Introduction

> We do not see the angels as present; this is something hidden from our eyes, something that belongs to the mighty commonwealth of God, our supreme ruler. But we know from our faith that angels exist, and we read of their having appeared to many people. We hold this firmly, and it would be wrong for us to doubt it.[1]

Augustine here expresses a simple fact of ancient Christian faith: that angels, invisible rational creatures, exist. The ubiquity of angels in the biblical text could hardly go unnoticed by such a great and prolific exegete, and indeed the angels feature in all of Augustine's major theological works and in his homilies. The angels are prominent in his discussion of the text of Genesis and are important for his doctrine of creation. The angels are the founders of the city of God and so of creaturely communion as Augustine understands it. The angels also play a pivotal role in salvation history, as well as in the story of each individual Christian's struggle against temptation.

Despite the attention that Augustine gives to the angels, there has been little scholarly interest in the place of the angels in his writings and in patristic angelology broadly speaking. The only modern monographs which substantially treat the early Christian understanding of angels are Jean Daniélou's *Angels and their Mission According to the Fathers of the Church* (1953) and Ellen Muehlberger's *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (2013).[2] Both Daniélou and Muehlberger begin their books

[1] *en. Ps.* 103.1.15.

[2] Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission According to the Fathers of the Church* (New York: Newman Press, 1957), and Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Neither of these texts focus on

by offering something of an apology for their chosen subject; the study of angels, it seems, necessitates a justification for the modern reader. Perhaps an interest in the angels could be seen as an indulgence in idle speculation. After all, the charge brought against the scholastics – who are said to have wondered how many angels could dance on the head of a pin – was that of utter irrelevance. Or, perhaps we are leery of a curiosity about angels which corresponds to an overactive imagination about the spiritual world, something which is not highly regarded in contemporary academic discourse. On the surface, it would seem that for us moderns the angels have little use, are of little interest and a study of them has no serious intellectual merit.

Although the mediation of angels seems to have little hold on the imagination of modern scholars, this was not the case for an ancient religious adherent. The *daimones* of Homer and Hesiod are inherited by Socrates, and in turn by the Platonists and the Neo-Platonists.[3] Celestial beings and divine mediators play a central role in Roman religious practice as well as in various forms of Gnosticism (including Manicheanism). In Augustine's time, the world is understood to be populated by spirits whose role in religious life is as important as it is contested. In a word, the existence of spirits such as angels and demons is assumed in antiquity. How they are understood to participate in religious worship and indeed everyday life is not consistent across time and place, but the interaction of human beings with celestial spirits of various kinds is a basic element

Augustine. The recent dissertation by Gregory Wiebe on Augustine's demonology, however, does have a significant treatment of the good angels in the first part of the text. See Gregory Wiebe, "Demons in the Theology of Augustine" (Ph.D. Diss., McMaster University, 2015). The only other substantial scholarly discussions on the topic of Augustine's angelology come from Augustinian encyclopedias – in English, Frederick Van Fleteren, "Angels" in *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009 [1999]), ed. Allan Fitzgerald et al., 20–22; and in French, Goulven Madec, "Angelus" in *Augustinus Lexicon*, vol. 1 (Basel: Shwabe & Co., 1986), ed. Cornelius Mayer, 304–315 – in addition to one article in Italian by Manlio Simonetti. See Simonetti, "Gli angeli e Origene nel *De civitate Dei*" in *Il De Civitate Dei* (Rome: Herder, 1996), ed. Elena Cavacanti, 167–178. Other short discussions of Augustine's angelology occasionally appear in works concerned with medieval angelology, such as Steven Chase, *Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2002), David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy* edited by Tobias Hoffman (Leiden: Brill, 2012). We may note this lack of scholarly material does not seem to correspond to a widespread lack of interest, as popular and spiritual titles on the topic of angels steadily appear.

[3] For a study of the *daimon* in Plato's thought and its reception through to the Neo-Platonists, see Andrei Timotin. *La démonologie platonicienne. Histoire de la notion de Daimon de Platon aux derniers néoplatoniciens* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

of ancient Greco-Roman religion. The nature of the angels and their relationships with human beings was of significant pastoral import for Augustine, and our lack of interest in the matter does not correspond well with the reality of ancient religion.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the existence of angels has far-reaching theological implications for patristic authors generally and for Augustine in particular. The presence of angels at many pivotal moments in the biblical narrative demands some account of them, and the question of the angels' role in Christian worship is still an open one in the fourth century. Although Augustine has no single work that treats the angels as a separate subject, he develops a surprisingly consistent way of speaking about them and of understanding them. He expends significant energy doing so, and the angels are integrated into fundamental aspects of his theology. It is not an overstatement to say that there are many ways in which we cannot fully understand his theology (and his world) without them.

To get a sense of the patristic orientation toward angelology, Daniélou describes the two theological extremes of angelology as he sees it: of mythology on the one hand, and of abstraction on the other, and it is helpful to imagine that Augustine (like other writers of ancient Christianity, according to Daniélou) navigates these two extremes.[4] On the one hand, given Augustine's Manichean background, it is crucial for him to develop a proper understanding of angels in order to defend the goodness of creation and to reject a dualistic worldview. It is imperative for Augustine that the angels were created good, with good intent, and that many persisted in that good. This very concern is one of the reasons why Augustine takes such keen interest in the book of Genesis and the angels' role in creation. The angels are not mythological beings, with their own narrative apart from that of scripture. On the other hand, as an exegete Augustine must interpret the numerous references to angels in the biblical text, particularly their interactions with God's people in the Old Testament. As Augustine notices, the angels in the Bible have a personal quality and are creatures in their own right.

For Augustine, then, the Christian angels are not the demons of mythology, but are personal, created spirits. A consideration of the angels is related to a number of theological questions, yet angels remain actual

[4] Daniélou, *Angels and their Mission*, vii. He speaks of these extremes as the unhealthy interest of spiritism or theosophy on the one hand (what I call mythology), and our tendency to think of angels and demons as merely the personifications of psychological realities on the other (what I call abstraction).

creatures and do not merely stand in for a theological concept. Put otherwise, Augustine seeks to understand the proper relationship of the angels with the rest of creation in a way that maintains the personal quality of their being. Augustine deals with this issue perhaps most significantly in *City of God* where he imagines the angels not only as a part of this great city, but as its primordial members. But in other texts, Augustine also speaks of the angels as our "neighbours,"[5] as our "friends,"[6] as "fellow citizens"[7] and reminds us that although God uses angels to communicate with human beings, he does not thereby always "trumpet out from heaven through an angel"[8] in some kind of imperious fashion. God allows both angels and human beings to participate in the economy of salvation, each according to ability and station.[9]

By avoiding both mythology and abstraction, then, Augustine shows that he understands the angels *as* created. On the one hand, they are good, they are made spiritual, and the good angels persist in perfection, but on the other hand, they are not so unlike us. Since they are created, they serve God and worship him, they seek God as their end, and they are our neighbors and fellow-citizens in the city of God. But since they are perfected, the angels also serve as a kind of litmus test in Augustine's theological thinking. If the good angels embody the blessed state for which the elect are also destined, by looking at them we might see what constitutes perfection for Augustine, and what theological categories he uses even when speaking about the blessed life of heaven. Against the angels, we can measure the relative importance of many theological themes in Augustine's writing; we can ask whether or not a certain way of speaking about God, about the body or about worship persists in the angelic life or not. The good angels help to show us the meaning and perfection of created life.

The Organization of This Work

In this book, then, we will see what Augustine says about angels and where in his corpus he is most interested to say it. This book is primarily

[5] *doc. Chr.* 1.31.
[6] *adn. Job* 20.
[7] See *en. Ps.* 90.2.1 and 136.1, for example.
[8] *doc. Chr.* preface 6–7.
[9] For example, Augustine interprets the ascension as the angels carrying Christ up toward heaven as an act of worship (or service) done by the angels, that is, Christ allows the angels to worship him but does not have any need to be carried. See *en. Ps.* 90.2.8.

concerned with the good angels (although the demons necessarily make an appearance) and with the question of how these good angels function theologically for Augustine, including the angels' role in his pastoral theology. The material on angels is somewhat disparate, and so dividing it up thematically, as I do in this work, runs the risk of atomizing Augustine's reflections on the angels and interpreting them apart from their original context. Each chapter, therefore, is centered on a specific text or group of texts, as well as a specific theme, and each chapter concludes with a suggestion about how Augustine's conception of angels is related to larger questions in Augustinian studies.

In chapter 1, Augustine's treatment of the creation of the angels as well as the role of the angels in creation is discussed. Augustine's Genesis commentaries are considered in chronological order, namely, *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, *The Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, the final books of *The Confessions* and book XI of *City of God*. We will see how Augustine fits the angels into the creation story, and that his persistent efforts to do so are founded on his desire to combat a mythological understanding of spiritual creatures. For example, Augustine argues, both in *Literal Meaning of Genesis* and *City of God* that the creation of everything (including angels) is described by the Genesis narrative. He says that he is unable to believe that the angels are not included in the biblical text, however obscurely, because in Genesis it is written that God created *in the beginning*, implying nothing happened beforehand, and that on the seventh day God rested from all his works, implying nothing could have been created afterwards.[10] The angels do not have an extra-biblical narrative of their own. Moreover, Augustine insists that his interpretation of *let there be light* as the creation of the angels is literal and not metaphorical; the creation of the angels and their subsequent activity (the night/day cycle) is truly signified by these biblical words.[11] Augustine thereby seeks to emphasize that the angels are part of the created order. He is insistent, both in the Genesis commentaries and elsewhere, that the angels do not create, but that this activity belongs to God alone.[12]

[10] See *civ. Dei* XI.6, XI.9 and *Gn. litt.* V.5.

[11] *Gn. litt.* IV.45.

[12] This is noted by Goulven Madec in his encyclopedia entry on angels. See Madec, "Angelus," 304–315. Madec also draws from an earlier article by Aimé Solignac; see Solignac, "Exégèse et Métaphysique, Genèse 1,1-3 chez saint Augustin" in *In Principio: Interpretations des premiers versets de la Genèse* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1973), 154–171.

The way in which the angels interact with creation, moreover, has implications for the goodness of creation and the goodness of the economy of salvation. Some scholars have argued that the sacraments are merely external signs for Augustine, with no lasting meaning or ultimate effectiveness.[13] The image of the angelic life in the Genesis commentaries challenges this notion. Augustine persists in using the language of signification and receptivity in the life of heaven which parallels our liturgical life here (such as the image of angelic reading). Signs and sacraments are ultimately taken up into Augustine's vision of the angelic life rather than simply surpassed in order for us to obtain something even better. For the angels, the contemplation of what God has created redounds to God's glory eternally, not just for a time until the external can be completely discarded in favor of the internal or spiritual.

City of God books IX–XII are the focal point of chapter 2. In these books, we find Augustine's vision of the angelic community, its sacramental life, and our interaction with and imitation of that life. Muehlberger's claim, that the angels are "divine drones" with no will of their own, and whose primary function is to serve as a heavenly placeholder or guarantor of a blessed afterlife, is contested.[14] The angels are not automatons, as Muehlberger suggests, but are icons of worship, since they both embody perfect worship of God and also mediate it. They are not un-free in being aligned with the will of God, but absolutely free in loving, willing and clinging to God. They are, in a way, guarantors of the blessed life to come, but they are also aids and exemplars to the church sojourning below.

Not only is the chapter on angelic worship the hinge chapter of the *City of God* (book X) but the understanding of proper worship is critical to the work as a whole. The *City of God* as a project, after all, attempts to envision two communities, the heavenly and the earthly, and these two cities are defined by the order of their desire, "the one enjoying God, the

[13] Phillip Cary is perhaps the most vigorous proponent of this view, writing (for example) that "in Augustine's Platonism words and sacraments have their significance and their use, but they cannot give us the inner good they signify. So it is not by turning to them that we find the knowledge of God but by turning inward, looking in a different dimension from all bodily things." See Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

[14] See, for example, Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, 5. She argues that Augustine's use of angels in *City of God* is primarily polemical. In short, Augustine pictures the angels as stable and blessed in order to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian God and the Christian heaven to the gods and afterlife of Roman religion. In this regard, Muehlberger follows the general argument of Simonetti.

other swelling with pride."[15] Angels have a more significant role to play in Augustine's understanding of that city than might be first apparent. The angels are already citizens of that city and represent our end. And so, as the first members of the city of God, angels are critical for Augustine's conception of the beginning, course and end of the city. They are an essential part of its composition. How, therefore, are we to understand the bodies of angels, and our future bodies in relation to them? If the angels present a perfect image of worship, how does our worship here on earth (particularly the *sacramenta*) correspond with heavenly worship? We again find significant evidence that Augustine has a "sacramental" understanding of the angelic life, as he uses the imagery of eating as well as the language of sacrifice to describe the angel's heavenly activity.

In short, *City of God* is about two communities, and both of them have their beginning among the angels. As John Rist writes, "it is human society as a whole, with its divine and diabolical associates, which is the subject matter of *City of God*."[16] But perhaps one of the most striking things about Augustine's work is that this statement can, and perhaps ought to be, reversed: it is angelic society, with its human associates, which is the subject matter of *City of God*. The city of God is not anthropocentric, and this entails that Augustine work, at times, on a completely different register.

It becomes clear, in the course of chapter 2, that since angels have a role to play in embodying perfect worship, they are exemplars for the church. In chapter 3, however, the human side of the question comes to the fore; how do angels interact with the human race throughout history in order to aid in its salvation? The main text for consideration is *On the Trinity*, in which Augustine asserts that all Old Testament theophanies are appearances of angels. In this respect, he departs from earlier traditions which regard these theophanies as appearances of Christ. In rejecting this position, he is able to solve the problem of confusing singular and plural references in some of these theophany texts, as well as to maintain what he sees as the uniqueness of the event of the incarnation. But he also thereby gives to the angels a privileged place in salvation history, and the implications are many. Again, Augustine works to affirm that the angels are created and so their role in the economy is one arranged by

[15] *civ. Dei* XI.33.
[16] John Rist, "On the Nature and Worth of Christian Philosophy: Evidence from *City of God*" in *Augustine's City of God: A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 214.

providence for their benefit and ours, but there is no room for an alternative myth in which angels work apart from God, nor does God have any inherent need for the angels to exact his will. Augustine solidifies this vision of angelic mediation by frequently pairing the work of angels with the work of prophets. By bringing angels down to the level of human mediators, so to speak, he also creates a unified vision of how creatures in general – angelic or otherwise – participate in the economy of salvation.

In chapter 4, the challenge that spiritual warfare does not feature prominently in Augustine's theology is addressed.[17] The primary texts considered in this chapter are Augustine's *Expositions of the Psalms*. In these sermons, Augustine does make frequent reference to demonic interference in the everyday life of the Christian, as well as in the scriptural narrative. He often interprets the Psalms as pertaining to spiritual warfare, and he sees the temptation of the devil and his angels as commonplace in Christian experience. Reading his *Expositions of the Psalms* in this light, a basic account of his teaching on spiritual warfare is given. He considers the devil's attacks to be real and dangerous, but recommends reliance on God as the foremost defense against them. He advises that we cultivate this dependence on God through the liturgy and prayer, as well as by following the example of holy men and women. The martyrs sometimes serve as this example, but Augustine prefers the biblical figure of Job as a model of a successful spiritual combatant.

In this chapter, we come to see that Augustine's teaching on spiritual warfare in his sermons is consistent with his angelology articulated elsewhere, that is, Augustine affirms angels are created beings involved in the economy of salvation, but not in the arcane cosmic struggles of myth. Thus he does not imagine spiritual warfare to be angels fighting demons over the control of souls, and rarely speaks about demons tormenting individuals or angels defending them. He insists that any power which the devil has is power permitted him by God, and that the devil's mastery

[17] Muehlberger distinguishes between genres of literature in which the angels appear. She designates the writings of Evagrius as "cultivation" literature, concerned with spiritual development, ascetic practice, etc., whereas Augustine's *City of God* is deemed "contestation" literature, concerned with political and theological argumentation. This distinction leads her to emphasize the polemical nature of Augustine's angelology. Spiritual warfare and cultivation are not part of Augustine's main concern, according to Muehlberger, but rather in aiming to give "an authoritative account of the world and of world history" Augustine "imagined angels to be eternally secure, in the happy circumstance of being assured of their stability with God. As Christians would be in the future … already aligned with the will of God and working according to that will" (*Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, 57).

of any human being involves the acquiescence of that person to the power of the devil. This understanding of spiritual warfare is consonant with Augustine's view of how the angels and demons form a community with us in *City of God*.

In pursuing these four main topics of discussion, we see that Augustine does not treat the angels as an abstract idea, but as creatures of God, whose existence has wide-ranging theological and pastoral implications about the body, about the sacraments, about salvation history and about everyday spiritual life. Augustine's angelology helps us to see his vision of the beatific community, and that understanding perfect communion is central to understanding the logic of (and perfection of) creation.