinct from heaven, where angels dwell for all time; to the bread of life feeding the celestial and earthly company (as in the Eucharist); and to Mary as the gate of paradise, the womb where heaven and earth meet, and the mistress of angels.\textsuperscript{15} The long poem \textit{Ave, Ree de Grant Dulchor} (XX) is filled with the language of paradise, heaven, the church, and Eucharist, all of which converge in Mary. She is the gate of heaven (line 16); supreme in heaven above the angels (lines 26-28); the virgin from whom issued forth resin from which red wine came (through which people find salvation), a gentle spice, a pleasant perfume from the soil of heaven, clearly evoking the language of paradise to describe Mary’s salvific role (37-45, 78-79); the box of white ivory where the king of glory resided, evoking language reminiscent of Solomon’s Temple, churches, and reliquaries, where heaven and earth intersect (99-100); a vessel of gold with diamonds and the ivory throne of Solomon (111-115); the mother of the Creator who both “entered the city” and is the “garden of humility” where trees and fruit grow in abundance—images of the new Jerusalem and paradise (119-128); the body where incarnation took place (140-141); the one who raised the “food of angels and mankind” (153-154); the “most glorious office,” the “holy ark which brings the sweet manna” into this desert, the garden of flowers, the “marvelous miracle,” the “palace of great authority,” the “throne of the new king,” all incorporating language evocative of the church, Eucharist, and

\textsuperscript{14} Barbara R. Walters, Vincent Corrigan, and Peter T. Ricketts, eds., \textit{The Feast of Corpus Christi} (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 429.

\textsuperscript{15} Poem VIII (lines 18-20), in Walters, Corrigan, and Ricketts, \textit{The Feast of Corpus Christi}, 460; Poem XVII (lines 153-154), 479, 484; Poem XIX (lines 1-4), 501, 506.
heaven (164-184); “the gate through which God passed” (191); the “most holy sanctuary” (199); the “glorious tabernacle” (207); the “glorious window,” like stained glass in a Gothic church (215); the “vessel which contained the bread which came down from heaven,” much like a monstrance (223-224); the one who ended bitterness with the honey that came into her from heaven (239-242); the “virgin wet with the celestial dew” (243-245); the glorious dawn in whom the sun rose and gave light to the world (incarnation in paradisiacal terms, 252-255); the “channel of the fountain which came from heaven” (279-280); and the “delightful paradise” (295). In other words, the language of heaven and earthly freely intersect and carry multiple meanings, bringing together the spiritual and material, the divine and human, and the miraculous and mundane in Mary, Christ, and the Eucharist.

Out of this devotional environment, clearly not confined to the church, the Feast of Corpus Christi emerged. Juliana of Mont Cornillon (also Juliana of Liège, ca. 1193-1258), a prioress and visionary deeply moved by the Eucharist and the belief that Christ’s presence was in it, pushed for a feast devoted exclusively to the sacrament. In earlier ages, this idea might have found minimal reception. But in the spiritual environment reflected in the Mosan Psalters—and in a philosophical climate recently inspired by Aristotelian thought, the resolution of debates about the nature of the Eucharist (formalized at the Fourth Lateran Council and its approval of the doctrine of transubstantiation in 1215), and social turbulence—this opportunity for a clearer connection with the divine found a ready audience. The Feast of Corpus Christi was first celebrated in Liège in 1246, accompanied by liturgy and music apparently written by Juliana herself, drawing from various doctrinal sources, including the works of Hugh of St. Victor. The feast had “always existed in the mystery of the Trinity,” Juliana asserted, and prompted by

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visions of assisting Christ at the heavenly altar, she understood her calling to be focused on making this heavenly reality manifest on earth.\textsuperscript{18} As St. Paul had done and Thomas Aquinas would echo, Juliana emphasized the feast aspects of the Eucharist, and “in so doing she could fall back on the Church Fathers who had added a Neoplatonic twist by presenting the Eucharist as the visible, earthly realization of the invisible, heavenly type and by declaring that believers could, in the here and now, take part in the heavenly banquet.”\textsuperscript{19}

The feast “reflects a convergence of Aristotelian philosophy and renewed emphasis on symbols and rituals in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” and was added to the liturgical calendar in 1264 with a new liturgy written by Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{20} Over the next century, what had begun as the personal calling of a single prioress came to be a widely celebrated annual event across Europe involving entire cities and hierarchical processions.

Processions were nothing new, occurring in liturgical cycles at various times throughout the year, including Palm Sunday, in which reenactments of Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem enabled the faithful to identify their own city as the heavenly Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{21} These processions likely served as a template for Corpus Christi processions, but the latter significantly exceeded their model in meaning and scope.\textsuperscript{22} The drama of the faithful envisioning and performing their

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\textsuperscript{20} Walters, Corrigan, and Ricketts, \textit{The Feast of Corpus Christi}, xv.
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\textsuperscript{22} Rubin, \textit{Corpus Christi}, 245.
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city’s connection with heavenly realities took on greater weight in the feast that celebrated the presence of Christ and prefigured the beatific vision.

Perhaps this significance explains the popularity and scale of the celebration. The Eucharist was the central, most foundational ritual of the church and represented not only the presence of Christ but also the sign and means of salvation. It was of cosmic importance and, perhaps better than any other event in the annual cycle, captured the immanence of heaven in the believer’s imagination. It therefore involved multiple sectors of city life both sacred and secular and, celebrated outside in summer months, exported this sacred experience into streets and fields. It was in no way seen to have been secularized by its journey through non-sacred space but rather sacralized the places along its path. Advent and Easter were bigger events on the calendar, but no feast seems to have surpassed Corpus Christi in its far-reaching implications.

An elaborate, portable, church-shaped structure carrying the host and supported by staves was often at the center of Corpus Christi processions—one from Bruges was made of wood, silver, and jewels, and was surrounded by figures of angels—further reinforcing the image of sacred space blessing its less sacred surroundings.\(^\text{23}\) In fact, numerous sacred elements might accompany the host, including crosses, incense, and relics.\(^\text{24}\) The procession began and ended at the altar of the church and followed routes with significance specific to each community. It might make multiple stops so priests, standing under the presence of Christ, could bless certain public or private buildings, boundaries, crops, walls, or any other place of importance to the city, or be taken to sites perceived as important for combatting threats like the plague.\(^\text{25}\) Processions included secular and regular clergy of all ranks and, as civic involvement increased, city leaders

\(^{23}\) Rubin, \textit{Corpus Christi}, 252.  
\(^{24}\) Rubin, \textit{Corpus Christi}, 244-245.  
and administrators, representatives of guilds and fraternities, and others of high social standing. But they were attended by all ranks of people, who saw the festivities as a joyful occasion in spite of the gravity of the presence being honored.

Corpus Christi celebrations in many locations also involved a lot of drama—the formal presentation of biblical plays, cycles that “combined the processional, the didactic, the civic, the competitive, the creative and the fantastic—the array of configurations which only a cosmic theme could bring about.” These productions might be put on by churches, guilds, fraternities, or other social groups. Corpus Christi fraternities met annually around the feast day and, like other fraternities, provided a number of services for members and founded community projects like hospitals or schools. In sum, the feast celebrated the faith’s most universal and significant ritual, taught foundational beliefs through numerous oral and sensory means, and grew over time to involve entire communities and promote the wellbeing of the community. And it represented a strong impulse to bring blessings and experiences of heaven into the earthly realm.

This meaning is most evident in the nature of the feast itself as a celebration of the immanence of Christ at a material point of convergence between heaven and earth. The Corpus Christi liturgies—the original attributed to Juliana and the official attributed to Thomas Aquinas—make repeated references to “the bread of heaven” and the potential of the Eucharist to bridge the distance between spiritual and material realms. Extant versions of the liturgy vary in some details but are consistent in theology. An antiphon in the original Hague manuscript, for example, refers to Christ transporting us “from the visible to the invisible, from the temporal to the eternal, from the terrestrial to the celestial, from the human to the divine”—a thoroughly

26 Rubin, Corpus Christi, 271-272.
27 Rubin, Corpus Christi, 234-235.
Dionysian theme signaling more than mere contemplation of the sacred mystery.\textsuperscript{28} In some places the texts distinguish between earthly and heavenly citizens; in others, they assume a present unity of all.\textsuperscript{29} Throughout, the celestial banquet is enjoyed simultaneously in heaven and on earth, making us “participants of the divine substance.”\textsuperscript{30} And in an intriguing hint at the Eucharist’s capacity to prefigure the beatific vision, a liturgical prayer asks the God “who refreshes us in this mortal life with celestial bread” to grant participants the ability to “always praise the vision of him in eternal glory,” presumably including “now.”\textsuperscript{31} 

The lections preceding musical portions of the manuscripts are drawn from sources including Alcuin, Gratian, and Peter Lombard and build on biblical themes of manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness (bread from heaven), Christ’s identity as the bread of heaven, and of course the Last Supper in which the Eucharistic rite was inaugurated.\textsuperscript{32} The texts pose a question of whether the “bread of angels which man ate and then died” is more precious than Christ’s flesh; “that manna is from heaven, this above heaven. That is of heaven, this of the Lord of heavens.”\textsuperscript{33} In the mystery of this better bread, “the choruses of angels are present, the highest and lowest are joined together, made one out of invisible and visible things . . . the same is both carried off into heaven by the ministry of the angels to be joined to the body of Christ, and is seen before the eyes of the priest on the altar.”\textsuperscript{34} This celestial bread wondrously “gives an end to

\textsuperscript{28} “Et sic de visibilibus ad invisibilia de temporalibus ad eterna ad terrenis ad celestia de humanis ad divina nos transferrat,” Corpus Christi liturgy, MS 70.E.4, National Library of the Netherlands, in Walters, Corrigan, and Ricketts, 152. 
\textsuperscript{29} “Laureata plebs fideles” and “Ad cenam agni,” MS 70.E.4, 180-183; “Ad Magnificat (O sacrum convivium/Magnificat contra Benedictus Dominus Deus patris nostri de sco Bernardo),” BNF 1143, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Walters, Corrigan, and Ricketts, 303. 
\textsuperscript{30} “Responsory: Vere mira/Hoc celesti/Gloria patri,” MS 70.E.4, 161-162. 
\textsuperscript{31} “Oratio,” MS 211.IV, Edinburgh University Library, in Walters, Corrigan, and Ricketts, 414. 
\textsuperscript{32} Ex. 16; John 6.30-59; Mw. 26.26-29. 
\textsuperscript{33} Gratian, De consecratione, Dist. II, can. 69, MS 70.E.4, 120. 
\textsuperscript{34} Gratian, De consecratione, Dist. II, can. 73, MS 70.E.4, 140.
symbols.”35 And, continuing in true Augustinian and Dionysian fashion, “While we acknowledge him to be God visible, we may be drawn by him to the love of invisible things. And therefore with the angels and archangels, thrones and domination, and with all the heavenly hosts, we sing a hymn to your glory.”36

The Eucharist therefore represented a heavenly event on earth, with performances and illustrations highlighting its otherworldly character with images of angels; a miracle-working power as the ultimate “relic,” producing health, protection, prosperity; a preview and experience of heaven through the gaze that brings the viewer face to face with the consecrated host and therefore God himself; and an ever-expanding reach beyond the liturgical setting and into the community—in private prayers in oratories and chapels and in the secular sphere, where “processions extended the impulse to construct hierarchies around the supernatural power of the Eucharist.37

In a very real sense, then, the Feast of Corpus Christi represented an outward thrust of sacred things, a taste of heaven moving from the internal space of the church to the cityscape and countryside, a sacralization of the secular all along the processional route. It trained medieval eyes to see connections between the altar, the seat of government, and the fields; or, more expansively, between heaven and earth not only at the site of dedicated sacred spaces but anywhere the presence of Christ in the consecrated host was carried.

These layers of meaning further reinforce the need to see the social maneuverings surrounding Corpus Christi processions (and all other religious processions) through medieval lenses that make few distinctions between the social and the spiritual. Rubin is surely correct to

36 “Preface,” BNF 1143, 320.
37 Rubin, Corpus Christi, 252, 291, 293, 297-298; Nichols, 51-52.
see “the idiom of privilege and lordship,” articulations of identity, and an “iconography of power” around these processions. And a “penetration of the secular and the civic-political into the eucharistic procession” certainly occurred. But why not also a penetration of the sacred into the secular and political? Idioms of privilege and iconographies of power are social phenomena, but not exclusively so. The period eye must have associated political power and privilege with spiritual status, and vice versa, or articulated personal and group identities not only in comparison with other persons and groups but also in the context of cosmic hierarchies. In a time when earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of God were so readily conflated, any competition for position and prestige must have been felt to apply to visible and invisible realms. For many, the stakes had to have been higher than temporal, transitory satisfaction.

In this light, it is not difficult to see in religious processions a well-developed cosmology, echoes of divine order and hierarchies, images of paradise (as in young children scattering flowers over processional routes), and awareness of a grand, overarching narrative, even if dramatic cycles were performed only in part and not in full. The costly materials that went into ritual articles and canopies may have been intended as displays of power, but what kind of power—earthbound or divinely initiated—remains in question. Such demonstrations of wealth and authority may have signaled attempts to replicate the divine order of things, and disagreements over that order may have been just as theological as they were political. The encroachment of political agendas into the celebrations may have represented an erosion of the sacred, but it may also have represented a desire to sanctify the secular. The use of Corpus Christi-like canopies in the coronations of French, English, and Spanish kings may have been a matter of secular powers coopting religious imagery, but if monarchs were seen as inhabiting a

38 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 240, 243, 259.
39 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 259.
cosmic order, it would make sense for them to share themes of majesty and sounds of music with other divine initiatives. Human nature seeks to validate, legitimize, and affirm what is hoped to be true by acting it out, and any tendentiousness arising on such occasions can reasonably be attributed to competing visions of truth.

4.3 The Ascent through Senses

The multisensory experience of Corpus Christi celebrations followed naturally from earlier developments, specifically the increasingly fragrant and musical performances of liturgy to align it more perfectly with the heavenly template. After all, if angels and elders are currently worshiping in a highly sensory environment and earthly worship is meant to be a matter of joining in, then earthly worship ought to be a richly sensory experience. This was, in fact, a strong emphasis in the Gothic period, with meaning ascribed to virtually every movement and gesture in the Mass, vestments, colors, fragrances, and other sensory perceptions. Medieval theology reflected numerous concerns about the senses because they could lead to all sorts of sins, but they also could lead to encounters with the divine. Theory of the senses, taking cues from Augustine, tended to emphasize sight over other ways of perceiving, as light passing from an object to the human eye was understood to be more than a matter of communicating an image and actually a means of imparting the characteristics of the object being seen. Whether theories of touch, hearing, smell, and taste interpreted them as having the same potential to transform the perceiver is debatable, but textures, sounds, fragrances, and flavors were incorporated into the

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40 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 259.
Mass and other spiritual exercises as signs, not mere symbols. All the elements of the liturgy—its objects, actors, settings, sounds, and garments—were not just representing sacramental realities but more accurately re-presenting them. This distinction implies, for example, that gazing at a portrayal of heaven or a heavenly object, or sensing it in any other way, was not only an effective prompt for meditation but also a meaningful channel for connecting with it and conforming to it.

In discussion of the multisensory performance of heaven, the roles of textures and colors are often neglected. This would include vestments, which communicate both texture and color in addition to their priestly symbolism. Clerical garments likely did not have symbolic meaning at first; they were adapted from common use in late antiquity. But they took on layers of significance in the Middle Ages as interpreters found specific connections with the other world in each article. In his comprehensive study of the Mass, Jungmann became convinced that the preciousness of material and decoration in priestly garments could “have but one meaning: that the priest in a sense leaves this earth and enters another world, the shimmer of which is mirrored in his vesture.” While clergy focused on the earthly side of this connection, Hildegard envisioned the heavenly—different colored clothing for virgins (white clothes, clear shoes), teachers (blue clothes, gold shoes), and martyrs (red clothes, emerald shoes). Some of these line up with conventional thought; white had long signified purity, and red for martyrs was a

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43 Medieval philosophers and theologians understood symbols to be metaphors or analogies and signs to be a more appropriate label for sacraments and other means of grace. Symbols were representations; signs were carriers or transmitters.  
48 Classen, The Color of Angels, 18.
common association. Others did not; blue gained prominence in the twelfth century but was
generally applied to Mary and royalty, not teachers, especially when accented with gold. In any
case, the appearance of garments, often with tactile associations, communicated a convergence
of spiritual and material realms.

Just as meanings had been assigned to eucharistic vestments sometime after their original
use, so meanings associated with incense may have developed over time.\textsuperscript{49} Whereas incense was
used primarily for funerals in the early centuries of the church, it came to represent the
fragrances of heaven.\textsuperscript{50} Incense certainly had biblical models; it figures prominently in the
worship environment of the apocalyptic vision, for example, and early use in Christian worship
would necessarily have been associated with that heavenly scene.\textsuperscript{51} It had also represented prayer
in Hebrew scripture.\textsuperscript{52} But the structures and formulas for its use solidified and were given more
specific meaning in the Middle Ages. In late medieval practice, thurifers frequently swung the
censer three times in the sign of the cross and then three times in a circle to symbolize a heavenly
crown, though considerable variations in censing patterns occurred (Fig. 3b).\textsuperscript{53} Twelfth-century
commentators Rupert of Deutz, Sicardus of Cremona, Hugh of St. Victor, and Honorius of Autun
attached various meanings to each pattern and their placement in the Mass and generally agreed
that incense at some points signified the church’s prayers rising to heaven and the angel of the
Apocalypse who mingled earthly prayers with heavenly incense.\textsuperscript{54} For Thomas Aquinas, incense

\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{49} Atchley, \textit{The Use of Incense}, 155.
\textsuperscript{50} Davidson, \textit{The Iconography of Heaven}, 111. As many have pointed out, particularly pure or saintly people could
be associated with the sweet fragrances of paradise, even after death, their bodies behaving opposite to natural
processes of decay.
\textsuperscript{51} Apoc. 5.8; 8.3-5.
\textsuperscript{52} Ps. 141.2, as well as associations with the wilderness tabernacle and Jerusalem temple.
\textsuperscript{53} Davidson, \textit{The Iconography of Heaven}, 113-114. As noted by Keck, angels in the rose windows of Notre Dame
carry candles and thuribles as if present in the Mass; \textit{Angels and Angelology}, 178.
\textsuperscript{54} Atchley, \textit{The Use of Incense}, 219, 230; Apoc. 8.3-5. Angels often appeared in sculpture holding censers above or
near the altar.
honored the Eucharist and spread the smell of the Son and his grace.\textsuperscript{55} Filling a church with fragrances was therefore “a true foreshadowing of heaven just as its luminescent windows prefigured the glorious light that would unendingly illuminate the place of bliss.”\textsuperscript{56}

\section*{4.4 The Harmonies of Heaven and Earth}

Filling a church with sound was thought to foreshadow and re-present heaven more precisely and concretely. Figures as foundational as Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Gregory the Great had asserted the union of liturgical chants with angelic singing. The \textit{Alleluia} on earth was understood to echo the \textit{Alleluia} in the heavenly Jerusalem; the \textit{Sanctus} joined the angelic exclamations from biblical visions of God’s throne room; the \textit{Gloria} imitated the song of angels at the nativity; and by the Middle Ages, the thrice-repeated \textit{Kyrie} was thought to correspond with the three orders of angels, each comprising three kinds of angelic beings.\textsuperscript{57} Liturgical prompts made the unison of earthly and celestial voices explicit, and some performances of the Mass—like a Sienese ordinal that instructed cantors to ascend the stairs between the choir and presbytery as chants transitioned from penitential laments to joyful alleluias—mimicked this merging of worlds in accordance with Sicard of Cremona’s \textit{Mitrale}.\textsuperscript{58} This unison was especially embraced in monastic communities, where hourly services made the singing of praise almost as constant as that of angels’ never-ceasing voices.\textsuperscript{59} But even in the lay

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Summa Theologiae}, 3a.83.5.2.
\textsuperscript{56} Davidson, \textit{The Iconography of Heaven}, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{57} Apoc. 19.1-6; Is. 6.3; Apoc. 4.8; Luke 2.14. The latter association of the \textit{Kyrie} with orders of angels is referred to in William Durandus and the \textit{Legenda aurea}.
\textsuperscript{58} Benjamin Brand, “Singing from the Pulpit,” in \textit{Music and Culture in the Middle Ages and Beyond: Liturgy, Sources, Symbolism}, edited by Benjamin Brand and David J. Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65. Brand points out the Pistoiese and Florentines did not follow Sicardo’s example in performing the penitential path, 68.
experience, particularly in a Gothic church, those participating in or observing liturgical performance would have seen angels all around in sculpture, glass, painted vaults, and altarpieces, and would have assumed heavenly voices singing in sync with earthly ones.

Though lay singing in churches declined after the twelfth century and became the more exclusive domain of clergy, any human participation was still thought to dissolve “not only the boundaries separating heaven and earth, but also those separating time and eternity, for they participated in the Eternal Mass in the Heavenly Jerusalem.” Not only did monks consider themselves to be participating in angelic worship; they saw their communities as earthly representations or exemplars of the heavenly environment. William Durandus compared monastic orders to the angelic order of cherubim and urged choirs to sing loudly and beautifully to reflect the angelic nature of their chants.

The convergence of heaven and earth through music occurred not only in liturgical settings but in other religious singing too, sometimes in a human voice that sounded angelic, in visionary encounters, or in near-death experiences or toward the end of fatal diseases. Mechtild of Hackeborn thought herself to be not only an observer of saints and angels singing in heaven but also a participant—antiphonal songs involving herself, angels, and even the Trinity. She believed heaven’s singing to be structured like a Mass but not experienced only during an earthly Mass.

Closely related to singing were other religious activities that went along with it—processions and dance, for example, which could carry similar associations with angelic

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60 Sheingorn, “The Te Deum Altarpiece,” 179.
61 Hammerstein, Die Musik der Engel, 32, 36-37.
62 Hammerstein, Die Musik der Engel, 44.
participation. Processions into the church were perceived as an entry into the heavenly home, and clergy or singers in white robes suggested angelic observers.\textsuperscript{64} Processions outside the church on saints’ days or in Corpus Christi observance linked movement and song in proximity to relics or the Eucharistic host, both of which were seen as connecting points between worlds. And mystical visions were full of leaping and dancing that could or should, according to some, be imitated on earth.\textsuperscript{65} Dance formations could contain deep symbolism—circles implying unity and initiation into the fellowship, the direction of rotation suggesting either the corrupt world (counterclockwise) or the heavenly realm (clockwise).\textsuperscript{66} Some of these perceptions were peculiar to certain kinds of Christians (like mystics), but the idea of heaven and earth uniting in certain activities, spaces, and liturgical practices was almost universally accepted among the faithful.

Though this connection of material and spiritual realms through music had roots in early patristic theology, it was given philosophical underpinning by the thought of Boethius. Boethius’ mathematical approach to music theory, which was solidly based on Pythagorean concepts, had an enormous influence on medieval theorists, who included music in the quadrivium (with mathematics, geometry, and astronomy) and utilized the proportions of intervals in ways that are still being uncovered.

Citing Plato’s assertion that “the soul of the universe was composed according to musical harmony,” Boethius assigned music to three main categories.\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Musica mundana} was the unheard physical, cosmic music of the spheres, elemental structures, and seasonal sequences; \textit{musica humana} was the unheard harmony in the human body and the harmony and balance

\textsuperscript{64} Hammerstein, \textit{Die Musik der Engel}, 49.
\textsuperscript{65} Hammerstein, \textit{Die Musik der Engel}, 48; Richard of St. Victor urged mystics to mimic the celestial dancing observed by visionaries.
\textsuperscript{66} Hammerstein, \textit{Die Musik der Engel}, 48-49.
\textsuperscript{67} Boethius, \textit{De institutione musica} 1.1, translated by James Garceau, Kevin Long, Susan Burnham, Michael Waldstein, and Thomas McGovern.
between the body and soul; and *musica instrumentalis*, the only sort human ears could hear, was sounded by voices and instruments.\(^68\) He added a fourth, *musica divina*, to accommodate the possibility of music of gods and angels, which transcended the material nature of the other three categories. In all, ratios were significant; in audible music, they reflected the differences between consonance and dissonance. Octaves, fourths, and fifths were considered the strongest consonances in creating a sense of unity, which served as “the mirror image of the heavenly order and differentiation.”\(^69\) Music originated in God-given design and was governed by fixed laws of numbers and proportions. For Boethius and many medieval theorists, musical works were not simply to be enjoyed but to be understood “by what ratio of sounds they are joined among themselves.”\(^70\)

In both Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought, Boethius’ theory of music reflected long-accepted divine hierarchies—the influence of superior agents (like moving heavenly spheres) on inferior agents on earth. The thought of human will being shaped by cosmic forces was not acceptable, but human bodies and other earthly materials and elements could be.\(^71\) So if human life was in some sense influenced by celestial consonances, as was believed, human expression should follow suit—a concept that provided a suitable foundation for the parallel octaves, fourths, and fifths so regularly applied in early polyphony. Later polyphony pushed well beyond those boundaries of harmony, but never very far; dissonances were always used in passing and had to be quickly resolved by consonances that were pleasing to the ear and dictated by heavenly order.\(^72\)

\(^{68}\) Boethius, 1.2.

\(^{69}\) Boethius, 1.3; 1.27.

\(^{70}\) Boethius, 1.1.


\(^{72}\) For many an implicit understanding, this was explicitly stated in John of Garland’s *De mensurabili musica* and the anonymous treatise *Septum sunt species discantus principales*, the latter of which identifies only three perfect
Boethian musical theory resonated powerfully with mystically oriented theologian-philosophers like Hugh of St. Victor, who understood “the arts” (philosophy in general, each branch of the quadrivium in particular) to “restore within us the divine likeness.”\(^73\) Hildegard expressed a common perception that earth’s misalignment with heaven after the fall was evident in its discordant sounds, and her liturgical songs, “Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations,” sought to produce the divine harmonies she had experienced in her visions.\(^74\) Human music, if brought into \textit{symphonia} and \textit{harmonia} with angelic music, was part of the Holy Spirit’s transformative process for the church.\(^75\) Boethian theory also resonated with the mentality that produced Gothic architecture, which articulated mathematical, proportional precision even more overtly. Musical harmony was understood not only to aid contemplation—a central focus of medieval spirituality—but often to reveal divine order and anagogically draw hearers into it.

Earthly music, then, evoked the immanence of heaven both mathematically and symbolically, a belief requiring considerable reimagining as polyphony became increasingly complex. Early forms of polyphony fit straightforwardly into Boethian and medieval theory. Early forms of mensural polyphony, which emerged within the first two generations of the Gothic movement in the Île-de-France, became more formalized over the next century and prompted specific instruction in the new artistic forms, specifically regarding the movement of intervals (unison, octave, and fifth) and four (fourth, major and minor third, major sixth) that need to be resolved with perfect intervals; Sarah Fuller, “Discant and the Theory of Fifthing.” \textit{Acta Musicologica} 50 Fasc. 1/2 (1978), 262.


voices in parallel or opposite directions of the melody. Motets created numerical possibilities—and therefore symbolism—that had not previously been explored. Over time, especially in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Boethius’ belief that music should be understood as well as enjoyed gained increasing relevance.

The Burgundian court both supported and benefited from perceptions of music having divine links, and its promotion of religious compositions, along with works of visual art, served both to legitimate its Low Country rule and encourage polyphonic innovations. Polyphony had been performed in Burgundy in the fourteenth century, before Philip the Bold inherited the Low Countries by marriage, and it seems to have progressed from improvisation to written, mensural composition over the next century. This evolution was aided by court culture, which at least by the latter years of Philip the Good involved a permanent staff of musicians whose role it was to create and perform works for religious services, feast days, weddings, funerals, and other significant events. Court employment was more profitable than church patronage, drawing the most accomplished musicians and artists, and a move from itinerancy to residency allowed for more dedicated focus on impressive, complex works. Court musicians performed daily polyphonic Masses as well as daily services for Vespers and Compline. The cultural achievements of musicians and artists were prominent features of the dukes’ theater state, which in time served their interests as creators as well as it served the dukes’ interests as rulers.

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78 Honey Meconi, Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life at the Habsburg-Burgundian Court (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9, 133.
79 Blockmans and Prevenier, The Promised Lands, 228; Meconi, 91, notes that composers before the rule of Charles the Bold had been hired as performers, not as creators, though they did produce many new works), and few patrons at the time, including the court, did not consider it important to recognize individuals for sacred work.
80 Meconi, Pierre de la Rue, 15, 19, 59; Blockmans and Prevenier, The Promised Lands, 223-225.
81 Meconi, Pierre de la Rue, 127.
82 Meconi, Pierre de la Rue, 59; Foley, From Age to Age, 209.
From the reign of Charles the Bold (1467-1477), the court chapel seems to have matured and come to function as complete unit that allowed the duke to hear Mass, receive the sacrament, and attend daily hours as desired. Meanwhile, its composer-directors expanded on established models, constructed elaborations on earlier plainchant, widened vocal ranges, and also composed secular works that were often based on popular songs. Compositional practices within the Habsburg-Burgundian court chapel came to be considered in the early sixteenth century among the finest anywhere and gained prominence across Europe. The Flemish polyphonists “revitalized European music” by their harmonies, instrumentation, expressiveness, and thematic coherence in large works like masses.

As many innovations do, this revitalization raised a lot of questions. Those questions were not entirely new; even in its early years with Léonin and Pérotin (ca. 1160), polyphony was a risk-reward endeavor. It might “astonish” and “enervate” the souls of hearers, “confer[ring] joy and peace and exultation in God, and transport[ing] the soul to the society of angels,” or it might devolve into bad taste and mere excitation when done in excess—a perception that eventually invited papal censure. But the concerns of many focused on more unearthly implications than the difference between entertainment versus devotion. If humans were joining in angelic song, as was widely believed, and human music was become more complex, contrapuntal, and unconventional, was it still in harmony with the sounds of heaven? This thought became the basis of criticisms among those most invested in liturgical performance and may have led to the

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83 Meconi, Pierre de la Rue, 59.
84 Blockmans and Prevenier, The Promised Lands, 228-229.
rejection of new forms in some places. If earthly and angelic liturgy were no longer in sync, the fundamental nature of the Mass was threatened.

Yet the possibilities for deeper connections with heavenly themes were intriguing. Greater complexity allowed for more layers of meaning and more opportunities for richer, fuller expression. More structure offered an occasion for more structural symbolism. As with the iconographic complexities of Gothic culture, polyphonic music with multiple voices moving along contrapuntal and polytextual lines could convey messages loaded with more significance. Symbolism became more deliberate and deeply embedded in compositions that modern scholars are still exploring.

For example, David Rothenberg has identified a motet from around 1300 in which the composer employed wordplay with *portas* to mean “gates” in some textual lines and “you carry” in others, merging Mary’s role as a gate between heaven and earth (as in the Mosan Psalter poems) and her role in carrying Christ, each evoking heaven’s immanence in many cathedrals, masses, feasts, and other events dedicated to Marian devotion. While this textual pun is being carried out, the rhythmic pattern of the motet repeats seven temporal units, incorporating a number long associated with perfection (heaven) and Mary (the queen of heaven). The imagery aligns remarkably with the Assumption portal at Notre Dame of Paris, above which Mary is portrayed as queen of heaven, holding Jesus, thereby evoking the two themes of the motet—the one who carries is also a gateway into the heavenly environment.

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86 Hammerstein, *Die Musik der Engel*, 33.
90 Rothenberg, “The Gate that Carries Christ,” 237.
More than a century later, the structure of Guillaume Dufay’s motet *Nuper rosarum flores* for the consecration of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (1436) contains deeply embedded symbolism pointing to Solomon’s temple—in ancient Israel, a connecting point between heaven in earth; in medieval Christianity, a symbol of the church; in both cultures, a place where God would make his presence known. Dufay had come from the Burgundian court and was well familiar with northern liturgies that incorporated Solomon’s prayer of dedication in lessons at Matins, and he filled many of his works with Solomonic imagery. Craig Wright has identified Solomonic references in the structure of *Nuper rosarum flores*, which is governed by a ratio of 6:4:2:3 (its isorhythmic design) and the numbers 4 x 7 and 2 x 7 (reflecting the duration of each section and structure of the text). Once thought to reflect the dimensions of Santa Maria del Fiore, these figures rather align precisely with the proportional dimensions of Solomon’s temple, which was begun in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign, took seven years to complete, was dedicated in the seventh month of the year in a ceremony that took two weeks (the biblical text literally says, “seven days and seven days, fourteen days”). According to Giovanni Cambi, the pope granted to everyone attending the consecration indulgences “of seven years and seven forty days,” and the Signoria pardoned and released fourteen (two sevens) condemned prisoners. And Giannozzo Manetti, aware of the proportions of Solomon’s temple (which he referred to elsewhere), wrote that the voices and instruments in this Florentine “temple” sounded like angels, as if divine paradise had been sent from heaven to earth.

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92 Wright, “Dufay’s ‘Nuper rosarum flores’,” 397-400.
94 Wright, “Dufay’s ‘Nuper rosarum flores’,” 429.
Jacob Obrecht’s motet *Laudemus nunc Dominum*, a dedication Mass written six decades after Dufay’s Mass for Santa Maria del Fiore, followed a similar logic but with different emphases. With a tripartite structure, he hinted at the rhetorical strategy of a thematic sermon—and also an analogy between sacred songs and sermons in the *Legenda aurea*—to “preach” a familiar story: Jacob’s dream, in which angels ascended and descended on a ladder between heaven and earth.⁹⁶ Dufay’s motet had begun with a text from that biblical story: “*Terribilis est locus iste*” (“How awesome is this place”). Obrecht began with the next part of the verse: “*Non est hic aliud nisi domus Dei et porta celi*” (“This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven”).⁹⁷ Obrecht dramatized the text with an ascent up the scale in the tenor melody at *summitas eius celos tangebat* (“the top thereof touched heaven”) and a descent in the contratenor at *descendentes* (“were descending”).⁹⁸ A musical “language” or “iconography” had developed the capacity to express thoughts and themes as rich and meaningful as cathedrals and visual arts had done.

For those who associated beautiful polyphony with sweet heavenly sounds, and for those who recognized and appreciated the structural, numerical, linguistic, and melodic subtleties as reflective of cosmic order and design or biblical themes, complex works were understood to draw imaginations and souls heavenward. For those who were rather irritated that *cantus firmi*, the dominant melodies and texts derived from precedents (most often plainchant), could no longer be discerned amid the many voices, there was nothing heavenly about the new works. The purpose of chant, though it was valued for its consonances, had always been to express the words within it. When those words became obscured, purists objected. It was one thing for court

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⁹⁷ Gen. 28.17; Bloxam, “Preaching to the Choir,” 266-267.
⁹⁸ Gen. 28.12; Bloxam, “Preaching to the Choir,” 282.
musicians to introduce innovations in a royal chapel, another for those innovations to influence the styles of music performed in churches. Simple counterpoints had long been appreciated—they expressed those highly valued Boethian proportions—but complex, interwoven melodies and texts threatened the simplicity and purity of traditional sounds, which is why John XXII forbade certain kinds of polyphony in 1324. The devil was thought to enjoy discordance for its contradictions to sweet, harmonious sounds of heaven. Composers and performers of polyphony felt considerable pressure to make their music beautifully celestial.\(^9^9\)

The voices against polyphonic, polytextual religious works had long made a reasonable case. They argued that, in its simplicity, plainchant had an otherworldly sound that aided contemplation and carried spiritual power.\(^1^0^0\) Moreover, polyphony was expensive and therefore considered wasteful—it required the hiring of many voices and often many instrumentalists to go with them—and gave the impression of ostentatious indulgence, frivolity, luxury, vanity, even decadence. Some felt it might even be a tool of Satan to lure souls into damnation.\(^1^0^1\)

But defenders of polyphony could turn some of those arguments around to support their case. To some, the beauty and complexity of the sound was just as otherworldly as plainchant, perhaps even more so. After all, if the universe was ruled by harmonious proportions, more harmonies would align more closely with divine design, and those opposed to all but the simplest harmonies might be out of tune with nature.\(^1^0^2\) Lapo da Castiglionchio, for example, wrote that “divine hymns and songs sung with different and diverse voices” could carry a listener beyond

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\(^1^0^0\) Dominican friar Giovanni Caroli made this argument as late as 1479, echoing the sentiments of many; Wegman, 34.

\(^1^0^1\) Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 30-49.

\(^1^0^2\) French composer Carpentras, for example, asserted in his preface to *Liber hymnorium*, ca. 1532, that the celestial harmony of church music inspired piety; Wegman, *The Crisis of Music*, 35-36, 77.
rational, earthbound thoughts and into the heights “at the tables of the Gods.”103 Around 1470, Gilles Carlier urged the praise of harmonious music and its “sweet melodies” for the sake of God’s glory, human salvation, and becoming worthy of the fellowship of angels.104 Johannes Tinctoris, a late-fifteenth-century composer of polyphony, argued that music could turn the mind toward heaven and align the church militant on earth with the church triumphant in heaven, but only those who understood the structure and design of music rather than simply hearing sounds could enjoy those benefits.105

Rob Wegman has observed a late-fifteenth-century shift in the understanding of music, in which “sweetness of sound” was no longer sufficient in itself; the music had to be understood to be appreciated. Before about 1470, sweet sounds (i.e., consonances) could be perceived as divine; Boethian proportions could be heard even if not comprehended, just as other divine mysteries like the Eucharist could be experienced without being understood.106 Nicholas of Cusa, for example, argued that rational souls can discern the perfection of the numbers on which pleasing polyphony was based even without being aware of any logic to the music and only enjoying the sound of it.107 Harmonious consonances could mimic heaven and repel demons.108 As Giannozzo Manetti remarked upon hearing Dufay’s dedicatory Mass for Santa Maria del Fiore, without reference to the symbolism within its structure, the diverse instruments and

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104 Gilles Carlier, Tractatus de duplici ritu cantus ecclesiastici, in Wegman, Crisis of Music, 49-50.
105 Johannes Tinctoris, Complexus effectuum musices, in Wegman, 53; Opera theoretica, in Corpus Scriptorum de Musica, 22, ed.Albert Seay (N.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1975-78), 67-68.
harmonies of that very elaborate work sounded angelic, like “an incredible celestial sweetness.”  

But in the 1470s, discourse on music took on a different tone—a depreciation of mere sweetness of sound and greater emphasis on understanding, with the perception that the casual or uninformed listener could not really discern whether music was “good” or not because only the initiated could fully appreciate its worth. Tinctoris’ comments on learning to understand and appreciate angelic songs were characteristic of the new perspective. There was a correct way to listen and judge a musical work. Listening properly took on an aura of elitism.

Perhaps this elitism helps explain the controversy over polyphony that reemerged in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Voices as diverse as those of Erasmus and Savonarola expressed contempt for music that obscures words, and both appealed to heaven’s perspective. Lamenting the fact that polyphony had found its way even into monasteries, Erasmus scoffed at the idea that the Virgin might consider something amiss if her own daily Mass did not include diverse voices, which were unknown in antiquity, though he also lamented that plainchant was sometimes sung with such tedium that it wore out its listeners. In his comments, he confessed not knowing what heavenly singing was like or how the angels had sung at the nativity, but their words were understood and their songs must have been lively. For his part, Savonarola insisted that God did not want the uproar or even the beauty of elaborate music on feast days because singers with big voices were like calves surrounded by crying dogs, and no one could

109 Manezzi, Oratio, 81-82.
make out a word. God would not listen to organs but only to the plainchant ordained by the church.113 The earthly music of presumptuous singers was not aligned with the music of heaven.

But defenders of elaborate polyphony appealed to heaven’s template too. Alberto Pio, in contending that Erasmus’ attack on some forms of church music amounted to an attack on all of it, argued that angelic choirs could scarcely do proper justice to sacred mysteries, seeming to imply that human beings were in no danger of exceeding heavenly norms, no matter how complex their music might be.114 Even a sixteenth-century legend about angels dictating Palestrina’s Missa Papae Marcelli to him and thereby impressing cardinals enough to save church music depended on the belief that music was initiated in heaven. Granted, much of the rhetoric regarding the virtues of polyphony versus those of plainchant or simple consonances did not invoke celestial patterns, but the fact that some did suggests that this appeal to absolutes was usually somewhere in the background of the discussion. These arguments were frequently framed in terms of whether a particular kind of music was inspiring or uninspiring, spiritually powerful or fruitless, a matter of harmony and order as opposed to a matter of dissonance and disorder. To medieval and early modern minds, these were otherworldly issues.

Because the highest concentration of Europe’s finest creators of musical works was in northern France and the Low Countries, and because Low Country composers were initially far more influential in Renaissance Italian music than Italian composers were, debates across Europe about musical innovations can be traced back to the religious culture of that region. The fact that at least one of the lines of debate, even if not the most prominent one, centered on the question of which kinds of music resounded in heaven tells us that the convergence of spiritual and material

114 Alberto Pio, Ad Erasmi Roterodami expostulationem responsio 1:258-259.
realms was important to many. Establishing connections with celestial realms was on the minds of culture’s most prominent influencers.

4.5 The Art of Gazing at Heaven

This preoccupation was clearly evident in visual arts. Sometimes art and music merged, as in paintings that depicted the Mass with earthly choirs and angels singing together. Iconographic representations of music in heaven generally came from either the Apocalypse or the Psalter, the first of which depicted elements of a heavenly liturgy (but may have been intended as non-liturgical representations), the second of which commonly contained illustrations of eight psalms, three of which used musical imagery. In many cases, this imagery may have been incidental—of course angels would be singing or holding instruments; that is what angels do—but on occasion may have been employed to reflect local preferences or make a statement about instrumentation or numbers of voices.

Representations of heaven diversified significantly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Conventional scenes of the faithful and angels gazing at the Father and the Son (and often Mary), frequently in concentric circles or other categorizing arrangements, continued. So did images of the squared heavenly Jerusalem with twelve gates, a worthy model for many artists in portraying their own cities, or for city leaders to mention in statutes wherever certain features of their cities aligned with that template. But more unconventional representations of the empyrean also appeared—Hieronymus Bosch’s Ascent of the Blessed, for example, in which unclothed humans are carried by angels into a conical portal from darkness on one side to white

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light on the other (Fig. 4.1). Often, as would be expected, a gateway between heaven and earth was placed in an ecclesiastical setting, as in Hans Memling’s *The Last Judgment* altarpiece, in which lines of humans (again unclothed) pass into golden light through a cathedral portal as welcoming angels give them robes and others play music above them (Fig. 4.2). The connection between heaven and earth within sacred space was ubiquitous, notably in the *Très riches heures* miniature of Christmas Mass at the Sainte-Chapelle (Fig. 4.3) and Rogier van der Weyden’s triptych of *The Seven Sacraments*, where each sacrament taking place in the church—in “eternal” time, as they appear simultaneously—is accompanied by a hovering angel holding a banner with text relevant to that particular sacrament (Fig. 4.4). The sacramental impartation of grace was understood to occur through visible signs (water, oil, the Eucharistic host, etc.), and one sacrament (extreme unction) almost never took place in a church, but van der Weyden’s altarpiece depicts a convergence of realms and a coordination of human and divine activity.

But the incursion of the heavenly into the earthly was commonly displayed outside of sacred space too—most conventionally in scenes of the Annunciation or Nativity (Figs. 4.5, 4.6), but also in mystic or fantastic scenes like the central panel of the Ghent altarpiece, Hubert and Jan van Eyck’s *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (Fig. 2.1), or Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut from *The Apocalypse* of Michael defeating Satan and his angels, with the war in heaven taking place over a tranquil town and countryside, a dramatic juxtaposition of heaven and earth asserting that intense conflict occurs even behind mundane affairs (Fig. 4.7).
Figure 4.1. Hieronymus Bosch, Ascent of the Blessed, Doge’s palace, Venice, c. 1504.
The empyrean was often represented as a bright, unearthly light—a challenge for artists, and one in which no details could be added without violating theological sensibilities. The most frequent approach seems to have been capturing the gaze of those beholding this beatific vision. Here, Bosch has the blessed ascending into it with the help of angels. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Figure 4.2. Hans Memling, Last Judgment, c. 1470.
Commissioned by Angelo di Jacopo Tani, a Medici banker in Bruges. People in the left panel enter through a cathedral portal into the golden light of the afterlife after being clothed by angels. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Figure 4.3. Limbourg Brothers, “Christmas Mass,” manuscript illustration, Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, c. 1412-1416.

The scene within cathedral space shows parallel activity—the earthly Mass taking place in the humanly visible realm, angels participating from above in the humanly invisible realm. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Figure 4.4. Rogier van der Weyden, The Seven Sacraments, altarpiece for church in Poligny, c. 1450.

The seven sacraments are taking place in earthly activity but in “eternal time,” simultaneously displayed, with heavenly activity depicted over each, all centered around the crucifixion. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Figure 4.5. Robert Campin, Annunciation (Mérode Altarpiece), c. 1427-1432. The imagery includes references to the Eucharist (the table as altar, Gabriel wearing vestments of a deacon), the virgin birth (the divine penetrating an enclosed room, the hortus conclusus outside), Mary as rose (the folds of her garment), and the throne of Solomon (lion finials on the bench). Liège is visible through the right windows. (This image is in the public domain. This file was donated to Wikimedia Commons as part of a project by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and made available under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

Figure 4.6. Workshop of Rogier van der Weyden, Nativity, mid-fifteenth century. The nativity story provided a clear biblical precedent for envisioning celestial activity in ordinary places—granted, in this case, in an exceptional event, but nevertheless outside of sacred space. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
At the earthly level, the town and landscape are at peace. At the celestial level, a fierce conflict between good and evil is taking place, with angels waging war against satanic forces. Few Catholics believed that the apocalyptic battle was raging beyond their view, but most believed that lesser spiritual conflict was continually going on behind the scenes of earthly life. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Jan Provoost’s *Sacred Allegory*, a surreal image that poses numerous interpretive challenges, is a fascinating depiction of interaction between heavenly and earthly realms (Figs. 4.8, 4.9). At the top is an eye in heaven; at bottom is an eye looking up, presumably from earth. From behind the clouds surrounding the eye above, God’s hand extends with earth in his grasp, with Jesus and Mary at each side, a figure of a lamb next to Jesus and the dove of the Holy Spirit in Mary’s lap. Only a close look reveals the subtle details of nine choirs of angels surrounding heaven’s eye, in keeping with Dionysian hierarchies. As enigmatic as the painting is, it clearly represents a blending of heavenly and earthly realms and conveys a message about interaction between them.

Interpreters differ on exactly what that message is, but Geert Warner argues convincingly that the painting represents themes also found in the mystical devotional writings of Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec, and Nicholas of Cusa.116 Eckhart had written that “the eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me,” and Nicholas believed that seeing God in the mirror of eternity means “seeing oneself being seen by God”—a concept that sheds light on Dürer’s famous self-portrait in which he seemed to be nearly deifying himself by casting himself in the image of Jesus but more likely was attempting to depict this divine mirror in which human beings can only truly understand themselves by gazing into the face of Christ.117 In any case, the human gaze, with hands awkwardly extending from the lower eye, meets the divine gaze in Provoost’s allegory, as Jesus and Mary sit in mediating positions. The world is central but small, implying that everything else happening in the painting is outside of it—an otherworldly activity

117 Warnar, “Eye to Eye,” 205, 212. Whether Provoost painted with these works in mind is very possible but uncertain; he was, however, familiar with a devotional culture that was influenced by them.
in which human and divine elements occupy the same space. It is a startling image of heaven on earth but outside of it, or humanity in heaven but only through the mirrored gaze between God and the blessed. It roots contemplation in the spiritual realm, acknowledging the contemplative process as something much more than mere thoughts. As Neoplatonic mystics and many monastic thinkers had long assumed, meditating on divine matters could pull the human soul into them.

Figure 4.8. Jan Provoost, Sacred Allegory, c. 1510-1515.

The original patron and purposes of this work are not known, but its size (40 x 50 cm) suggests that it was intended for private devotion. The disarming imagery provides numerous opportunities for interpretive angles; the eyes (of God above and humanity or the viewer below) suggest a devotional understanding of north European contemplatives: that seeing God in the mirror of eternity implies seeing oneself being seen by God. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Visual representations of heaven, then, had enormous power, even in private devotion. In Books of Hours, the entire celestial court, including the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Mary, and orders of angels, could be held in one’s hands at home. The visual iconography of the fifteenth-century Netherlands, developed among figures like Campin and van der Weyden, repeatedly show Mary interacting with the divine messenger and reading devotional works in domestic interiors common to the Low Countries, not because artists could only envision the Annunciation in their own context but because this context was understood to be a common locus of human-divine interaction. In placing Mary there, “domestic Madonna scenes identify

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118 Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: George Brazziler, 1999), 22. Campin’s *Mérode Altarpiece* and van der Weyden’s *Annunciation Triptych* are prime examples of this domestic-divine convergence. The subject (the Annunciation) was understood to be a unique event; the settings the suggest transferability of meditational encounters with the divine into homes.

her with daily home life rather than with ecclesiastical institutions, as if the living rooms of private homes were just as appropriate places as church interiors for the Holy Family to enter.”

Sacred space was not limited to the church or monastery, as it perhaps had been in the past. It could be defined by the devotion or heavenly presence that took place, wherever that happened to be. Or, to put it another way, common space could be sacralized by the activity that occurred there, and that activity could not be exclusively human. It had to include otherworldly presence.

Whether devotion and its implications were public or private, contemplation was understood to be more than thought processes. While Neoplatonism tended toward the unknowability of God, the Aristotelian influence in Thomism and then Dante emphasized the *visio Dei*, the experience of seeing him. This eternal gaze could only be fully enjoyed in the ultimate destination of the faithful, but it could be experienced in part by gazing at the Eucharistic host and by contemplating the images and sounds (as well as scents and textures) of heaven—in church or well beyond it. Those images and sounds took on new hues and tones in the Burgundian Low Countries, where they were invested with greater meaning, depth, and complexity in their expression of the world beyond.

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120 Neuchterlein, “The Domesticity of Sacred Space,” 62.
5 THE SOCIETY OF HEAVEN:
CIVIC ITALY

When Florence’s ecclesiastical and municipal leaders were organizing the consecration ceremony for the cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore, they called upon Guillaume Dufay to compose a motet for the event. There was good reason for that; the Franco-Flemish school of musicians comprised most of Europe’s preeminent composers of the fifteenth century. Italy had accomplished composers too, but the true innovators stretching the possibilities of polyphony and symbolic structures further—the architectonic design employed by Dufay in this case for *Nuper rosarum flores*, for example—came primarily from northern France and the Burgundian Low Countries. Among many other examples, northern music counters popular perceptions of Italy’s Renaissance giving its cultural advances to the rest of Europe without receiving many in return.

In fact, Franco-Flemish culture exported a variety of influences to the rest of Europe, including northern Italy. Its art was often commissioned and disseminated by Italian merchants and bankers working in the Low Countries like Tommaso Portinari, head of the Medici bank in Bruges; and the “new style” of painters like Rogier van der Weyden and the van Eycks was appreciated and adapted for use by some Italian artists.\(^1\) The predominantly Burgundian court artists and chapel musicians of Emperor Charles V were considered the finest of the first half of the sixteenth century and made an impression on many observers throughout his travels. Marin Cavalli, the Venetian ambassador at his court, thought Charles’s chapel to be the best in

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Christendom. Religious influences from the north had long preceded these creative expressions, taking on Italian characteristics while incorporating French and Low Country innovations. For example, northern Italians had already cultivated a robust tradition of colorful and extravagant processionals before the feast of Corpus Christi was embraced by the church in the late duecento, but the sacramental emphasis of this northern import offered a unique annual occasion to reframe the sacrality of the urban environment and its social strata. And, of course, Gothic influences made an impact on Italian architecture—Santa Maria del Fiore, for example—even as key elements of northern style were substituted with more classical forms or preferred symbolism.

Like both native and imported religious and artistic forms, the impulses embedded in them—including the impulse to replicate celestial order and meaning in earthly expressions—were embraced, cultivated, and adapted in the unique environment of late medieval and early modern Italy. They also took on new philosophical and social characteristics and incorporated diverse influences within that environment to shape civic religion (or religious civicism), provide models for urban space, inspire mathematically precise visual creations, and perhaps contribute to the volatile politics of the age.

5.1 Hybridizations of Heavens

Roman and Byzantine-influenced churches of Italy had always been intended as structures designed to host the presence of heaven, but not with the intensity and to the degree that Gothic architecture and iconography normally evoked the other world. The beginnings of Gothic-influenced construction in Florence—Santa Maria Novella (1279), Santa Croce (1294),

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Santa Maria del Fiore (1299), and the Palazzo Vecchio (1299)—therefore signified something more than a preference of style. Gothic forms themselves were not always well received in Italy, where they might be seen as alien to the culture, but their intensely meaning-laden character must have come to represent for many a rejection of worldly ways in favor of otherworldly aspirations. Giotto’s use of Gothic has been interpreted as an affirmation of “virtuous” style and an anticipation of “heavenly architecture” and his work in the Scrovegni Chapel as a representation of the heavenly Jerusalem. The classical revival may have moved away from these Gothic sensibilities, but it was by no means a rejection of their meaning or a secularization of Renaissance society. Circular church architecture came with its own celestial symbols—circles representing eternity, the rings and spheres of the cosmos, and the empyrean beyond the material universe—and even the Medici church of San Lorenzo (c. 1420) included winged, non-classical cherubs as echoes of Solomon’s temple and heaven’s realms. Gothic and classical styles lived side by side in Venice, and Rome’s classicism could not have signified a radical secularization of society in the shadow of the ecclesiastical head. In many respects, Italian architectural forms may have been attempts to align visual culture with the literary culture of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Or, as Onians puts it, “Brunelleschi and Michelozzo were indeed Dante’s heirs.”

Dante himself was a master synthesizer of diverse influences. He incorporated classical figures, myths, and philosophy into his Commedia, and was very possibly inspired by Islamic models of story and thought, even while thoroughly embracing traditional Christian theologies.

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4 Onians, Bearers of Meaning, 116, 119.
5 Onians, Bearers of Meaning, 127.
6 Onians, Bearers of Meaning, 132, 146.
and blending them into a coherent picture of heaven. He also inherited a rich, visual vocabulary regarding the afterlife that lent itself to literary description and poetic imagery. How much of his vision of heaven was consciously synthesized from Christian, classical, and Islamic sources is not always clear. In some respects, the work of synthesis had already been done for him in Gothic style, scholastic philosophy, and ongoing scholarly engagement with Neoplatonism. But certain images, embellishments, and concepts are certainly his, and his ability to make the conceptual tangible provided inspiration for generations of intellectuals and artists.

Dante’s cosmology was, of course, a product of many centuries of philosophical and theological understanding. The Ptolemaic/Aristotelian universe consisted of nested, rotating spheres; Christian doctrine had added a sphere (or spheres) beyond the material universe that explained the primum mobile (the “first mover” of planetary spheres) and the empyrean (the abode of God in which perfected souls can see or encounter him), all of which structure Dante’s journey in Paradiso. Natural and supernatural realms overlap, aligning with Platonic and biblical assumptions that the material world is a shadow of immaterial realities—for example, the geocentric universe as a lesser image of the theocentric universe, the music of the spheres that order human life as an echo of angelic songs that resound in heaven, or human beings being made in and remade into the likeness of God.

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7 Aristotle had reentered European intellectual life in the twelfth century through Islamic vehicles, specifically the commentaries of Averroës, to whom Dante refers in Inferno 4.144; and similarities between the Commedia and the Kitāb al-Miʿrāj (Ascension of Muhammad) have frequently been noted. Whether Dante was exposed to Islamic works directly or as mediated by Latin scholars remains unclear, but strong evidence points to some degree of influence.

8 John Saly points out that “though Dante quotes freely from Aristotle and from St. Thomas Aquinas, the philosophy embodied in the Comedy could not be called either Thomist or Aristotelian. . . . Dante’s way of thinking has really much more in common with Plato. The work of Bruno Nardi has made it abundantly clear that the Paradiso is thoroughly imbued not so much with the spirit of Plato as with Neoplatonism. The return of man to the One through intellectual knowledge in which light and love are inseparably fused, is the way of the Paradiso, and it is a distinctly Plotinian idea.” Arab philosophers, including Avicenna, Algazel, and Averroës, were also significantly influenced by Neoplatonism. John Saly, Dante’s Paradiso: The Flowering of the Self (New York: Pace University Press, 1989), 194, 196.
Dante’s nine levels of heaven correspond to Pseudo-Dionysius’ nine orders of angels, and it is these angels, not an impersonal first cause, that provide the energy and inspiration that moves the spheres.\(^9\) Dante incorporates in his *Paradiso* not only the anonymous Syrian monk who wrote in the Areopagite’s name but also the intercession of Saint Bernard, the Virgin’s pure love, the art and imagery of the great cathedrals, and scholastic theology he likely learned from Dominicans who had studied in Paris and lived in Florence.\(^10\) All of these thought-pictures come together in a carefully orchestrated pilgrimage toward the beatific vision, the mystery of which was embraced by Neoplatonist-Dionysian mysticism, and the certainty of which was well supported by the Aristotelian-tinted theology of Thomas Aquinas. The religious culture Dante lived in represents a convergence of long-running streams of thought, largely pooled together by thirteenth-century scholars like Thomas; and the poet made that intellectual reservoir startlingly visible with a creative and coherent vision of the afterlife, incorporating not only the theology of his times but also the aesthetic, architectural, and iconographic sensibilities of the previous century and a half.

The convergence of intellectual and visual universes in the late medieval period has been the subject of much fascination. Panofsky saw a connection between Gothic architecture and scholasticism; Simson considered cathedrals to be an incarnation of sorts, a material representation of the theologically transparent cosmos, as well as a model of the celestial city; Duby remarked that the *Divine Comedy* itself was a literary cathedral; and Demaray understands processional churches to signify pilgrimages—and the pilgrimage of human life—and therefore

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\(^9\) Gregory the Great also identified nine orders of angels (two more than Augustine), but Dante chose the arrangement given by Pseudo-Dionysius and, in *Paradiso* 28.130-135, gently suggested that Gregory, now in heaven, is amused by his own mistaken arrangement of them. In 2.127-129, the angelic “Blessed Movers” are responsible for moving each of the “sacred gyres,” though the initial force originates in the *primum mobile*. John Ciardi, tr., *The Divine Comedy* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1970), 405, 569.

form the visual structure of the *Commedia.* Paradiso is thus filled with Gothic imagery saturated in Pseudo-Dionysian assumptions and sensory cues—circular movements, symbolic colors and materials, paradisiacal aromas—culminating in a stunning rose composed of saints, angels, and the Virgin that a cathedral’s rose windows could only faintly invoke with their earthly dimensions and hues; and also with Byzantine and Romanesque imagery that, with its architecturally limited circles and domes, could only weakly point toward a vastly more symmetrical, harmonious, orderly cosmos topped by (or surrounded by) an immaterial heaven. These medieval and earlier architectural sources are mirrored but also transformed in Paradiso’s movements—angels who rotate the spheres and dance in circles, candlelit cosmic processions as if following a liturgical route, Christ at the hub of a moving wheel-rose “window.” In many respects, Dante’s heaven is a reflection of the visual culture of his times. Yet much of that visual culture had been created to reflect an immaterial realm that had been evolving conceptually since before the Christian era.

Dante marks a new phase of growth in the aesthetics of this evolution. Like the Florentines who came after him, he put an enormous premium on beauty as something divine. That in itself was not a significant departure from his architectural influences, but his depictions gave the eternal realm a life and movement that had long been expressed primarily in liturgical and festal rituals and only by implication in static images. “Everywhere in Heaven is Paradise,” he wrote, adding organic, fertile, dynamic elements to the more fixed, sterile heaven taught by

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12 Demaray, *Dante and the Book of the Cosmos*, 73.
Aquinas and Bonaventure. Heaven’s circular court—“nostra basilica,” in Beatrice’s words—is made up of living, radiant beings.

In Dante, everywhere in heaven was also some sort of temple or cathedral—the supernal reality after which earthly manifestations were patterned. The “glorious and angelic temple” in the primum mobile embodied the mathematical perfections of divine order and musical harmony. The movements within the heavenly temple are portrayed as the exemplar of circular processions and dances on earth—or Abbot Suger’s “celestial chorus” encircling the upper choir at the consecration of St. Denis, which of course was an earthly chorus of ecclesiastics that he envisioned as celestial rather than terrestrial. Even Dante’s music of the spheres in the material heavens and angelic songs in the immaterial heaven are in tune with each other. As he has Beatrice teach him, “This sphere [the primum mobile] must correspond to the angel sphere that most loves and most knows.” The underlying assumption throughout is that all of creation—elements, angelic orders, and therefore presumably humans with rightly ordered desires—is designed to resemble God, “the Point,” and in fact is eager to do so. It is built on correspondences between realms.

This mystical, scholastic, lively, musical, architectural cosmos was well known in Florence and generally taken for granted by many as the singular Christian understanding of

14 Paradiso 25.30.
15 “The form and the exemplum” were “at odds” (28.56) in Dante’s understanding—natural laws and supernatural laws working in opposite ways—but his choice of words demonstrates the fundamental relationship between the two: the immaterial temple was the model, the material universe its copy.
16 Paradiso 28.9, 53; Demaray, Dante and the Book of the Cosmos, 64-75.
17 Demaray, Dante and the Book of the Cosmos, 71-72; Suger, De consecratione 6, in Cusimano and Whitmore, 55.
18 Purgatorio 30.92-93.
19 Paradiso 28.70-72. Seraphim were considered the highest order and closest to God; Dante’s image here implies that the source of motion for the whole universe (and therefore everything in it, to some degree) should correspond to seraphic sphere, known for its burning passion for God. Or, to adapt the biblical “on earth as it is in heaven” to this image, it would be something like “on earth as it is in this sphere of heaven, which in turn is as it is in the highest heaven.”
20 Paradiso 1.102-105; 28.100-102.
what heaven was like. In historical perspective, it appears as a composite from numerous sources. In the period mind, at least in northern Italy, it was simply “heaven.”

5.2 Religion in ‘Secular’ Cities

Most historians recognize a strong, continuing religious ethos in the Italian communes and Renaissance cities, even if some have emphasized the secularizing nature of their political culture and humanist leanings.21 Though certain individuals may have pushed religious thought to the margins of their lives—a reality in any period or culture—Italian society in general remained rather saturated in a Christian worldview. In distancing themselves from the empire, northern Italy’s cities “produced a religious culture truly their own” and retained the sacred as “a fundamental part of civic identity.”22 The communes “were formed within the episcopal curia; they met in sacred spaces; they replaced the emperor with new patron saints. The fathers felt no need to proclaim their faith when legislating on roads, drains, taxes, and court procedure.” Yet “they steeped the city’s ‘secular’ legislation in heavily religious language and imagery. . . . For the first time, the cities explicitly legislated on the moral and religious life.”23

This is not to say that recognizing a heaven-on-earth socio-political, cultural impulse depends on establishing a pronounced religiosity in a particular place or period. The possibility of following heavenly patterns on earth was not always a fruit growing from deep, devotional roots. It was rather an assumption within a common worldview. Those who were more intensely

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21 J. K. Hyde, for example, asserted that the communes were secular and able to flourish not because of religion but in spite of it, in Society and Politics in Medieval Italy: The Evolution of the Civic Life, 1000–1350 (London: Macmillan, 1973), 8; Philip Jones wrote that communal government and politics were “altogether secularized,” in The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 425; both cited from Augustine Thompson, Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325 (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 3.
22 Thompson, Cities of God, 4; Trexler, Public Life in Renaissance Florence, 7.
23 Thompson, Cities of God, 136-137.
religious might desire or articulate that program more explicitly, but it was hardly
countercultural. Even amid surges of classical learning and increasingly heavy-handed,
conspiratorial politics, both of which might be interpreted as inimical to medieval religious
culture, sacred beliefs, rituals, and images continued to have foundational influence in Italian
communes and Renaissance cities.24

The visual and literary culture of the age is evidence enough of this persistent sacrality,
whether in divine, celestial idealizations in Petrarch’s poems or biblical and sacramental imagery
in the art of Renaissance masters.25 No matter that many of these works were commissioned by
corrupt patrons hoping to mask their evils, display their piety, and earn their way into heaven; the
visual vocabulary they employed demonstrates an assumption that heaven and earth can meet in
sacred space, whether that space be in a church, private chapel, or consecrated halls of
government.

But ample evidence reveals the sacred side of social relationships and activities too.
“Religious doctrine was also social doctrine” in the thirteenth century, and even in the late
fifteenth century, it can be said that Florence was “a very religious city” with more than sixty
parish churches, many friaries and convents, and numerous confraternities.26 A pervasive
religious worldview cannot help but define and direct social relationships, at least in part, and at
no time between the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries did enough people in Italian cities entertain
genuine alternatives to a fundamentally Christian orientation of life to constitute any modern

24 The conspirators against Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan prayed together before assassinating him, providing an
intriguing image of internal contrasts—one of many such examples—within the period’s religious-political
worldview.
25 Lauro Martines sees “mini-utopias” in Petrarch’s poems, as the poet’s lady is idealized in heavenly qualities and
his love for her serves as an example of bringing heaven’s perfection into an imperfect earthly existence; in Power
and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 325.
26 Martines, Power and Imagination, 86; Martines, April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 2003), 111.
understanding of secular society. Christian assumptions (in their late medieval, Roman Catholic form) were certainly stretched at times, and the influence of ecclesiastical institutions waxed and waned periodically. But throughout the fifteenth century, long after the period of supposedly “secularizing” communes, Bernardino of Siena could preach persuasively about the church being an abode of angels and the “hotel” of God; Bartolommeo del Corazza could describe a papal visit to Florence in obsessive detail regarding materials, colors, gestures, and ceremonial formalities as though every symbol mattered; and the intense and fierce friar Savonarola could draw political support from profoundly humanist thinkers.27

The use of sacred space well illustrates the union of sacred and secular—categories that carried quite different meanings before the seventeenth century than they have since. On one hand, Italian cathedrals and churches, as elsewhere, recalled the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon, each of which prefigured heaven and the presence of God; materially represented the order of the material and immaterial cosmos; and brought together the people of God on earth (the church militant) and in heaven (the church triumphant).28 In other words, it “made present the orders of the church, the society, and the commune,” as well as the heavenly Jerusalem and the gate of heaven.29 Yet “the nave belonged to everyone,” many groups created their own side chapels, and congregations took it upon themselves to hang crown-shaped, gem-studded chandeliers between columns to remind the faithful of their heavenly destiny and rewards.30 This concept of lay participation in sacred space spilled over into the sacralization of

27 Bernardino of Siena, Le Prediche Volgari (Florence, 1424), ed. C. Cannarozzi, 2 vols. (Pistoia, 1934), I, 211ff., from Trexler, Public Life in Renaissance Florence, 11; Bartolommeo del Corazza, “Diario Fiorentino,” in Archivio Storico Italiano: Serie V 14, no. 196 (1894): 260-262, in describing Easter Mass at Santa Maria Novella in 1418; Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was one of several prominent examples of humanist thinkers drawn to the severe ideology of Savonarola in the 1490s.
28 Bishop Sicardo of Cremona saw the cathedral in these three roles, in Mitrale 1.1, col. 15, as cited in Thompson, Cities of God, 26.
29 Thompson, Cities of God, 26.
30 Thompson, Cities of God, 23, 39.
secular space, if such divides had existed in the first place. Monks at Bologna’s Santo Stefano, for example, replicated Jerusalem’s holy places to make the monastic complex and the city an earthly representation of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly model, not just for themselves but for laity to experience.\textsuperscript{31} A sense of the sacred was made available even in Italian streets.

Naturally, a society walking in sacred pathways of churches and cities begins to see its secular government as a sacred entity. This was already true in principle; earthly power had long been understood to derive from the divine sovereign, and Aquinas had postulated the relationships between higher and lower powers and their particular spheres of authority with his typical precision.\textsuperscript{32} Acknowledgment of God as the source of power came up in public speeches often, and almost always in a ruler’s first address to the citizenry, in keeping with the guiding principle that “all political activity is in some profound sense a religious concern, subject to an eternal order of values, and that governments, in turn, have legitimate religious concerns.”\textsuperscript{33} From the mid-thirteenth century, explicit distinctions between civil and ecclesiastical administration in the communes did little to secularize civil government. Rather, they drove them to establish their own divine legitimacy, usually through the patronage of saints and the saturation of laws, assemblies, and institutions in sacred rhetoric, symbolism, and ritual.\textsuperscript{34} The saints provided divine sanction at a time when unsanctioned forms of government were under considerable scrutiny.\textsuperscript{35}

The saints also provided a model for the patron-client relationship. The city could always turn to the powerful patron in a time of need—and turn against the patron temporarily if no

\textsuperscript{31} Thompson, \textit{Cities of God}, 44.
\textsuperscript{33} Martines, \textit{Power and Imagination}, 123-124.
\textsuperscript{34} Thompson, \textit{Cities of God}, 107-108.
\textsuperscript{35} Thompson, \textit{Cities of God}, 114.
miracle came—and though the stakes were lower in purely earthly relationships, the dynamics of the lower could be rooted in the nature of the higher. In one such example, Augustinian hermits petitioned Siena’s Nine in 1329 for Agostino Novello, who had ministered in Siena only a couple of decades earlier, to be honored by the commune because “he is constantly a great advocate in the heavenly court for the commune and city of Siena and its peaceful condition.” Out of context and without the word “heavenly,” the description might fit any correspondence about local advocacy in an imperial or ducal court or the papal curia. Opportunities to establish such connections between divine and human, and even the need to do so, abounded.

Civic leaders in Florence and elsewhere therefore surrounded their activities at least with the trappings, if not genuine sentiment, of religious devotion. They “sanctified” the city through religious-themed paintings and sculptures, dedicated communal altars in city buildings after assemblies no longer met in churches (Florence’s Palazzo was built in 1298), organized corporations in familiar religious forms, and used municipal chapels for secular meetings and business. In some cases, such uses of chapels might have raised concerns about profaning them; in others, such locations for business and politics might have represented a purification of otherwise profane activities and made them more weighty and binding. In theory, the influence could go either way, and the case can be made that government buildings had been “converted into sacred places”—as evident even much later when Florence’s Hall of the Great Council was “cleansed and purged of all [Medici] filth . . . by priests with holy water” and a solemn Mass of

36 Angenendt, “Fear, Hope, Death, and Salvation,” 24, building on Peter Brown’s contention that the heavenly patron became a model for earthly patrons; Gurevich, Medieval Popular Culture, 43; Trexler, “Public Life in Renaissance Florence,” 90.
38 Thompson, Cities of God, 120-125.
The communes emerged as “a reconception of the city as a new organism—permeated with religious flavor from the ground up,” and cities retained much of that flavor at least into the sixteenth century.

Life in northern Italian cities therefore went through less of a process of secularization than of diversification. Church and cloister ceased to serve as the exclusive mirrors of heaven as organizations, city halls, and even city streets took on more sacred justifications. Communicators of social values and political speech did not flip a switch from a Catholic worldview to a classical or secular one. They typically embraced both, and in cases in which some did dispense with a Christian ethos, many of the values and much of the cosmology they inherited lingered. Then, as now, thought was a product of many influences.

Perhaps an apt metaphor for the competing (or merely coexisting) worldviews of the period is Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Magnificent, who seemed quite comfortable with cultural and personal contradictions. For all his irreligious behavior—manipulation, coercion, exploitation, self-aggrandizing, pulling strings, and purchasing sacred offices for others—Lorenzo nevertheless had been well trained in scripture and the works of Augustine and, in the last two years of his life, composed nine sacred lauds and authored a religious play. Martines depicts this as “a clash between his piety and his worldly passions.” But in more than a few personalities of the period, any sense of this sort of clashing seems either subconscious or nonexistent. And any effort to characterize the age as increasingly secular (or religious, for that matter) can be met with ample contradictory evidence.

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39 At least metaphorically, “the city hall had to be partly church” because the move to secular space heightened the need for an altar rather than eliminating it: Trexler, Public Life in Renaissance Florence, 49, 52; Jacopo Nardi, Istorie della Città di Firenze vol. 2, book 8 (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1858), 128.
40 Thompson, Cities of God, 132.
41 Martines, April Blood, 248.
5.3 Real and Imagined Social Structures

Heaven’s hierarchies, as postulated by Pseudo-Dionysius and expounded upon by John Scotus Eriugena, Alan of Lille, Thomas Gallus, Bonaventure, and numerous other medieval theorists, consisted of nine orders of angels grouped in three triads, with each order assigned a specific function. In descending rank, they were seraphim (love), cherubim (knowledge), thrones (living in the divine presence), dominions (benevolent rule), powers (courage), authorities (lifting up inferior angels), principalities (manifesting transcendent principles), archangels (interpreting divine revelation), and angels (giving revelation to the world and assisting humans).42 Those orders were thought to be mirrored both in the human soul and in the church’s authority structures, and to correspond to specific human activities and structures.43 So, for example, when the human soul is occupied with announcing, declaring, leading, ordering, strengthening, commanding, receiving, revealing, anointing, and helping others, each respective to an angelic order, it is theoretically able to enter the heavenly Jerusalem and behold choirs of angels, even while still on earth.44 Medieval theologians generally agreed that the soul’s ascent is first of all internal and that the human individual and corporate body were designed after the supernal reality.

Therefore, it was thought, human congregations, the church’s hierarchy, and even a society’s understanding of status were assumed to be based on a divine model. Human beings

43 Pseudo-Dionysius, The Celestial Hierarchy 1.3; Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 6.3.5; Gregory the Great, Homily 34.1; Alan of Lille, Hierarchia, in Chase, Angelic Spirituality, 29-30; Bonaventure, Itinerarium 4.6. In the twelfth century, Honorius of Autun correlated each of the nine orders with historical groups within the church; PL 172, 1182, as cited in Keck, Angels and Angelology, 43.
44 Bonaventure, Itinerarium 4.4.
were designed to cooperate with and imitate the divine hierarchies as coworkers; as the latter are conformed to God, so are people who pursue this partnership also conformed to God as they align with divine activities and functions. This mirroring of heaven’s design informed relationships between sacred and secular institutions and perhaps served as a convenient justification for the expansion of ecclesiastical authority in the twelfth century. It also informed the liturgical calendar; the seasons of Advent and Lent and saints’ feast days were all a matter of obedience to heaven’s time, an annual rhythm of participating in the timeless miracles of the redemption story. Social order, such as the broad categorization of “those who pray, those who work, and those who fight” (with later variations, and each with hierarchies within them), was highly valued not only for its obvious benefit to rulers and other elites but also for its compliance with current interpretations of biblical instruction for everything to be done “decently and in order,” and for its alignment with Pseudo-Dionysian conceptions of rank. Heaven and earth, time and space, spirit and flesh were created by the ordered mind of God, and most of the universe was already in conformity to his harmonious design. It was up to the faithful to defy the relentless currents of a fallen world and bring human society and souls into conformity to his design too.

Belief in the divine hierarchies therefore had profound implications for social order. Theologians had their various interpretations of divine models and what they meant for human activity, but few would deny they existed. Systematizers like Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas made careers of defining such things. Most people left definitions to the experts; the

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46 For example, liturgies and artistic representations reflected the belief that events like the Exodus or the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and people like the prophets, apostles, and saints, were all coexisting in eternal “time,” making ritual participation not a mere remembrance of past miracles but a manifestation of or entry into their efficacy.
divine template may not have been grasped by any but the scholarly elite. There is little evidence that non-specialists could even name the orders of angels and their roles, but most knew there were nine and that they somehow mattered, and that order in society was ordained by God. And with that knowledge, most understood that it might be advantageous to fit into that order as favorably as possible.

So social order was a theological issue, defended both by those in power and those who thought power had been gained illegitimately and wanted to restore it to God’s original intent. And, with most theological issues, there is no end to possible applications; alignment with divine order extended well beyond major categories and social strata. Clergy, for example, zealously defended the divine pecking order of bell-ringing—cathedrals first, then other churches in their appropriate sequence, depending on their age and rank, and in keeping with the cathedral’s cadences, unless of course it was the feast day for a patron saint of a smaller chapel, in which case that chapel held first-ring privileges. Heresy was a threat not only because it might lead people into damnation but because it upset church order and contradicted the model of lesser angels submitting in obedience to higher ones. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, groups of commoners (potenze) organized Florence into “kingdoms,” set boundary markers between them, ordered them hierarchically, gave them Dionysian names like “thrones,”

48 The scholarly elite apparently had strong views about them. Poet Franco Sacchetti of Florence noted c. 1365 that a painting of Urban V at San Giovanni had a huge “torch” in front of it, while an image of the crucified Christ could only look down at a small candle before him, giving the appearance that the pope was the “king of eternal life.” Sacchetti was astonished at this disruption of hierarchy and order—that priests could elevate the bodies of beati above Mary and Christ and that “worldly sinners” could be painted “high above Our Lady, . . . showing them to have been great valiant men to the world.” “On ‘Modern Saints’,” trans. Catherine Lawless, in Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation, ed. Katherine L. Jansen, Joanna Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 385-389.
49 Thompson, Cities of God, 175, particularly with reference to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thompson notes that deviating from the established order could be considered a criminal offense, punishable in some places (like Piacenza) by excommunication.
50 Keck, Angels and Angelology, 67, on Alan of Lille’s preaching against the Waldensians; hierarchy and subordination were “permanently enshrined in the order of things.”
“dominions,” and “principalities,” and marched in the streets to celebrate their neighborhoods or occupations. And as political meanings were increasingly ascribed to participation in feast days and processions, social and political institutions—governing councils, guilds, fraternities, and the like—strengthened their involvement and, in many cases, asserted the status they thought they deserved. Ideally, every area of society was subject to divine order, just as angels were understood not only to fit into their nine-fold arrangement but to exercise highly organized roles within those ranks.

The drama of heaven and earth appeared most brilliantly in processions and other festal events. Pageantry and symbolism were vitally important at least from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when northern Italian communes were “more a visual than a literate society.” Increasing literacy over the next two centuries seems to have done little to inhibit dramatic flair; boys clubs in Florence presented dramatic scenes in a 1454 procession for the Feast of San Giovanni (John the Baptist was Florence’s patron saint), dressing in white as angels and acting out the heavenly conflict between Michael and Lucifer, with God overhead in a cloud. At a 1462 Corpus Christi procession in Viterbo, with Pius II in attendance, scenes included the suffering Christ among cherubs, the same spiritual battle between Michael and Lucifer as in Florence, orchestras of angels, and Mary’s tomb opening for her to ascend into paradise to be crowned by her Son and led into the Father’s presence.

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51 Trexler, *Public Life*, 402. Even if these names were playful or metaphorical—much like we name our sports teams after animals—the vocabulary reflects a familiarity with at least some orders of angels and an understanding of society as potentially mirroring higher realities.

52 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 258. Rubin identifies the second half of the fourteenth century as the time when political meanings were inserted into feasts and processions with greater frequency.


54 Trexler, *Public Life*, 376. Trexler suggests that this angelic battle represented the tensions of real life, but, with boys as the cast of characters, indirectly and inoffensively.

processional order, extravagance, prestigious titles, fabrics and gems, and the numbers of musicians, flags, candles, and floats, not unlike some descriptions of a special Mass with visiting dignitaries; and certain people were said to have entered “with angels,” their rich and colorful attire hinting at the beauty of heaven, their appearance more angelic than terrestrial. Bartolommeo del Corazza invoked not only the name of the Father, the Son, and “the glorious Madonna Santa Maria” but also that of “all the holy celestial court” before mentioning the feast day of “Saint Dionysius of France.” In preparation for the Feast of San Giovanni each year, workmen created an enormous cloth canopy of heaven to cover the Piazza, and Gregorio Dati once remarked that with all the marriages, songs, dances, and joy accompanying the feast, the city seemed to be a paradise.

Perhaps such comments were standard praise or the effusion of civic pride, but sometimes they were unmistakable, conscious references to the invisible realm. At a 1459 dance in Florence honoring Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the visiting duke of Milan, an anonymous observer noted the order of people on the dance floor and seated next to it, everyone according to his or her station, colorfully and extravagantly dressed for the festive occasion. The observer took in the whole vista, dancers and audience together, and while Trexler emphasizes the ritual character of the interactions and the dynamics among “undulating social groups,” the observer-poet’s commentary reveals another dimension in the scene. All was in divine order, he said; the women appeared as angels, their movements evoked paradise, and the social ritual displayed angelic

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56 Trexler, Public Life, 188-196, 312. Trexler asserts that the chroniclers’ focus served moral purposes for the future, but he also says that “citizens saw and chroniclers described a civic cosmos fused with the social cosmos of the entrant.” One might add that the religious cosmos was certainly included in the descriptions. A remark by Filarete about the quantity of pearls and “most noble jewels” may have represented an artist’s appreciation of beauty, but it still recalls the precious metals and gems of the Apocalyptic vision. Even if some of these references to heaven were figures of speech, they were meaningful figures of speech, employing a strongly theologically derived idiom.
58 Trexler, Public Life, 247; Gregorio Dati, Istorie di Firenze, quoted from Trexler, 266.
hierarchies. “The whole appeared a heaven of lovely roseate circles / In which the count represented the sun / And the women and garzoni [boys] shining stars.”59 This was in no sacred context, and almost certainly no souls were contemplating their ascent to God just then. But Dante and the Pseudo-Dionysius nevertheless would have been pleased.

Clerical processions were “theology in motion,” and citywide marches were “political theory on the move,” both expressing some degree of hierarchy and making the “social order visible.”60 In any iteration, these were identity-marking or even identity-making events, opportunities for individuals, institutions, and groups—among the upper strata, anyway—to display their position and, if possible, elevate it.61 Burckhardt’s insistence on a fusion of classes aside, precedence and order were important aspects of processions, which could become highly tendentious and exclusive.62 Political groups did arrange themselves around the symbolic power center, as Rubin points out, but not only political groups.63 Many parties representing all sorts of interests jostled for position, and probably for different kinds of power. As noted in the previous chapter, the competition for power may not have necessarily been a secularizing one; people who appear to have been trying to establish their place in society actually may have been trying to establish their place in the universe, of which their city was only a part. As demonstrated above,

60 Thompson, *Cities of God*, 149-151.
61 Rubin points out that these civic rituals excluded most working people, women, children, servants, outsiders, etc., and could therefore not be considered a picture of the community; *Corpus Christi*, 266. Some were more inclusive than others, and all involved nonparticipant observers—so, in that sense, not necessarily an inaccurate picture of the community, even if an incomplete one. Laying the hierarchy bare so categorically may have been the point—the natural order as it was perceived by the generally privileged, with the marginalized looking in.
62 Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance*, 230. Though status by no means disappeared, Burckhardt remarks that “birth and origin were without influence,” perhaps recognizing the social instability on display in competitions for position and influence. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 263.
the cosmic order was often at the forefront of people’s minds on feast days and other important occasions.

5.4 The Order of Life

The social implications of a heaven-oriented worldview are reflected in evolving visual representations in the Italian Renaissance. The perceived immanence of heaven is depicted in numerous works of art from the period, the most central of which in Florence is the dome of its baptistery, in which the Dionysian orders are clearly articulated (Figs. 5.1, 5.2). This section of the mosaic was completed in the thirteenth century, while Dante was still living in Florence, and therefore was well known to him and likely one of the many images that informed his vision of heaven. Nardo di Cione’s Paradise, a fresco in the Strozzi Chapel of Santa Maria Novella, was painted in the mid-fourteenth century, likewise shows the order of angels, likely inspired by Dante’s Paradiso in that angels interact with saints at levels other than their native spheres, and some angels are depicted as producing music (Fig. 5.3).64

Over the next two centuries, in contrast to the intensely God-focused emphasis of scholastic learning, more “human” elements appeared in heavenscapes that included earthly friends and sometimes even erotic imagery, while the increasing urbanization of heavenly representations blended with or reverted to open landscapes—the New Jerusalem and gardens of paradise in the same scene (Fig. 5.4), or sometimes just the gardens without an urban reference (Fig. 5.5).65 Boccaccio’s ten storytellers were so impressed with their natural surroundings in their escape from the city that they could not imagine paradise—no longer just a restored Eden

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64 As noted by Gill, the small David figure in the spandrel of Bicci di Lorenzi’s Annunciation (c. 1431) reinforces associations between the harmony of the spheres and events in which heaven and earth intersect. Gill, Angels and the Order of Heaven, 112; Ps. 19.1-4.
65 McDannell and Lang, Heaven, 112.
but an image of ultimate destiny—taking any other form. An attraction to the “shadowy world of the senses” and the “luminous world of beauty and love” colored Renaissance depictions of the afterlife. Angels became more corporeal and human and feminine. A changing world meant a changing otherworld.

Figure 5.1. Florence Baptistery, c. 1250-1330.
This ceiling mosaic, which depicts heaven, Christ as judge, orders of angels, and the blessed and condemned at the last judgment, was complete or nearly so during Dante’s last years in Florence. His Paradiso includes elements seen here, whether directly borrowed from the mosaic or similarly derived from a shared theological understanding of heaven. (Usage permitted under GFDL.)

67 Martines, Power and Imagination, 326-327. Martines attributes this shift to the revival of Platonism in sixteenth-century Italian thought, which often drew from Petrarch and shared his longing for ideal worlds, perfected lovers, and true beauty.
68 Gill, Angels and the Order of Heaven, 47-48.
Figure 5.2. Florence Baptistery, center detail, c. 1250-1330.

Beside the image of Christ holding a book, two seraphim (in red) and two cherubim (in blue) hold their places as the two orders closest to God. The seven other panels in the same ring depict two angels from each of the other Pseudo-Dionysian orders. (Usage permitted under GNU Free Documentation License [GFDL].)
Figure 5.3. Nardo di Cione, Paradise, Strozzi Chapel at Santa Maria Novella, c. 1355. At the top is a row of red seraphim and a row of blue cherubim, after which rows of angels are interspersed with rows of humans. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
As in the van Eyck’s Adoration of the Lamb, numerous heavenly elements converge in the same scene—prophets, apostles, saints, orders of angels, the church triumphant and the church militant, and an urban heaven (the celestial city) with a rural heaven (dancing in the natural environment). (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)

Paradise, often conflated with heaven, was more likely to be portrayed with pastoral, Edenic imagery—here with the blessed clearly not returning to their natural state but experiencing prelapsarian (or post-historical) fruitfulness and pleasure. (This file was donated to Wikimedia Commons as part of a project by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and made available under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)
Yet some characteristics of heaven remained constant as representations of them evolved. The Dionysian corpus had been exposed as pseudonymous by Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457), but a heaven with distinct orders of angels already held a secure place in Renaissance iconography. The renderings of those orders, however, became less structured and more creative. In keeping with the humanization of the heavenly realm, the orders of angels often appear in closer proximity to human beings, still distinct but both participating in the same world.

Representations of the afterlife fused the spiritual and material, the celestial city and paradisiacal gardens, the individual with the social, and the God-ward gaze with very human aspirations.

Change included a shift from the music of the spheres and the songs of angels toward more human musical expressions. Following the biblical exhortation to praise God with all sorts of instrumental noises and “everything that breathes,” angels in Fra Angelico’s *Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven*, for example—still in discernible order, especially in the red seraphim and blue cherubim in the top rows—carry a range of period instruments, some of which were used exclusively for dance (Fig. 5.6). In another piece painted at about the same time, Fra Angelico further blends the Neoplatonic and scholastic understanding of angels with Renaissance emphases on the nature of paradise and the eternal city. His *Last Judgment* panel displays typical hierarchies of angels and saints, again with additional images of music at the bottom of the central sphere from which Christ reigns, but with dance now explicit rather than implied (Fig. 5.4). The dance tellingly captures both urban and pastoral themes, taking place in a

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69 Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven*, 54. Valla was not the first to question the authenticity of Pseudo-Dionysius’ works; Peter Abelard, for example, had suspicions three centuries earlier. Nor was Valla’s assessment universally accepted; Pico della Mirandola remained convinced that the corpus was genuine, and Marcilio Ficino thought it still worthwhile to translate the *Divine Names*.


71 Ps. 150; Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven*, 124.
field just outside the New Jerusalem. In some examples, heaven and earth are clearly distinct, even when occupying the same scene, as in Botticini’s *Assumption of the Virgin* (Fig. 5.7). In others, like Neri di Bicci’s *Coronation*, human and supernatural figures overlap in “unmediated witness” of the event (Fig. 5.8).

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**Figure 5.6.** *Fra Angelico, Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven, c. 1430.*

Orders of angels are conventionally depicted, but their instruments and hints at dancing (some instruments pictured were used almost exclusively for dance, and the movement of some angels suggests dance) are later additions to the iconography of heaven. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)

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72 Circle dances can be interpreted as a reference to the harmony of the spheres playing out on earth and appear in many works. Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* (c. 1500) is a striking and unusual example (Fig. 5.9).
Figure 5.7. Francesco Botticini, Assumption of the Virgin, c. 1475-1476. Heaven and one of earth’s natural landscapes are both visible and focused on the same event but are given clear separation from each other. Heaven is immanent but not within the scope of human awareness. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
If heaven appeared less ordered and more creative, a certain precision and logic remained despite appearances. Sometimes that logic conformed to tradition; though Botticini’s Assumption puts saints and angels together in the lowest triad of orders, the Dionysian hierarchies are otherwise entirely conventional, even as they hover over an open Italian landscape. Sometimes it
conformed to tradition while incorporating more subtle and innovative elements. Fra Angelico’s *Last Judgment* centers on a theologically predictable heaven—Christ as judge is surrounded by orders of angels and flanked by saints and biblical prophets—while picturing earthly pleasures in bottom left, where angels dance with humans in a circle, and a garden and a city both represent the abode of the blessed. And sometimes the logic and structure are disguised by novelty but present in symbols like a circle dance and golden dome (Fig. 5.9). Expressiveness in visual arts did not represent a resistance to order.

In fact, just the opposite can be argued. Sandro Botticelli’s expressive Lehman *Annunciation* (1492) employed the golden ratio or divine proportion both in the dimensions of the painting and in its internal composition (Fig. 5.10). This annunciation (Botticelli painted ten) was completed some seventeen years before Luca Pacioli published *De divina proportione*; the author had praised the painter for his marvelous proportions that seem divine and lack only the breath of life, and *De divina proportione* gives mathematical definition to this aesthetic assessment. The basis of Pacioli’s argument was that because the universe was created with mathematical harmonies and order, artists’ work would be more aesthetically pleasing and align more with the Creator’s purposes by replicating his design, which Leonardo da Vinci famously depicted in his graphic demonstration of Vitruvius’ ideal proportions for the human body.

Pacioli’s work is filled with mystical numerology that echoes Pythagorean-Boethian harmonic ratios and applies them to architecture and visual arts but also attaches multiple layers of symbolic meaning to them. “This linking of harmonious architectural measurements to the human body was exceedingly attractive to Renaissance artists,” specifically because of the belief

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that man as microcosm reflects the perfection of the macrocosm—i.e., art and architecture on earth should mimic the divine design of the universe. And to the degree that those measurements might express biblical and mystical numbers, earthly creations would be sanctioned by heaven’s approval and be accompanied by heaven’s presence.

![Figure 5.9. Sandro Botticelli, Mystic Nativity, 1500.](image)

The order of heaven is disguised in this rendering of the nativity, with creative expression seeming to supersede religious convention. Yet the scene captures conventional themes of angels rejoicing over the birth of Christ and conflict between the forces of good and evil. The gold “dome” that serves as a celestial canopy over the site and the circular dance of angels both refer to divine order and glory. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)

Both the external dimensions and internal composition employ the “golden section” or “divine proportion.” (This file was donated to Wikimedia Commons as part of a project by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and made available under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

Renaissance architects who designed public buildings and churches with Pythagorean proportions understood the relationship between those proportions and consonant musical ratios and considered architectural harmony “a visible echo” of celestial harmonies. As an irrational number, the golden ratio could not be applied to musical intervals, but as in Dufay’s motet for Santa Maria del Fiore, other correlations between material and musical architectonics were possible. Marsilio Ficino believed in the principle of “as above, so below”—that the numerical proportions of the spheres could be utilized on earth to imitate, and to some degree harness, the

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power of the cosmos. Whether or not Renaissance artists assigned similar confidence to divine ratios, some used them effectively in the composition of their work. In many cases, the motive may have been purely aesthetic. In some, divine proportion was applied to this-worldly and otherworldly representations in ways that are clearly intended as meaningful.

If art was sometimes used by civic leaders to sanctify the city, architecture had an even greater capacity to build divine order into it. Renaissance architects readily applied Vitruvian insights about proportionality to civic projects. The idea of divinely ordered space was obviously not new; it had been the impetus for the construction of churches and monasteries for centuries in various styles. But interest in shaping urban environments toward that end had been growing since the communal period, and “by building a well-planned city or legislat ing a model environment, a community’s leaders could become God’s partners in recreating a paradise on earth.” The potential for embedding symbolic geometry and cosmic harmonies into stone and brick surroundings captured creative imaginations.

Trecento builders had been intentional in their design of Florence’s pre-Renaissance piazzes, but apparently not with any sense of architectural links to the cosmic order. The basic configurations of this built environment were not subject to change, for obvious reasons, but constructions in the fifteenth century reflected the new interest in systems of proportion, which were often (but not always) believed to be divinely initiated. Brunelleschi’s (or Michelozzo’s)

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79 Julie Hibbard offers several examples, some more convincing than others, including the Limbourg brothers’ “Paradise” from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* and Rogier van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross*; Julie A. Hibbard, “Boethius’s Concept of Related Quantity in Music: Its Application in the Visual Arts,” *Carmina Philosophiae* 3 (1994): 53-81.
80 Thompson, *Cities of God*, 120-125.
81 Emerson and Feiss, *Imagining Heaven*, xvi.
Pazzi Chapel (1442-1443) demonstrates “striking geometric harmonies” utilizing circles and squares, each of which contained divine connotations and power.\textsuperscript{83} Alberti’s Palazzo Rucellai (1446-1451) provides a non-sacred example that employs sacred proportions. Both buildings are significant for their classical elements, yet both seem to have been built with an awareness of the ratios of divine perfection. Such order was not necessarily reflective of the \textit{divina proportione} posited by Pacioli and artistically implemented by Botticelli but was seen by many as having originated in the sacred design of the cosmos.

Well before Brunelleschi’s and Alberti’s work, Leonardo Bruni had praised Florence’s beautiful buildings for seeming more “to have fallen from heaven than to have been constructed by the hands of men.”\textsuperscript{84} Much of his language evoked Homeric images, yet he also applied the idiom of paradise to his city—the urban space as well as the hills and fields of Florentine lands. The villages surrounding the city were like the moon and rings of stars, as spheres orbiting the earth, a metaphor simultaneously comparing the region to a Greek shield and recalling cosmic symmetry and perfection.\textsuperscript{85} Bruni was clearly referring to an actual landscape, but “reality is here strikingly molded by the eyes of the quattrocento: we find at work the same sensibility which is familiar to us from panoramic drawings of Florence by quattrocento artists—the same love of geometric regularity and proportion which was to express itself throughout the Renaissance in so many diagrams of ‘ideal cities’.”\textsuperscript{86} Clear distinctions between sacred and secular space, whether in a panegyric like Bruni’s or the meetings of a guild in the nave of a church, were no longer discernible. Whether the secular encroached on the sacred or the sacred had sanctified the secular.

\textsuperscript{83} Martines, \textit{April Blood}, 112.
\textsuperscript{85} Bruni, “Panegyric,” 104.
is a matter for debate, but probably not in the Renaissance mind, which seemed comfortable with the absence of such distinctions.

Trexler makes much of the power inherent in presiding over sacred time and space. He casts the public life of Florence into a framework of honor and shame, wealth, status, order, contracts and trust, and security, all of which are important sociological concerns but also seem to come with a deeply theological or cosmological flavor. For example, he makes much of the binding nature of oaths taken at sacred sites or in the presence of sacred objects, but less of the apparent sacralization of business and politics implied by such oaths. He explains that certain rituals and forms were employed for social cohesion and promotion of the city, but why were social cohesion and promotion so viscerally important? The answer may be purely sociological, but it may also involve the deep, existential longings of the human heart. If the Medici coopted sacred time and space for their own purposes, as he asserts, it can be argued that they were essentially creating a heavenly template of their own—a cosmic order in which the unofficial rulers of Florence were essential arbiters of heaven’s calendar and rites.

Such is the nature of competing worldviews, which almost always lie beneath surface of social tensions. Earlier Guelf and Ghibelline conflicts may have focused on the difference between the practicalities of papal and imperial rule, but at some level they were also about sacred and secular authority and aligning with divinely ordained principles. The sword- and cross-bearing angel on the Ciompi banner may have publicly manifested the secret oath that bound the dispossessed together, as Trexler suggests, but it also invoked the unseen conflict between good and evil that continually colored human life.\footnote{Trexler, \textit{Public Life}, 343.} The social dynamics that played out on the fields of competition reveal much about values, status, and self-perceptions, but what was
all this ritual positioning if not a search for some transcendent glory? Power and wealth may have been the points of contention, but the contest seems to have taken place in a much grander arena.

5.5 Toward a Paradise Regained

The invisible, grand scale of social life sometimes appeared in public life from behind the scenes. Because the city as a reflection of a heavenly counterpart and nature as a reflection of paradise were common themes in art, literature, and theological treatises, they also became increasingly common justifications for public policy. Studies on perceptions about dirt and decay, environmental statutes, and social and legal enforcement of policies add some complexity to frequent assumptions about the filthiness of medieval and early modern cities. A more layered understanding of historical Christian views of the environment is emerging. In northern Italian cities of the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries, one of those layers seems to have been a politically, economically, and theologically driven desire to make cities and their natural surroundings more divine.

Civic authorities have never needed a philosophical or religious justification for their efforts to promote or maintain a pleasant urban environment. In matters of the common good, no deeper motivation than the common good is necessary. Civic pride can be a powerful impetus for change. But in many cities of northern Italy, something more than civic pride or an effort to improve the lives of inhabitants seems to have been at work in policies regarding cities’ physical environments. Hints of greater aspirations appear in panegyrics describing the ideal city, political speeches that embraced a God-given role for governments, theological treatises on humanity’s role as stewards in partnership with God over creation, and even in municipal statutes, which
codified religious principles in multiple policy arenas, including urban planning and the stewardship of land and resources. The impulse to experience a well-managed urban environment had deep philosophical and theological roots.

Giacomino da Verona’s poem “On the Heavenly Jerusalem” is an intriguing blend of religious vision and human aspirations. It depicts the walls surrounding the heavenly city in the shape of a square, each side with three gates. The city is filled with marble and gems, the streets are paved with gold and other precious materials, a river flows through the city center, and fruit trees and flowers abound. In this pleasant place, this urbanized *locus amoenus*, there is no fear. All is peaceful and beautiful within these walls.

On one hand, this is an unsurprising depiction of a biblical image. The last picture in the Christian canon is a renewed Jerusalem descending from heaven with four walls, three gates on each side, gems and precious metals throughout, a river and a life-giving tree, and an environment of peace, beauty, and joy, just as Giacomino described. On the other hand, the poet placed this heavenly vision in a familiar frame. Its paradise “is merely a perfected and dressed-up North Italian city of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.” In the ideals of poets of the late Middle Ages—and of theologians and savvy politicians too—distinctions between the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly city were increasingly blurred.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* in Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico does not overtly refer to the heavenly Jerusalem, but it does make a clear connection

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between the earthly city and a heavenly agenda (Figs. 5.11-5.14). Painted less than a century after Giacomino wrote, it depicts city government, urban and natural environments, and the spiritual forces at work in the whole civic project. Lorenzetti’s depiction of bad government includes debris in the streets and ruins in the countryside, as well as darker and dingier hues than in his corresponding depictions of urban life under good government. Crops are not growing, the land looks exploited and exhausted, and the scene is largely deforested except for a few browning trees. In the scenes depicting a city under good government, however, the streets are immaculate and the countryside is flourishing—fruitful wherever it is being cultivated and forested among the hills. The angel Securitas holds a banner that promises safety to all coming in and going out—a scene that might easily fit the description of paradise restored.91 This all happens, of course, in alignment with the seasons, the planets, and the movement of the celestial spheres, and under the watch of angelic beings and the virtues they represent. Heavenly and earthly realms converge in the well-governed city and its environs, evoking the canonical bookends of human history—both the pristine environment of Eden and a restored creation in the heavenly Jerusalem.

91 Apoc. 21.27, for example, depicts a city with “nothing unclean,” no falsehood, and of course only the redeemed within.
Figure 5.11. Ambroglio Lorenzetti, Allegory of Good and Bad Government, the effects of bad government in urban life, Siena, 1338-39. (This image is in the public domain [US-PD].)

Figure 5.12. Ambroglio Lorenzetti, Allegory of Good and Bad Government, the effects of bad government in rural life, Siena, 1338-39. (This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Figure 5.13. Ambroglio Lorenzetti, Allegory of Good and Bad Government, the effects of good government in urban life, Siena, 1338-39.
(This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)

Figure 5.14. Ambroglio Lorenzetti, Allegory of Good and Bad Government, the effects of good government in rural life, Siena, 1338-39.
(This work is in the public domain [US-PD].)
It is a small step from seeing the heavenly Jerusalem allegorically to seeing entire cities—with church or cathedral at the spiritual center—as representations of heaven on earth, at least theoretically if not in practice. And many such small steps had been made by scholastic thinkers. Aquinas’ natural theology emphasized order, planning, and design—nature as a reflection of God’s goodness and glory. His political theology described the location of the ideal city in thoroughly Edenic, paradisiacal terms and its ruler as God’s representative who should pattern his government after the divine template. Scholastic interpretations embraced Aristotelian theories of justice and *bonum commune*—exactly the ideals Lorenzetti meant to depict.

Another key step between the church as an experience of heaven and the entire city as a bearer of the same connotations may have been the feast of Corpus Christi—that celebration of the Eucharistic elements (having become the body and blood of Christ) beyond church walls. The feast represented the outward movement of the sacred, a taste of heaven proceeding from the altar to the city and countryside, a sacralization of the secular wherever the host was carried. Eyes trained to see the “the bread of heaven” at work in fields and streets might soon come to see those fields and streets as having higher meaning.

Regardless of the means, a composite theology of the city grew not only from Christian imagery but also from a longing for the past (in renewed interest in classical philosophy and architecture), from new discoveries of other cultures, and from a balance of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic interpretations of the material world. The ideal medieval city was beautiful (full of marble and gems, as in the Apocalypse); orderly and hierarchical (as in Augustine, Aquinas, and

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92 *Summa Theologica* 1.65.2; *De regno*, book 2, chs. III, V; Zupko and Laures, *Straws in the Wind*, 31-32.
the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius); and characterized by peace, harmony, and purpose (as in any vision of ideal society).\textsuperscript{94} Or, as some have put it more vividly, it was a combination of the heavenly Jerusalem, Augustine’s City of God, ancient Rome, and Marco Polo’s Cathay.\textsuperscript{95}

Jerusalem, whether earthly or heavenly, could in fact be readily conflated with an Italian city, as in Botticelli’s \textit{Mystical Crucifixion}, in which the Duomo and other Florentine features fill the background of the crucifixion scene (Fig. 5.15). This “conscious equation” of the two cities, in which a specific city could be identified with a more sacred location, has been attributed to the region’s developed system of political theory (or theology).\textsuperscript{96} Renaissance cityscapes or architecture frequently served as the setting for biblical scenes in visual representation, not because artists had no awareness of what the real Jerusalem might look like but because of a conceptual framework that allowed them to make profound theological statements about the place of their city in the cosmic order. Landscapes were often portrayed as Edenic, paradisiacal “pleasant places.” Even wildernesses in which ancient saints fought off demonic temptations might depict idyllic natural features, wild animals tamed, or a benign angelic presence (Figs. 5.16, 5.17).\textsuperscript{97} Urban and natural environments were clearly not always exploited with a utilitarian agenda; sometimes they were seen as divine gifts modeled after higher realities.


\textsuperscript{95} Zupko and Laures, \textit{Straws in the Wind}, 40.

\textsuperscript{96} Russell, “A Similitude of Paradise,” 150.

\textsuperscript{97} For example, Workshop of Paolo Veronese, \textit{St. Jerome in the Wilderness}; Moretto da Brescia, \textit{Christ in the Wilderness}.
Figure 5.15. Sandro Botticelli, Mystic Crucifixion, 1497, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.

It was not unusual for images to merge events from the earthly Jerusalem with European cities, here Florence, to express the universality of the eternal narrative and imply local inclusion in it. (This image is in the public domain [US-PD].)
Figure 5.16. Workshop of Paolo da Veronese, St. Jerome in the Wilderness, c. 1575-85. Images of Jerome typically included a lion, after a legend in which he removed a thorn from the paw of a lion that limped to him as he was teaching. Like the other beasts in the background, the surrounding wilderness is as benign as the lion. (Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.)
Figure 5.17. Moretto da Brescia, Christ in the Wilderness, c. 1515-20.

In this convergence of spiritual and material realms, heaven (represented by angels) and an austere but harmless landscape provide the context for the temptation of Christ, who sits calmly in his tamed natural environment. (Provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.)

The equation of earthly cities and their surroundings with the earthly and/or heavenly Jerusalem is also common in literary sources, particularly in panegyrics describing the ideal city. Urban encomia, which began to flourish in the twelfth century, painted “a utopian view of the city that mirrors the heavenly Jerusalem [and] rhetorically conveyed ideals of urbanity for aspiring members of the body politic to emulate.”98 Bruni’s Laudatio florentinae urbis

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98 Weeda, “Cleanliness, Civility, and the City,” 39.
commends the city for its “unparalleled cleanliness” and designates its beauty as its “highest and noblest adornment.” Though Bruni never mentions Eden or the heavenly Jerusalem in his text, his descriptions hint at those familiar images, whether intentionally or not. Those images are made explicit in many other such panegyrics. A rather different sort of author in another genre plainly expressed this idealization of the city as divine sanctuary; Savonarola thought that a more thoroughly Christian civic environment would make the city a paradise on earth, “more heavenly than earthly,” and its children more like angels. He perhaps took that sentiment to further extremes than most, but it was not an unfamiliar one.

Monks, priests, scholastic theologians, and other instructors who taught community leaders, whether directly or in shaping the general mentalité in which almost all formal instruction took place, were immersed in this composite picture of the ideal city and surely imparted that vision to their students, at least into the quattrocento. These biblical images of the celestial city, even when blended with non-Christian models, were understood to be templates for earthly life—unreachable in actual practice, perhaps, but nevertheless a God-given ideal. Just as the temple on earth (and by implication the church) was seen as a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, the city on earth came to be seen by many as a shadow of the heavenly city. That concept provided a solid foundation for policies, statutes, and planning that might somehow, even if only in a small degree, move the city closer to its Edenic or eschatological goal. If a city’s celebrations could be seen as a sign of its paradisiacal qualities, and if its processions and festivals could be seen as an emulation of heaven’s values—as in the eyes of the anonymous

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99 Leonardo Bruni, “Panegyric to the City of Florence,” 99-100.
100 Weeda, “Cleanliness, Civility, and the City,” 39-40.
102 Chiara Frugoni, A Distant City, 27. Heb. 8.5, 9.23, and 10.1 established this concept of religious forms on earth serving as shadows of heavenly realities, which could then be applied not only to sacred spaces but also to human hierarchies and urban planning.
observer of Florence’s dance in honor of the duke of Milan—it is not farfetched to consider that its policies were meant to reflect such values too. Its urban and natural environment might become something of a foretaste of paradise.

This vision of the northern Italian medieval city creates a bit of dissonance when juxtaposed with some assessments. How could this idealized city coexist with “natural elements [that were] profane and, unless mediated by human authority, . . . legitimate dumping grounds for material and body waste”? How could medieval towns “stand out as islands of secular rationality and materialism” if they were being mentally equated with the heavenly Jerusalem? If the city was being increasingly sacralized in the late Middle Ages, at least in theory, how can a recent popular history repeatedly emphasize its “ugly depths of depravity” and “deeply unsanitary environment”? Or, on the other hand, if these negative assessments are true, how could Burckhardt write about the Italians’ belief that they were cleaner than other nations, and why would entire books be devoted to medieval communes as “cities of God” and Renaissance Italy’s culture of cleanliness? And why might scholars contradict “the assumption of previous generations of historians” by insisting that “preoccupation with sanitation predates the early modern period”? The polarized opinions on the religiosity and cleanliness of these cities begs for clarification.

104 Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 47.
One explanation is the universal discrepancy between the real and ideal in virtually every area of life. Just as medieval Christians held the saintly life as an ideal yet held out very little hope that they and their peers would attain to it—some commended the saints in heaven while fully expecting to end up in hell—many likewise looked to the new Jerusalem as a template for their cities while dumping refuse in the streets. Yet even in that contradiction between belief and behavior, community authorities could be confident in appealing to this belief and basing their policies and laws on it. All could agree that it was something to strive for, even if the necessities of daily life kept pushing the goal further into the future. In any culture, ideals are embraced while realities confront them. But the ideals still hold currency.

The ideals are discernible at times in late medieval practice. As land values rose, large tracts became privately owned, and the landscape was marked by alterations like deforestation, diking, and irrigation in the tenth through twelfth centuries, the relationship between town and country changed. The landowning patriciate was eager for regulation, as evidenced by city statutes in the thirteenth and later centuries. Several studies on the environmental concerns and policies of late medieval northern Italian cities have demonstrated legislative and popular efforts to sanitize the urban environment and manage the natural resources surrounding it. The image of the city and the experiences of its residents were a frequent source of contention, and not because of some binary distinction between “quality of life for its citizens” or “environmental protection.” The reasons for environmental management were more nuanced than that, sometimes involving a desire to replicate the garden of paradise or prefigure the eternal

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Amid universal human motives for peace and prosperity was an often implicit, occasionally explicit belief in the divine image for a city.

The 1264 statutes of Vicenza are one such explicit example. They begin with an oath that outlines God’s rule over angelic choirs, the eight cosmic spheres, earth’s climatic zones, and his creation of animals. “It celebrates God’s creation of humanity, which shares existence with stones, life with plants, sensation with beasts, and understanding with angels”—a thoroughly integrated creation in which “the authority of the popular commune came from heaven, and the commune lived in communion with it.”¹¹² No enmity between humanity and the natural world is evident in these statements, or ideally in the laws that follow. To the contrary, all of heaven and earth converge in a good creation.

Laws pertaining to tanners and wool workers abounded because of the compounds they used and smells their work produced. In the late thirteenth century, Bassano limited leatherworkers to certain areas of the city and forbade cloth guilds from washing wool and soaking flax in town waterways, the latter prohibition of which Verona also enacted.¹¹³ Ferrara and other cities placed tanners outside the town’s environs and regulated flax workers and cloth makers for the chemicals they used.¹¹⁴ Inhabitants of Siena petitioned the government to prevent leatherworkers from using the city’s fountain and hanging their skins in open air, resulting in a back-and-forth struggle between the guild and inhabitants that eventually went the way of environmental concerns over business.¹¹⁵ Butchers, too, were considered threats to healthy air and water; Ferrara regulated their workplaces, conditions, and waste production, and Bergamo

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¹¹¹ Emerson and Feiss, *Imagining Heaven*, xx.
¹¹² Thompson, *Cities of God*, 137.
prohibited them from doing their work along roads or in public places because their putredo and abominatio—terms that not only reflected strong repulsion but also hint at biblical language regarding sin and filth—should not contaminate heavily traveled areas.\textsuperscript{116}

Much of the concern surrounding these industries was related to air quality, specifically the stench that corrupts air and could potentially bring pestilence—i.e., miasma theory, a belief left over from Hippocratic and Galenic medicine in which contagions were thought to be present in foul odors.\textsuperscript{117} Bergamo, for example, instructed residents in how to burn dung properly to protect the communal air, and Pistoia prohibited some artisans for working within the walls surrounding the city for the same reason.\textsuperscript{118} The waters were equally a concern, for obvious reasons; upstream waste was patently offensive and understood to be dangerous. As mentioned, Bassano and Verona regulated certain guilds’ use of town waterways; Bassano forbade waste in the waters unless far enough downstream; Spoleto required residents in 1296 to enclose private drains and latrines for several meters from their homes in order to hide the filth; and Pirano regulated fisheries and forbade waste in communal waters.\textsuperscript{119} And general regulations regarding the disposal of waste in the streets, squares, gutters, or other places of public concern were widespread: Ravenna’s 1327 statutes aimed at protecting passersby, and Castelfranco di Sopra, Montepulciano, Pirano, and Scarperia forbade pouring water out of windows and balconies before curfew.\textsuperscript{120} Figline and Dronero imposed severe fines for improper treatment of waste and violations of general cleanliness in the 1400s.\textsuperscript{121} Some penitents were encouraged to invest in

\textsuperscript{116} Zupko and Laures, \textit{Straws in the Wind}, 182, 100. The statute from Bergamo is from 1727 but rooted in medieval tradition.  
\textsuperscript{118} Geltner, “Urban Viarri,” 100-101.  
\textsuperscript{119} Geltner, “Urban Viarri,” 99-100. 
\textsuperscript{120} Geltner, “Urban Viarri,” 100. 
\textsuperscript{121} Geltner, “Urban Viarri,” 101.
drains, fountains, and refuse carts as penance for their bad behavior—as if actions of physical cleanliness would counteract their earlier actions of moral filth.\textsuperscript{122} The goal in all of these statutes and policies was not only to keep streets and squares clean to protect health but also to beautify the city and make it somewhat closer to the ideals so often expressed in urban encomia.

Regulations not only aimed at limiting the effects of waste and cleaning up offensive chemicals and smells. They also aimed at preserving resources and protecting forests and pastures from erosion, depletion, and flooding.\textsuperscript{123} Roadways (for food supply) and waterways (for water supply, limited fish supply, and flooding and erosion) were particularly protected.\textsuperscript{124} Many of these efforts were motivated by financial concerns, and they do not reflect environmental awareness with any modern understanding of sustainability. But they do demonstrate awareness of limited supply and at least some long-term effects.

Rationales behind these regulations were rarely stated—the nature of statutes inhibits extended prose—but enough hints are included to suggest a connection between policy and worldview. Use of the terms \textit{putredo} and \textit{abominatio}, for example, included in Bergamo’s statutes mentioned above, support the assertion that filth and dung were not considered merely unhealthy or even that they were often used symbols of sin and corruption, but that they were actually the embodiment of sin and corruption—“sin made material.”\textsuperscript{125} All cultures consider filth (as defined within those cultures) to be undesirable; medieval Christian theology cast it as the antithesis of the divine.\textsuperscript{126} This association explains the phenomenon of fines for improper

\textsuperscript{123}Bowsky, \textit{A Medieval Italian Commune}, 194-195.
\textsuperscript{124}Zupko and Laures, \textit{Straws in the Wind}, 53-56, 64-70, 82-83.
\textsuperscript{125}Bayless, \textit{Sin and Filth in Medieval Culture}, xviii.
waste disposal increasing nearer a cathedral. The whole city might be metaphorically tied to the new Jerusalem, but the “temple” at its heart was most sacred and therefore most protected from pollution.

In a fascinating study on Brescia, Robert Russell identifies a similar attitude toward ruins. At a time when new city walls were being built in the shape of a square with three gates on each side—features clearly mimicking the shape and distribution of gates in the heavenly Jerusalem—a 1251 statute prohibited the tearing down of houses in order to keep the city from being disfigured by ruins. When that statute was renewed six decades later, a brief rationale was added: “since it is said that cities have been made in the likeness of Paradise.” In 1339, the gates in the walls surrounding Florence numbered fifteen, but the city statutes of that year reduced them to the sacred number of twelve, making them officially equal to those of the heavenly Jerusalem. A statute from Imola in 1334 adhered to these numbers too—twelve chapels with three in each quarter, a symmetry hardly worth pointing out unless its symbolism was considered important. If power was indeed derived from God, and if “all political activity [was] in some profound sense a religious concern, subject to an eternal order of values,” it is understandable that city leaders would have brought that mentality into urban planning and legislative procedures. The order and cleanliness of a city and the preservation of its resources could serve as affirmations of its divine purpose.

130 Frugoni, *A Distant City*, 27.
131 Frugoni, *A Distant City*, 27.
5.6 Order and Political Vision

Florentines needed little encouragement to believe their city had a divine purpose. The question was how that purpose might be fulfilled, and under whose leadership—issues that provoked tensions from the Guelf-Ghibelline divides of the communes to the republic-oligarchy-tyranny debates of the Medici years. When Lorenzo de’ Medici died and his son Piero was exiled in the early 1490s, the ultimately hopeful words of the Dominican friar Savonarola—that after a time of deep and painful chastening, Florence would shine brightly as it had long been ordained to do—captured the civic aspirations of many. The friar’s vision of a city led by God’s chosen instruments, “officials” or “archangels” serving the public good, had Florentines convinced that “their government acted with cosmic validity.”\footnote{Trexler, \textit{Public Life}, 469-470.}

Perhaps Savonarola simply capitalized on the instability of sacred time, space, and ritual left by Lorenzo and his family.\footnote{Trexler, \textit{Public Life}, 440-470.} In the absence of a cosmologically ordered governance in Florence during Lorenzo’s later years, Savonarola’s strict religious program may have reincorporated a sense of divine harmony and purpose into the city. In any case, the latter’s vision was more specifically imitative of heaven, and his fellow friars at San Marco demonstrated to laity “how the whole city would interact once the millennium had come.”\footnote{Trexler, \textit{Public Life}, 473.} The idea of heaven on earth reached far beyond liturgical settings, iconographic displays, the cloistered environment. It was all-encompassing.

The Savonarolan movement could not have happened in a secularized city. The vision of becoming a city near the top of God’s earthly hierarchy—and therefore nearer to the angelic
orders that carried out his purposes on earth—found broad appeal, at least for those beginning years when the vision seemed fresh. Competing agendas regarding the breadth of signorial representation, alignment with France’s Charles VIII or the Holy League that opposed him, and the enforcement of moral standards quickly turned the visionary into a controversy, but specifics aside, his program for a city “more heavenly than earthly” was not out of touch with Florentine interests. So clearly articulating his goal of reproducing heaven’s environment on earth, not just in a cloister or a seat of government but in an entire city, was bold and risky—a risk that ultimately missed its reward. Yet the response tells us that a yearning for some utopian, millenarian, celestial kingdom was present in wider circles than often imagined.

In the following decades, as the republic fell, then returned, then finally fell again, the Medici returned from exile, two were elected to the papacy, and Florentine ritual life was again colored in Medicean shades. By the last years of the republic, “Florence was being sacrally deconstructed,” or at least sacrally bent in different directions—not having lost its religious ethos, or even its vision of Florentine glory, but with little inclination to entertain political rhetoric reminiscent of the friar’s. This is not to say that civic religion—or again, alternatively, religious civicism—was a thing of the past. Its lasting legacy cannot honestly be written out of the story of political development. But its explicitly religious justifications turned more implicit, more subtly nuanced, and more blended with diverse elements. The social side of heaven-on-earth would be left for explorers and utopian writers to reposition and dream about. The spiritual

137 Trexler, *Public Life*, 543; Trexler’s analysis tracks “the Mediceanization of Florentine sacred time,” which “soon led to the sacralization of Medici time,” and goes into intriguing detail in interpreting the meanings given to the city’s feasts and processions and “ideological communications that equated the Medici with divinities and divine histories,” 507.
side, of course, would still be experienced in the visual and other sensory manifestations that remained.

5.7 Paradise Internalized

The eclectic scholar and philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a supporter of Savonarola and an apparent victim of poisoning in 1494 (possibly ordered by Piero de’ Medici), had written a speech in 1486 to introduce his nine hundred theses on the uniqueness of being human. The oration never happened, but the work became a seminal articulation of humanism.\textsuperscript{138} In it, Pico wrote of the glory of angels—specifically the top three orders in Pseudo-Dionysius’ hierarchy—as models for human love and knowledge. We are creatures of heaven, he asserted, living on the ground floor of the universe that is God’s temple. We “who wish to emulate the angelic life” should “hasten to that court beyond the world” to attain to the dignity and glory of those exalted orders. How? “Let us observe what they do, what kind of life they lead. For if we lead this kind of life (and we can), we shall attain their same estate.”\textsuperscript{139} In other words, the replication of heaven on earth occurs in the human mind and soul.

Like the Pseudo-Dionysius, Pico aimed to elevate the soul toward heaven through a spiritual “knowing.” But like visionaries who preceded him, he also allowed for the soul’s ability to draw heaven down to earth, to unite the human and divine in the here-and-now world of flesh and blood. To contemplation he added the acquisition of specific knowledge and the possibility that the God-ward journey involves a lot of human dignity and initiative. Even the idea of being made in God’s image, fundamental to Pico, assumes some imitation of divinity on earth and

\textsuperscript{138} The oration was first published in 1496, a decade after it was written.
some aspiration for heaven here too. His oration confirms that at least some expressions of Renaissance humanism did not dull the human impulse to reflect cosmic order. In Pico, the spirit of the age internalized the response and affirmed humanity’s ability to live it out.
The Savonarolan movement was not an inevitable or even likely outcome of a heaven-on-earth political ideology, and in more diplomatic hands, a similarly motivated movement might have looked substantially different and lasted significantly longer. There is no way to know this. No other Italian city pursued such a radical manifestation of otherworldly policy; most continued to negotiate a balance between the ideal and the practical, the heavenly Jerusalem as a model and earthly corruptions as necessary evils. Perhaps the political arena was understood to be too worldly for such holy ambitions, and Florentines had simply been guilty of entertaining the fantasy that it was not. In any case, the intellectual elites of northern Italy who did not govern affairs of state were free to continue embedding representations and proportions of cosmic significance into their works, and religious elites continued to provide theological and philosophical justifications for them to do so.

The impulse to apply heaven’s ideals to earthly environments, that hunger to experience something of the divine realm in human space, had gone through many turns and iterations since Gothic innovators picked up on the ancient concept and attempted to magnify it wherever possible. The late medieval period was an age of transitions, and because of the theological and stylistic milieu in which this growth and change took place, much of it was accompanied by this heaven-on-earth agenda. Understandings of sacred space and the portability of its essence became useful in sacralizing what had previously been mundane. The central rite of the Catholic faith was mobilized for the sake of whole cities and their territories, including their social groups and governing institutions. Burgeoning artistic, musical, architectural, and ritual creativity capitalized on this sacred potential to give witnesses and participants divine tastes, touches,
sounds, smells, and visions of physically imperceptible realities behind the scenes of the human drama. And civic religion became much more than a matter of social responsibility, and certainly something other than a last stand against secularizing trends, in giving expression to the order and design of the universe.

6.1 Dynamics of a Worldview

These observations cut against the grain of some narratives. The continuing presence of this religious impulse, so patently present in so many expressions from the late medieval and early modern periods, does not contradict the idea that modernizing Europeans were experiencing new ways of thinking and experimenting with broader, more inclusive worldviews. Of course they were. Classical thought, optimistic definitions of the nature of humanity, humanist emphases and expressions, and a willingness to challenge ecclesiastical dicta were all authentic hallmarks of the European Renaissances. This counternarrative does, however, serve to rein in any unidirectional teleologies of secularism and balance them with a less caricatured, more layered—and more realistic—picture of the human spirit. Classical thought, that hallmark of humanism, was often Christianized, optimistic definitions of the nature of humanity were given theological justifications, humanist emphases and expressions were often preoccupied with sacred themes, and challenges to ecclesiastical dicta were often made in the name of a higher authority, as Savonarola himself so brashly demonstrated in his rebukes of Alexander VI and his defiance of excommunication. This was not a period of de-Christianization, or even the beginnings of one. It was a period of Christian diversification, theological thinkers thinking more freely, makers of sacred art experimenting with less sacred design elements, philosophers maturing beyond an artificial choice between wholesale acceptance or rejection of ideas and
approaching the buffet of novel views they served up for each other. To be sure, some Renaissance intellectuals became less religious. Far more of them simply became less institutionally beholden in their religion, at least in heart if not yet in practice. The difference is significant. The narrative of a secularizing world breaking free from the oppressive fetters of medieval religion is not at all consistent with the evidence—on many counts.

Hence the contradictions, the seemingly opposite points that the evidence presents. On one hand, we see rampant conspiratorial politics that could hardly be defined as religiously principled. On the other hand, we see the conspirators against Galeazzo Maria Sforza praying together before they assassinated him because they were convinced that they were on a divine mission to free Milan—and perhaps God’s kingdom itself—from ungodly oppression. As noted earlier, we see Italian city leaders embedding overt references to paradise and obscure references to cosmologically significant numbers into their statutes, then moving on to address dung heaps, infernal odors, and other ongoing problems that confronted them with the reality that their urban environments were not exactly heavenly. Oaths were taken at altars and under the watchful eyes of patron saints, making them sacred and binding and inter-worldly, yet those oaths sometimes bordered on manipulation and treachery, rendering them in no way commensurate with the piety of the saint in whose name they were taken. Patrons eagerly and sometimes desperately commissioned sacred art not only to enhance their reputation but to purchase their entry into heaven, apparently convinced that such enormous displays of piety freed them to eliminate political opponents and commit all sorts of other sins with impunity. And Franciscans and Dominicans in Florence could seek to replicate heaven’s social life and sacred environment in their abbeys while laying down life-and-death challenges and nearly going to war against each other over public policy.
But every age has its contradictions. So does every human psyche, which complicates the effort to answer one of the overarching questions behind this study: How pervasive was this heaven-on-earth mentality? A focus on one recurring theme through several centuries in the span of a few chapters can give the impression that it was ubiquitous, universally understood, and behind nearly every decision. This is not the case, of course. Though it often appears, it also often does not appear. Savonarola articulated his heavenly agenda, and a significant number of influential Florentines supported him. But does the fact that few other people in power did articulate such a vision mean that all of those Florentines were drawn to an anomaly rather than an ideology that struck a chord? Possibly, but only if the urban encomia of previous centuries were simply gushing the language of empty idealism rather than implicitly casting their cities in a divine image, and if preambles to statutes that invoked the purposes of creation were mere formalities rather than expressions of a shared belief. If the pervasiveness of a worldview can only be established by clear and frequent articulations, perhaps the heaven-on-earth perspective was only loosely embraced by certain segments of the population and not a widespread mentality after all.

But worldviews are generally assumed, not explained, and therefore are difficult subjects of inquiry. The fact of patriarchy, for example, was almost universally accepted in medieval society, but virtually no one felt the need to explain it in a *summa*, issue a papal decree establishing it, or philosophize about it as though it needed to be defended. It profoundly shaped life not because it was an important point of discussion but because it was so thoroughly taken for granted. The assumption surfaces clearly in visual and literary evidence, but indirectly, not as a primary theme, and not in any way that a historian would go looking for it in controversies or

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1 Much of Trexler’s *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* is aimed at positioning Medici power in terms of sacralizing the family’s own image—so, in a sense, a “heavenly” agenda, but an alternative one in which the Medici equated themselves with (or wanted to be seen as) divine leadership.
sermons of the time as something that needed to be proved. Sunday sabbath was likewise taken for granted and rarely appeared in any sort of treatise or debate. Yet it was profoundly formative; secular and liturgical schedules, the rhythms of life, were completely oriented around it. It was an integral part of a pervasive worldview, only to be discerned wherever that worldview showed itself incidentally in the course of other discussions. These were backdrops on the stage of medieval life.

The heaven-on-earth mentality falls in this category. It seems to have been present in many visual and literary expressions while being overtly stated in only a few. The visual evidence presents it clearly, yet the meaning of such evidence is not obvious. Trexler, borrowing from Peter Brown, insisted that we have to understand the audience before we can understand the ritual, festival, procession, or any other behavior.² Did the period eye see that ritual/festival/procession as didactic, symbolic, representational, or re-presentative? Was it a cue for contemplation or an invitation to experience the thing signified? Were all of these references to heaven’s immanence mere expressions of formal belief, or were they also expressions of deep desire? There are no completely reliable answers to these questions, though much in the previous chapters has aimed to answer them. The best we can say is that a self-conscious articulation of heavenly themes surfaces frequently enough to suggest that this perspective reflects a general, widespread mentality, but not so frequently or directly that it was always a conscious agenda or program. It was sensed by most, actively pursued by some, and voiced by only a few.

As with most investigations of medieval life, an inherent limitation of this study is that its sources were almost all produced by literate, educated, skilled elites. The artisans who built the great cathedrals, the theologians and contemplatives who studied the thought of Augustine and

² Trexler, *Public Life*, xxv.
the Pseudo-Dionysius, the chroniclers who recorded social and political histories of their times, the master artists, architects, musicians, and writers who created richly expressive and meaningful works—all were among the privileged. Yet even if their expressions of heaven on earth were part of an esoteric language that only the initiated could fully understand, many of those expressions were intended for a larger audience: the masses who attended Mass, the marginalized who only observed processions rather than joining them, the listeners of songs sung in unison with angels. Gregory’s statement that images were the Bible of the illiterate, though demonstrably, drastically incomplete as later medieval people understood images, nevertheless makes a very important point: the illiterate saw them. And even if the illiterate could not fully comprehend the iconographic program displayed for them, they knew what angels looked like and understood enough Latin to recognize the Sanctus and the Gloria. They could sense the heaven that was being presented.

Still, all of Latin Christianity can never be considered uniform on any particular concept. The available evidence for theological discourse among religious elites was produced and preached in monasteries, universities, and cities. The most compelling visual evidence also comes from cities because that is where cathedrals stood and great works of art were commissioned. Only in cities were there sufficient funds and accomplished musicians to perform composed polyphony; in rural areas, plainchant and improvisational polyphony sufficed. Though it is necessary to avoid firm categories like “elite,” “formal,” and “popular” because they often overlapped so substantially that they cannot be treated as distinct, questions of reception remain. Did rural Catholics, who often had limited or no exposure to many of the sensory and literary expressions of this concept, share in the worldview that produced it? Possibly, if the worldview was pervasive enough. But again, that is a delicate line to draw.
Delicate lines aside, the evidence demonstrates amply enough that the shapers of culture and society perceived heaven as a reality that was both distinct from earth but could be experienced on it through certain mediations. Like Latin, the visual, tactile, auditory, and otherwise sensory language of the otherworld shared widely, enough so that a casual observer of seating arrangements at a dance could draw comparisons to Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchies, or a careful listener of a polyphonic Mass could discern, amid the theatrics of heaven surrounding the Eucharistic rite, a distinct invitation to experience a glimpse of the beatific vision now. Creators of such complex, intricate, oblique references to divine things may have created them at times to function like Christian talismans drawing divine power into the earthly event, just as hidden triangles supported the vault of Reims Cathedral because of their Trinitarian importance. But they far more often created them to be seen and heard, which means that at least some people seeing and hearing them would be expected to understand them. And, based on the theological discussions from which they were drawn, quite a few did.

Non-elite participation in this paradigm appears more explicitly in the number of pilgrims who crossed regions and continents to experience outposts of heaven—holy sites and relics that were usually tied to saintly patronage or biblical events. Biblical locations might be reproduced in places outside the Holy Land, as in Bologna, where monks at Saint Stefano replicated Jerusalem’s sacred sites, or inside monasteries or churches where stations of contemplation set a path for viewers to experience in progression. For some, the journey may have been just as heavenly as the destination, particularly if it mimicked the way of the cross or the lifestyle of prophets and apostles. The most popular pilgrimage sites—the Holy Land, Rome, and Santiago

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The vita of Raymond of Piacenza (d. 1200), “the Palmer” (for pilgrimage to Jerusalem), says he was told by Jesus in a vision to dress in a garment the color of the sky—i.e., to clothe himself in the color of the heavens—to go back to his home country to minister to the poor and sick. “The Life of Raymond ‘the Palmer’ of Piacenza,” in Acta Sanctorum, ed. Peter van der Bosch, trans. Kenneth Baxter Wolf, in Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation, ed.
de Compostela—were costly journeys, and many non-elites could not afford them. But many embarked on them anyway, and the far more numerous sites besides these most famous ones were manageable treks for almost everyone. Few Europeans lived so far from any site of a miracle or relic that they could not go there in a time of need or penance. And the proliferation of devotional objects in the fourteenth century made supernatural touchpoints even more accessible. The sensory explosions of a richly orchestrated Mass at a prominent cathedral might have been out of reach for some, but there was something of heaven to experience almost everywhere.

### 6.2 For Further Research

Much more could be explored on this issue of portability and to what degree it made heaven seem more immanent. It might be thought that increasing accessibility to sacred things may have watered down the sense of exclusivity or unique holiness of richly adorned locations and events. But such locations and events could retain their privileged status precisely because of their extravagant sensations and adornments, even as smaller, humbler, yet still spiritually endowed medallions, statuettes, and other crafted images satisfied the same impulses in between Masses or for broader groups of people. In many respects, “holy” was in the eye—or ear or touch—of the beholder. Some beholders may have needed more extravagance to evoke the holy because of their frequent exposure to it. Others might be enraptured by a brief gaze at the elevated host or a touch of a reliquary.

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4 Carolyn Bynum observes how very tactile medieval devotion could be. Holy images were not just seen. Personal dedicated objects in particular were to be touched, kissed, and carried everywhere. “The medieval devout frequently treated such images as the locus of the divine.” *Christian Materiality*, 65.
Another area for further exploration is the ways in which patron-client relationships were modeled on the heavenly model. There are certainly similarities between the relationships between cities or churches and their saints and that of clients and their patrons, and some evidence points to the latter being consciously patterned after the former. But did the changing nature of patron-client relationships in the late medieval period alter the understanding of heavenly patrons and their clients—or vice versa? A comparison of evolving social dynamics and parallel (or not) religious dynamics might yield fruitful results and make clearer the degree to which human societies consciously or subconsciously mimicked heaven’s templates or modified those templates to mimic their changing world.

One aspect of the changing world that needs fuller exploration is the cultural and intellectual diversification of heaven. Tracing a decidedly Christian path from Gothic France through the devotional and aesthetic cultures of the Burgundian Low Countries to Italy’s civic values risks giving the false impression of a linear development or a purely Christian phenomenon. Yet no religion was purely formed in a vacuum, protected from outside influences informing its development. Latin Christianity itself owed significant debts to Platonic and Aristotelian thought, which were mediated to Christian tradition by centuries of tension and negotiation between Hebraic and Hellenistic elements. The shapers of medieval Christianity generally acknowledged their debt to classical thought and forms but often denied similar debts to Judaism and Islam. Though Jews were marginalized throughout the period, Judaism was foundational for Christianity, and Islamic influence on northern Italy—aesthetically primarily

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5 Medieval theologians were well aware of Christianity’s indebtedness to Hebrew scripture and the Jewish culture that produced prophets, apostles, and the Messiah. But that is not quite the same as recognizing a debt to Jewish people, who were widely resented and marginalized throughout the Middle Ages. In Catholic (and later Protestant) eyes, the entire history of Judaism up to Jesus therefore became Christian history that the Jews had stewarded for a time but distorted and lost their right to steward thereafter.
through Venetian trade, literally through works increasingly available in Latin—appears at times in visual styles and literary appropriation. If Dante’s and therefore Florence’s heaven had a bit of Islam in it to go along with the Hebraic, Christian, Neoplatonist, Aristotelian, and north European literary and mythological flavors already mixed in, social and political life might also have been affected. Paradise itself has ancient Persian roots, and how the paradises and heavens of medieval European thought were shaped by contemporary iterations of this universal theme is worthy of further exploration and closer analysis.

6.3 Trajectories of an Idea

An increasingly diversified Christianity produced increasingly diversified responses to the possibility of experiencing heaven on earth, whether spiritually, through physical senses, or in the social body. This is most plainly evident in the Protestant Reformation, when views on the senses and how the immaterial world might be experienced became highly contentious issues. For many reasons, not the least of which was the question of materiality and its meanings, this was a defining moment in Christian history. Matter had been at the heart of Christian practice, most directly in the Eucharist, and the fact that Corpus Christi processions became frequent occasions for hostile encounters confirms that the interpretation of material expressions of the immaterial was not at all a peripheral issue. The Protestant alternative directed all piety toward the written and spoken word rather than the visual or material expression, but reorienting devotion so dramatically, and toward something as ephemeral as verbal declaration, was

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6 Dante’s indebtedness to the Kitāb al-Miʿrāj (Ascension of Muhammad) has long been suspected and is the subject of Luciano Gargan’s Dante, la sua biblioteca e lo Studio di Bologna (Rome: Antenore, 2014), among other works.  
8 Rubin, Corpus Christi, 353.
challenging. In regions remaining strongly Catholic, the host was given greater versatility than before—for example, in hierarchical confraternities of the Holy Sacrament in seventeenth-century France, in which devotion to the host, no longer tied exclusively to fixed or portable altars, became the occasion for charitable works and campaigns against Protestants, prostitutes, and poverty. As Protestants resisted giving meaning to materiality, Catholics leaned into it even more.

The Reformation changed how sacred images, and therefore how images and iconographic representations of heaven, were seen. For art historian Joseph Koerner, they became the material of subjective, inner experiences with the potential of personal interpretations; the tragedy, from a Catholic (and artistic) perspective, was that “Luther unwrapped and internalized what Christian images dialectically revealed and concealed . . . Art became pure fiction.” Or, to put it another way, it turned faith in general into hearing, thinking, and understanding rather than envisioning, sensing, and absorbing. This trend is likewise noticeable in discourse about heaven. Over the next centuries, the heavenward pull would become less of a corporate and more of an individual journey, and encountering it through any sort of representation became a private more than public matter.

Of course, with Protestants’ initial aversion to any sorts of images, this privatization or personalization of heavenly experiences was not immediately discernible. Protestants redefined the notion of sacred space and chose to experience the world differently than Catholics did, but for most Catholics, the beliefs and experiences of heaven as they had understood them prior to the Reformation continued after the Reformation as well—perhaps even more consciously, in

10 Rubin, Corpus Christi, 366.
light of how debates brought these beliefs and experiences to the surface. Protestant attitudes toward sacred space ranged from the violent to the subdued to the covertly (or subconsciously) adaptive.\textsuperscript{12} What had perhaps remained subconscious or unarticulated in Catholic culture before the image controversies of the Reformation entered an arena of precisely defined rhetoric and defense. Along with disputed doctrines, the entire premise of material expressions of an immaterial realm polarized European religion.

According to Luther and many other reformers, images were powerless for anything other than instruction—and perhaps contemplation, but not of the sort that could move the soul toward heaven. They could only represent, not re-present, whatever was portrayed in the image. The only image-making Protestants eagerly supported was the imprint of the divine on the human soul, though they did make liberal use of woodcuts for illustrations of biblical and doctrinal texts. Images meant only for didactic purposes were considered more effective the more literal they became. Obvious symbols for Jews as swine or the Pope as antichrist were acceptable; less so were subtle, open-to-interpretation images like a \textit{hortus conclusus} or divine light entering a closed room. Provoost’s \textit{Sacred Allegory} would have alarmed many Protestants for its ambiguities as much as its Mariolatry. Protestants perceived Catholics as persistently obscuring the truth, and their response was to make truth and meaning unmistakably transparent—arguably a positive development in theology; inarguably a negative direction for art. Tellingly, Protestant attacks on art often centered on representations of the senses—eyes

gouged out of images, for example, or sculptural hands or ears mutilated. Where Catholic churches had received light in brilliant colors to enliven the images and materials within them, many reformers shattered stained glass to let the pure, white light illuminate their “plain walls and biblical texts.” The images assessed as powerless by many leading reformers must have retained a significant amount of power to have been dealt with the way they were.

The reaction of Protestants to Catholic visual programs seems to confirm the thesis of this study. If Catholics saw images only as instructive, narrative, or meditational, the visceral reaction of some reformers to them is hard to explain. At the other end, if veneration of images was the only issue, those reformers’ efforts at elimination would not have included images unlikely to prompt veneration (like scenes of heaven or portrayals of Old Testament prophets). Luther came to see images as useful for instruction, as long as they were not venerated or even used as prompts for veneration. Some other Protestant leaders had harsher assessments. Images had to have been perceived as powerfully evocative, not as mere decoration or instruction, to become the subject of such condemnation by the radical branch of reformers.

Protestant music, on the other hand, eventually excelled at complex polyphony—Bach, an early eighteenth-century Lutheran, being an eminent example. But early Protestantism was not as kind to the musical extravagance of sixteenth-century Catholicism. Luther held, in his earlier years, that proper worship required no bells, organs or singing, or any other sensory expression Catholics tended to emphasize, though he later appreciated the value of music for its ability to enhance worship experiences. He came to see music as a divine gift from God, nearly

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14 Tavinor, “Sacred Space and the Built Environment,” 27.
on a standing with theology, and preached that the devil could not cope with it. Still, many Protestant movements downplayed the benefits of professional choirs and instrumentalists and emphasized instead congregational singing of hymns. As in preaching, the words became central—verses to which everyone could give voice for the purpose of celebrating, remembering, and rehearsing the faith. Melanchthon had written that the primary purposes of music were to increase understanding and memory of doctrine and preserve and promote the message.\textsuperscript{16} Reformers appreciated the sense of community congregational singing could create, but none perpetuated the belief that this community included angels singing the same songs. Perhaps humans and angels were singing simultaneously, but not \textit{together}, at least not as part of any ordained liturgy taking place in both realms.

The Reformation was not the only area in which medieval worldviews were turned, stretched, and diversified in various, more modern directions. The discovery of new worlds and increasing familiarity with old but distant ones revolutionized European understandings. Encounters with new species and cultures were fascinating; encounters with new peoples and civilizations were disorienting and challenging. Aspects of the biblical narrative were thrown into question. Had there been two creations? Were “primitive” people examples of prelapsarian innocence or postlapsarian depravity? And were their pristine environments reminiscent of Eden—or perhaps near Eden itself? This upheaval of what had been a relatively stable understanding of the world prompted an enchantment with distant places and a re-envisioning of paradise. The possibility of an attainable earthly paradise had long been so elusive that the heavenly paradise, which fit neatly into Christian eschatology, occupied religious aspirations. Now the possibility of an earthly paradise, which did not fit nearly as neatly into Christian

\textsuperscript{16} Bertoglio, \textit{Reforming Music}, 189.
eschatology, seemed much more realistic—perhaps not for the vast majority of people who had little opportunity to travel great distances, but for explorers, adventurers, dreamers, and humanity as a whole. Whereas descriptions of paradise and heaven overlapped substantially or even merged completely in late medieval theology, distinctions between them became more keenly felt.

Despite the many challenges of adapting such a revolutionary understanding of the world into deeply held assumptions and beliefs about its divine origins and purposes, the existence of new worlds seems to have given renewed impetus to the idea of replicating the heavenly city on earth. While some searched for Eden or a fountain of youth, and some sought exploitation of resources and vast vistas of mercantile opportunities, others saw a blank canvas and longed to be the Fra Angelico who painted its heavenly scenes. European Franciscans wanted to create a Province of the Holy Cross on that canvas.¹⁷ Later adventurers envisioned what a city of God built from the ground up might look like. And many of them began with the ideals that had been instilled in them directly from their religious context.

Northern Italian cities had leveraged the image of the new Jerusalem in striving for or justifying a more paradisiacal urban environment and had become a model that some other European cities emulated and eventually exported in their colonial ventures. Tracking that progression with any specificity is difficult; it would be easy to interpret hints of an environmental movement in Italian cities as an isolated trend specific to a particular region and period, in which the focus was entirely local and never global (or even regional). But other cities in Christian Europe—all of which shared the religious and philosophical inheritance that associated earthly cities with the city of God—did adopt some of these northern Italian

approaches (sometimes consciously, sometimes as independently developing trends) and adapted them to their own environmental concerns, and much of this mentality was integral in shaping New World colonies.\textsuperscript{18} Unbridled exploitation of resources certainly took place, especially in the colonies—contradictions between ideals and reality were transplanted there too—and urban environments in both worlds continued to wrestle with the challenge of unclean air and water. But the theoretical foundation for envisioning old or new cities as potential reflections of another realm remained.

There are hints of this continuing legacy in various Catholic and Protestant branches of thought, which all draw from the same intellectual roots. The biblical, Augustinian, and scholastic imagery of heaven (or paradise or the city of God) that manifested at times in northern Italian cities significantly influenced utopian thinkers, for example, who picked up on these visionary themes but often stripped their works of overtly religious language. Though their ideals derived from ancient sources, their works (and those influenced by it) employed a rather different vocabulary.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, post-Enlightenment naturalists and romantic writers consciously utilized religious motifs—specifically those related to ascetic monks and wilderness landscapes—that can be traced back to early Christian monasticism and were widely depicted in Renaissance art.\textsuperscript{20} Visions of the ideal city may have evolved over time, but the art of envisioning has a long history with many continuing motifs.

Whether these northern Italian cities served as laboratories for incorporating an
otherworldly mentality into municipal law or other cities of Europe and the Americas simply
drew from the same conceptual streams as the rest of Christian Europe may be difficult to
determine. Some assert the former: that “the importance of their efforts led to the transmission of
legal knowledge, concepts, and techniques across the face of Europe, through England, and over
to the New World” and became a “cornerstone of the modern environmental movement.”
Similarly difficult to identify is any direct line from these cases to the thought of certain
Protestant groups that influenced proto-environmentalists of the early nineteenth century, or from
the scholastic brand of natural theology to later versions of it. At times in the government of
cities, nature has been seen as a gift to steward and the urban abode as an image of sacred design.

Utopian visionaries, and the genre of utopian literature that emerged in the sixteenth
century, built upon the theme of ideal cities without confining themselves to practical limitations.
Some scholars see utopian works as further evidence of a secularizing world, probably because
they often (but certainly not always) avoid a sacred vocabulary and offer creative alternatives to
ecclesiastical dominance. But far from being possible only in “a generation of lay intellectuals
who were not fettered by the concepts of theology,” some utopias were written by very
theologically oriented people who nevertheless envisioned earthly paradises that embodied
unearthly (or ideal-earthly) values—likely inspired by the discovery of new worlds more than
any disintegrating fetters of religion. (Hence the suggestion raised by Lucien Febvre that
Rabelais could not have thought in proto-secular terms as modern people might think of them.)

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21 Zupko and Laures, *Straws in the Wind*, 5. The authors do not provide details of this transmission but imply that the
details are known.
22 Miriam Eliav-Felton, *Realistic Utopias: The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance 1516-1630* (Oxford:
Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
The Italian utopias remained thoroughly Christian, even if other elements entered in. It has been rightly asserted that “the relationship of an ideal city in this world to a future heavenly Jerusalem, though sometimes not explicit, was never wholly lost from sight. The utopias were Platonised, but their Plato had been thoroughly Christianized.”

Numerous definitions of utopias have been proposed, and they vary widely. But even the definitions, particularly some by authors who view them as thoroughly secular, belie their religious, Edenic roots. One such definition asserts that “a utopia is a static society that has not evolved gradually but was created by fiat ex nihilo, has not changed since its creation, and is not destined to change in the future, since any change means deviation from perfection and therefore corruption.” This, in other words, might as well be the creation in Genesis if it had not fallen—an Eden or paradise with a serpent in absentia, its theological underpinning often decorated in religiously neutral styles. (The underpinning shows through clearly at times, however: Campanella’s *La Città del Sole*, for example, and its diffusion of true faith into the world; Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, the overtly Christian piety characteristic of Bensalem and its college, “Salomon’s” House, overflowing with religious symbolism of paradise and/or heaven.) New worlds, utopian optimism, and generous assessments of human nature did not replace earthly or semi-heavenly paradises. They diversified them and syncretized them with classical authors. And, in doing so, they allowed room for many of the period’s unanswered questions about prelapsarian innocence, original sin, and an outside world unknown to and unaware of Christianity.

Authors of European utopias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had reasons for avoiding overtly religious language (sometimes) while presenting essentially Christian visions of

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society: almost uniformly, they represent a wistful longing for unified or tolerant society and faith—a radical dream in the fractured societies in which they were imagined. On a continent torn apart by religious hostilities and competing worldviews, in the context of which almost any religious phrase might be seen as representing alignment with an entire movement or body of doctrine, envisioning alternative ways of life was risky business. Yet it was a business still fundamentally rooted in an inherited view of biblical values and ideals, no matter how reinterpreted they were.

Where sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paradise-utopias more significantly depart from the medieval beliefs about heaven and God’s kingdom is in their emphasis on equality, not hierarchy. Yet even in their equality their cities could mimic the spatial and ritual environments of medieval constructs—especially when arranged in concentric circles (like Campanella’s), inevitably recalling Aristotelian cosmology, or possibly Dante’s Paradiso, which was based on that cosmology. (Citizens in ringed formation are unequally arranged, naturally; some are closer to the center than others.) Campanella’s ideal society also departs from traditional beliefs by embracing sensory pleasures—baths, perfumes, aromas, ointments, etc.—which are not bad for the soul, as in monastic thought, but good for the body.26 The dining table looks like one in a monastery but is set with plenty of healthy foods chosen not by religious authorities but by doctors.27 Hints of paradise are not difficult to discern in these descriptions, but it is neither a Catholic nor Protestant paradise. In Campanella’s mind, however, it seems to have been a Christian one.

Juan Bautista Villalpando (d. 1608), a contemporary of Campanella, cannot be classified as a utopian writer, but his commentary on Ezekiel and his drawings of Solomon’s temple had

26 Camporesi, The Anatomy of the Senses, 80-81.
utopian-like elements and originated in the same beliefs in divine geometric proportions and cosmic order that Piacoli and likeminded Renaissance architects and theorists had held. He was a Jesuit architect and biblical scholar who believed that sacred architecture preceded Vitruvius (and in fact had been imitated by classical architects), and his reconstruction of the perfectly proportioned, rebuilt temple of Ezekiel’s vision conformed to harmonic proportions that were linked to the celestial bodies.\(^{28}\) For Villalpando, his rendering of Solomon’s temple and the celestial heavens “contained the power and understanding” of what it signified—the microcosm mediating the essence of the macrocosm.\(^{29}\)

The temple in Campanella’s *Città* likewise reflected the heavens; “the holy room represented the celestial world and the inner sanctum symbolized the angelic and mental world.” His city was to be “the repository of all knowledge, both terrestrial and celestial.”\(^{30}\) Its circular arrangement mimicked cosmic order, and though Campanella was somewhat eclectic in his beliefs—a Dominican with a bit of Hermeticism mixed in—his views of universal principles were direct descendants of the heaven-on-earth mindset of the previous centuries. Both he and Villalpando believed that earthly design somehow attracted or embodied the power of the heavens.\(^{31}\)

Clearly, ideas and beliefs about representing heaven materially and socially did not end with secularizing influences, Protestant resistance, or new paradigms accommodating new discoveries. They were repeatedly applied and performed in earthly life. Whether this was a conscious effort, a subconscious impulse, or a fascinating coincidence is not always easy to


\(^{29}\) Morrison, *Unbuilt Utopian Cities*, 60.

\(^{30}\) Morrison, *Unbuilt Utopian Cities*, 60.

\(^{31}\) Morrison, *Unbuilt Utopian Cities*, 61.
determine, of course. But the more often a coincidence occurs, the less coincidental it becomes. And attempted mimicry of heaven continued to occur quite often.

But it did not occur without alternatives creating tension for its advocates. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century developments in the field of science—the rapidly changing paradigms for “natural philosophy”—challenged the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian (and therefore Christian) cosmology that had been viewed as certainty for centuries. If human structures and endeavors were meant to emulate or encapsulate cosmic order and the understanding of its purposes, the possibility of the cosmic order being fundamentally different from long-held assumptions potentially provoked existential crises. Reformation thought and scientific discoveries must have been seen not just as intellectual or cultural innovations but as threats to a near-universal understanding of the cosmos and divine order. With the specifics of divine order (but, for most people, not the fact of it) thrown into question, we might expect an end to efforts to imbed it in earthly rites and designs. And, considering the hostility that newfangled ideas often provoked, the end might have seemed near.

In human history, however, there are few clean breaks with old beliefs. Gradual adaptations are the norm, and sometimes new paradigms even bring new energy and creativity to the existing ones. Poet Torquato Tasso (d. 1595), for example, welcomed the enigma of nature and envisioned cosmic parallels and secret affinities between plants and planets. Paolo Segneri (d. 1694) embraced the previously unknown wonders of creation—particularly anatomical intricacies—and marveled at “the Celestial Architect” who, as an “astonishing inventor,” endowed order, sense, and harmony on his creation, affirming that the invisible attributes of divine blueprints were still made visible in the created world, only with much more

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complexity and genius than once thought.\textsuperscript{33} The anatomical rediscovery of the body during the
Renaissance, Camporesi observes, “became encapsulated in a religious dimension during the
Counter-Reformation, which used anatomy as a kind of subtle instrument for the rediscovery of
God” and made the body a field of inquiry into the nature of divine design.\textsuperscript{34} And “far from
destroying the celestial hierarchy with a mathematicised cosmos,” Galileo himself affirmed the
consistency of his views with divine order by “align[ing] himself with angels in his writings and
images so that something of their nature, power, and authority might be transferred to him by
association.”\textsuperscript{35} Some cathedrals were even utilized as observatories for studying the heavens,
presumably because the divine order to be discovered posed little threat to the divine order that
was already assumed, at least in its most fundamental theological implications.\textsuperscript{36} Science was not
supplanting religion. Old beliefs were not being conquered. Far more adaptive than often
presumed, they were being reinvigorated with new dimensions of understanding.

Camporesi’s assessment of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century advances in knowledge
therefore captures the sentiment of a society that instead of losing its grip on the culture has
rather rediscovered its intellectual energy:

In the century in which mathematicians and astronomers explored interminable space,
even the “miracles” and tiniest anatomical novelties became the object of emotional
reactions and intellectual speculations. Poetic “amazement” was induced not only by the
stars, comets, skies, planets, satellites, the “celestial heaven” and the cosmic creation, but
also by the obscure archipelago of the human body, the self-propelled universe of
muscles, bones, and veins.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{33} Camporesi, \textit{Anatomy of the Senses}, 92.
\textsuperscript{34} Camporesi, \textit{Anatomy of the Senses}, 93.
\textsuperscript{35} Nick Wilding, “Galilean Angels,” in \textit{Conversations with Angels: Essays Towards a History of Spiritual
\textsuperscript{36} Spicer and Hamilton, \textit{Defining the Holy}, 10.
\textsuperscript{37} Camporesi, \textit{Anatomy of the Senses}, 110.
The contentious Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the paradigm-stretching discovery of new worlds, and the disorienting scientific “revolution” did signify tumultuous and vociferous times. But they also prompted exhilarating directions in the trajectories of an idea.
7 CONCLUSION

In *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Johan Huizinga describes the permeation of all aspects of life with religious images. This visual outpouring of faith was so pervasive, in fact, that it risked losing “the tension of true transcendence” and slipping into “terrible banality.”¹ For many people, this is apparently what happened—a “fatuous familiarity with God” that testified both to the stability of faith but also to a waning appreciation for its mysteries.² Of course, degrees of belief and devotion are never uniform from person to person, even when the tenets of faith have long been known, embraced, and shared. Passionate conviction can easily become mere mental assent.

Attending church was central to social life in the late Middle Ages, and for many it became merely an opportunity to dress up, show off their rank, and compete for status. For some, the event itself faded into the background behind their social priorities; conversations and trysts during Mass seem to have been common.³ “There [was] more naïve familiarity with liturgy than open godliness,” Huizinga observed, with people “following the sloppy course of a religious practice half gone to seed.”⁴

But devotion itself had not gone to seed, at least not in any fashion beyond the normal dynamics of commonly held beliefs. Quite the contrary. As in any age, there were those for whom the practice of faith was mere religious or social ritual and those for whom it continued to be deeply meaningful (and, because human hearts can be flighty, those for whom it might be one

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² Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 178.
³ Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 184.
⁴ Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 186.
thing one week and the other the next). Though some lived out their faith nominally, others lived it out with vigor. Evidence of religious sentiment and significant religious movements remained prominent in late medieval culture.

Throughout the late medieval and early modern periods, we have ample examples of what Huizinga calls “the passionate intensity of life”: the pageantry, the emotions prompted by a glimpse of the host or a relic, the ecstasies of mystic visionaries, the passion provoked by devotional objects, the intense gaze or contemplation that induced visions of bleeding, weeping, sentient images of Jesus or Mary, the immanence of heaven not just as a principle but as a felt experience, and the burst of creative expressions, many of which incorporated this heaven-on-earth theme. In the face of naïve familiarity with ritual stood a strong devotional culture that looked for signs of heaven and sought to integrate them into earthly life.

Huizinga recognized the value of those signs. “There was no room between what was depicted, and which one met in color and form . . . and faith in all this,” he wrote. “There was no room for the question, ‘Is this true?’ All these representations went directly from picture to belief.”5 Such images continued to be created because belief in and hope for heaven remained relevant and persuasive; and belief remained strong, in part because it was continually fed by powerful images. The hope of heaven and its power was a persistent theme of religious life throughout the period.

Longings for paradise or heaven or some pleasant respite from the severities of life are as old as the earliest known civilizations. They appear in cultural mythmaking, loci amoeni, tales of faraway lands and other worlds, the search for ideal kingdoms or fountains of youth or some almost-reachable Shangri La, utopian dreams, fantasy fiction, vacation packages, and lottery ads.

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5 Huizinga, The Autumn of the Middle Ages, 189.
They are prominently foundational in one form or another in most major religions, offering an eschatological resolution to human existence, at least for those who will embrace it. And the ways to embrace it are myriad, depending on the religion and where it comes down on the tensions between here and there, now and then, material and spiritual, visible and invisible, literal and figurative, sin and sanctity, and other such spectra of time and space and perception.

This study has been an exploration of one such phenomenon in the dominant religion of one continent during a four-hundred-year period. Such phenomena cannot be isolated in time, confined to a single culture, or covered exhaustively, for obvious reasons. Human inclinations are hard to specify and quantify, the origins are rarely obvious, and evidence for them is often too varied, too obscured or implied, or subtler than minds can make of it from a distance. But the evidence is there, the phenomenon is discernible, and in this case, it is much more than a peripheral issue. It illuminates the religious, philosophical, social, political, and aesthetic characteristics of an age and the dynamics that followed it. It unveils at least some aspects of a worldview from an important angle. And perhaps it helps bridge a gap between medieval and modern hearts and minds, which sometimes have gone searching for the same sense of transcendence, albeit in culturally remote ways.

In the conclusion to his exploration of the phenomenon of *Dreaming of Cockaigne*, Herman Pleij tries to put his finger on this same impulse as it appeared in medieval fantasies of the perfect life:

This yearning for a paradise on earth is undoubtedly an unconscious mode of human behavior, no matter how consciously these dreamworlds are constructed with building elements bound to time and place. The only variable is their outward form. Modern society now has at its disposal an unprecedented variety of paradises, characterized by ready accessibility and their ability to compete in revitalizing facilities. . . .

Present-day paradises are tailor-made to suit the individual customer. This idea seems to be lurking in some of the portrayals of the heavenly paradise dating from the Middle
Ages: eternal life should be lived in a setting of one’s own choosing. Heaven, however, was far away and anything but certain, which explains the need to discover paradises and lingering golden ages at the edges of one’s own civilization and beyond.  

I would add only that the need to discover paradises and golden ages also persistently manifested in a more surprising direction in the Middle Ages and its cultural legacies: the replication of glimpses and tastes and moments of the eternal paradise in the local environment, not nearly so fantastically beyond or geographically removed from immediate experience. And in those glimpses and tastes and moments, it seemed much more certain than might be thought.

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