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1 How to Write about Angels

The world was once aflush with angels, until they became irrelevant, if not embarrassing, and were almost completely exiled by the twin forces of secularism and scientism – almost, but not quite. Pockets of religion and popular culture remained hospitable, and over the last few decades, there has been something of a revival of interest within religious studies, New Age practices, literature, and the imaginative arts. Still, we are a long way from the historically high periods of angel veneration, far less their serious study.

Angelology's claim to be a systematic body of knowledge, announced in its suffix -λογία and attested through a long tradition of learned inquiry, is out of step with the academic conventions of our times. No longer 'queen of the sciences', theology has learnt to trim her ambitions – clip her wings, if you will – disavowing what James Joyce once called 'the true scholastic stink' (Joyce 2003, 214), along with the supposedly primitive elements of supernatural faith on which such studies were founded. Speculation on the angelic hierarchy that fascinated the likes of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maimonides, or Avicenna and Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, has been consigned to its pre-modern oubliette.

It might be objected that there is today still a busy industry of books and articles on angels, and there is, especially Christian. But a closer look reveals that contemporary angelology is by no means what it once was; it has fundamentally changed its character. For the most part, across the Abrahamic faiths, the study of angels has become a zombie discipline, a revenant that staggers along without an authentic metaphysical life. The subject cannot be said merely to have evolved, because that would imply an organic relation to its former self, when it has in fact been travestied, in two directions.

On the one hand, it has been attenuated into fideism. Popular publications, the majority share of the market, are confessional, and insofar as they explain the nature and function of angels, they do so without pretending to academic rigour or systematic treatment. To say so is not to doubt the sincerity or even the veracity of such publications; it is only to observe that they stand on their own terms, as personal testimonies, substantially unaccountable to previous scholarship. Relatedly, 'one of the features of the contemporary upswing in interest in angels is that the formally non-religious are often happier talking about them than those who are part of a religious institution' (Stanford 2019, 8). Belief in angels is indeed often promoted without a corresponding belief in God.[1] Supernatural comfort is thereby promised without the corollary obligations

[1] 'A distinctive feature of the angels of the nineties, high as well as low, is their dissociation from orthodox religious contexts and their affiliation instead with other metaphysical phenomena

that come with a Supreme Being. This trend is not so much towards polytheism (a rebooted version of the pagan gods) as it is a kind of decapitated monotheism, to which Socrates long ago provided the appropriate riposte: 'what human being would believe that children of gods exist, but not gods?' (Plato 2017, 27A–28A).

On the other hand, angelology has collapsed into anthropology. Scholarly works typically treat angels not as objective ontologies, but as mere symbols and metaphors. By this praxis, angels do not offer glimpses of the divine order but of human desires, anxieties, ideologies. Celestial cathecting is said to extend from benign wish-fulfilment to our darkest sublimations, and of the 'range of ideas that we want to project', mortal isolation is usually judged to be uppermost: 'a need for this life not to be everything', for 'there to be something in that space between earth and sky', because 'we just didn't want to be alone' (Stanford 2019, 29, 46).[2] Even within conservative and evangelical circles, compared with earlier centuries there has been a dearth of 'serious discussion about angels' as divinely created beings (Potter 2017, 3).[3]

Such disenchanted talk is taken up especially when it comes to explaining the recent resurgence of angels in popular culture, which Harold Bloom has interpreted as a kind of 'populist poetry', said to have been precipitated in 1990 by Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels* (Bloom 2007, 4, 59).[4] Sundry claims have been advanced for this angelic comeback, everything from 'the tumbling of the [Berlin] Wall and the political change in 1989' to their serving as 'tools for imaginatively confronting the AIDS epidemic that was then ravaging gay communities', or as 'metaphors for mediation and information flow in an era of light-speed communication' (Serres 1995, 154; Wolff 2007, 695; McHale 2017, 43). Angels, by this reckoning, might as well be vampires, aliens, or ghosts – anything unreal and otherworldly: the effusion of human creativity, without any meaningful relationship to objective reality, or to any particular religious tradition.[5] They are an intellectual crutch and an emotional comfort-blanket in a puzzling and hostile world, a sheer confection for coping with 'the unbearable loneliness of our cosmic existence' (Wolff 2007, 695).

and violations of physical law – with ghosts, hauntings, and unsanctioned miracles' (McHale 2017, 35).

[2] Recent studies in the same vein include: Jones (2010), Bloom (1996), and Bloom (2007).

[3] For a survey of 'Gaps in Modern Angelology', from the limitations of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* to the New Age movement, see Potter (2017, Ch. 4).

[4] On the return of angels in popular culture, see McHale (2017); also, Wolff (2007): 'No one reckoned with the comeback of angels about the turn of the millennium' (695); 'The great theologians of the 20th century had simply forgotten them or were ashamed of them' (695). Also see Wolff (1991).

[5] For a recent perspective on reinterpreting historical encounters with angels as possible encounters with aliens – while suggesting that both may be confabulations anyway – see Pasulka (2019).

But what if angels actually exist?

That innocent question deserves its own paragraph: its implications are immense and define the direction of this entire Element. Ask after the objective reality of angels, a question that historically never needed to be asked, and modern scholars are liable to smirk if not sneer at the possibility, which they prefer to dismiss in advance, and on first principles. That 'angels always turn up in times of crisis' (when, say, a religious cult loses its attractiveness, or a political system becomes unstable) does not itself tell us whether they are real or fantasised. For those open to the existence of angels, their resurgent popularity could equally be 'A sign that the saving power is approaching in apocalyptic danger' (Wolff 2007, 695). Crises may be a catalyst for delusive projection, in other words, but crises would also presumably be the occasions when real divine intercessors, if they really existed, would be most likely to intervene.

Contemporary angelology is in any case unable to adjudicate on such questions, because it has boxed itself into an epistemological corner. Caught between fideism and anthropology, it struggles to reconcile religious conviction with scholarly respectability. Although it is possible to express one or the other, it proves difficult to entertain both at the same time. The reasons for this are far reaching and express the extent to which modernity has conceived of faith and reason as antagonistic modes of knowledge; or, at best, 'non-overlapping magisteria'.[6] More will be said on this as it pertains to angels in Section 3. It is sufficient to note here that while the epistemological problem faced by angelology is being immediately pinned to modernity, for reasons that will be teased out in what follows, it was actually incipient from the very beginning.

The existence of an invisible world composed of good and bad spirits was universally acknowledged from the earliest stirrings of the Abrahamic faiths. It could hardly have been denied, given the prominence of spiritual creatures throughout the holy books on which those faiths were founded. Scripture raised more questions about these spirits than it answered, though, such that it was necessary, as Joseph Turmel observed in his 1898 history of angelology, to resort to 'la conjecture philsophique ou aux raisons de convenance théologique' (Turmel 1898, 407). That meant going beyond exegesis, to consult also the evidence and logic of Church and cultic traditions, as well as prior and analogous theological positions, together with private prayer, contemplation, and reason.[7]

[6] Advocated by Stephen Jay Gould (1997) and (1999). For a recent Islamic perspective by a similar rationale, see Guessoum (2010).

[7] Even Pseudo-Dionysius, who founded his angelology on biblical exegesis, ultimately looked beyond Scripture, at times contradicting it: see Peers (2001, 4–5). Islamic angelologists who define angels as incorporeal find themselves contradicting several clear statements in the Qur'an to the effect that angels have material substance: see Burge (2012, 99).

The more elaborately such supra-Scriptural speculations are unfolded, however, the more contestable they may become. Anna Jameson spoke for many in 1848 when she cavilled at the ways in which, taking for their basis only 'a few scripture texts', 'the imaginative theologians of the Middle Ages ran into all kinds of extravagant subtleties regarding the being, the nature, and the functions of the different orders of angels' (Jameson 2012, 45).

At once accountable to Scripture, but at the same time prompted by Scripture to rely on other sources: Turmel and Jameson address the perennial bind faced by angelology. And yet there is also a sense in which their responses are inflected by a peculiarly modern prejudice. Both authors make their remarks in the contexts of celebrating the existence of angels. So their prejudice is not like that of, say, William Robertson Smith, whose entry on 'Angel' in 1875 for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* likewise considers the 'Biblical data' on angels to be 'very scanty', but who – unlike Turmel and Jameson – goes on to raise questions about whether angels are any more than the 'poetic art' of the human imagination (Smith 1875, 26–28). When Jameson speaks of the 'extravagance' of medieval theologians, she is not quibbling with their belief in angels (she shares that same belief), only the lavishness of their taxonomies. Turmel strikes a similarly belittling note when he portrays the enterprise of angelology with the language of scholarly self-indulgence, as a desire to 'contenter la curiosité' (Turmel 1898, 407).

There is, to be fair, something judicious in both assessments. Angelology is a subject for which Scripture only offers a prologue, and it is easy to see how the opinion might form that the scholastics really should have circumscribed their studies accordingly. The trouble is that angelology is too important to be so circumscribed; it cannot be dismissed as a speculative sideshow. The theological stakes are much higher than this. Look to the seminal interventions on the subject across millennia, and angels are regarded as an essential constituent of the religious cosmology at large. They are not studied as a private whim, but as an indispensable feature of a complete metaphysics, and one that represents real and important knowledge: 'curiosity' does not cut it.

Jameson and Turmel are not cited here because they demonstrate how belief in angels is wavering within the nineteenth century; that point could be made more forcefully by piling up further examples like Smith, who was accused or heresy soon after his article on angels and other religious subjects appeared in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Jameson and Turmel represent something more intriguing, something crucially different. They suggest how far even scholars who believe in angels are, since the nineteenth century, liable to downplay their significance in ways that are at odds with the longer history of angelology; ways that are instead consistent with the modern

historicisation of religion in general. While diminishing the scholarly standing of angelology, curling a lip at its claims to knowledge, may look like something very different from disbelieving in angels, religious history shows that the former attitude inevitably reflects and nurtures the latter. Scepticism about angelology leads to scepticism about angels.

'The fact that religion is a fully cultural construct is fairly evident', writes Maurizio Bettini: 'if it weren't, its practices and organization would not have changed so radically from one era to another, from one continent to another, or from one nation to another' (Bettini 2014, 3). This chain of reasoning is familiar within modern discourse on religion, but it turns on a simple fallacy, obscured by Bettini's use of 'fact' but belied by his subsequent qualifications, 'fairly evident' and 'so radically'. 'Fairly' concedes that the evidence is not definitive; 'radically' begs the question of whether a given religious evolution is extrinsic, expressing merely outward cultural trappings, or intrinsic, referring to a 'root' change.[8]

The importance of this distinction between extrinsic versus intrinsic change can hardly be overstated; it touches a foundational assumption of angelology. Put most directly: religious doctrine may develop while remaining coherently true. The contingencies of human experience across different times and cultures do not necessarily discredit the truth of a given faith; they may actually create the conditions in and through which its truth most fully emerges. G. K. Chesterton glossed the principle with characteristic limpidity:

> When we say that a puppy develops into a dog, we do not mean that his growth is a gradual compromise with a cat; we mean that he becomes more doggy and not less. Development is the expansion of all the possibilities and implications of a doctrine, as there is time to distinguish them and draw them out [. . .]. (Chesterton 1933, 7)[9]

That the human understanding of angels has been informed by human history, experience, and nature, and that some salient claims within angelology remain unresolved, does not, by this logic, perforce exclude the possibility of their objective existence. Competing accounts of angels might also, as part of an authentic doctrinal development, suggest the limited and shifting human capacity to construe them. These are not exclusive possibilities. Contradictory

[8] Originally written in Italian, Bettini's use of the word 'root' will be even closer to the Latin etymology of the English word 'radical' that, like the late twentieth-century theological school of Radical Orthodoxy, assumes the logic of recovery rather than mere reinvention.

[9] For the classical articulation of this principle, see John Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, which was originally published in 1845 (Newman 1878). For a contemporary thesis as it relates to the Islamic rather than Judeo-Christian tradition, see Guessoum (2010).

and changing opinions may express the conflicted and shifting perspectives and circumstances of human experience, but they may also – not as an alternative, but as a concurrent possibility – reveal the abiding fallibility of human beings.

Dante Alighieri tips a wink here, reminding us that even great popes and saints may err when determining the divine order. Gregory the Great is said to have laughed at himself ('di sé medesmo rise') when he made it to heaven and realised his mistaken ranking of the angelic hierarchy (Dante 2007, 28.133–35). Dante implicitly includes himself in this humbling, since he had previously followed Gregory's system, rather than what, in the *Commedia*, he now presents as the true order contemplated by Dionysius the Areopagite. From top to bottom: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels (Dante 2018, 2.5.6).

As was common in the Middle Ages, Dante was unaware that the works issued as if by Dionysius were in fact written by the fifth-century Christian Neoplatonist who has come to be known in the contemporary world as Pseudo-Dionysius. But the principle stands. Dante makes no special claim for Dionysius *qua* scholar: the canto ends by explaining that mortal man was not able to access such hidden truth through rationality alone, but only because it was revealed to him (Dante 2007, 28.136–39).[10] Pseudo-Dionysius had himself already made the same contention, contextualising what it is angelology can authoritatively claim to know through reason, by presenting knowledge of divine things as something that only fully reveals itself through the 'truly mysterious darkness of unknowing' (Peers 2001, 5–6).[11] For all the confident precision of angelology, it is irrefragably provisional.

This is where things, from an academic perspective, become awkward. Appealing to the necessity of revelation and the limits of reason is all very well in certain poetic or religious contexts, but modern scholars are not so easily satisfied by this move. Pope Leo XIII closed his intervention on epistemology after the Enlightenment, *Aeterni Patris* (1879), by enjoining the faithful to 'follow the example of the Angelic Doctor', Saint Thomas Aquinas, 'who modestly confessed that whatever he knew he had acquired not so much by his own study and labour as by the divine gift' (Leo XIII, §33). In religious terms, it was a potent and needful intervention. But advocating a return to Scholastic philosophy that can integrate faith and reason does not readily translate into the professionalised academic world: it is an affront to method. Where the encyclical urges 'modesty' when it comes to knowledge acquired by

[10] For an illuminating discussion of this passage, see the commentary in Dante (2007, 166–67).
[11] Quoted in Gill (2014, 17). Gill elaborates the point as it applies to visual depictions of angels. For an account of Dionysius's angelology, see Perl (2007).

reason and empirical inquiry, the modern academy has challenged the legitimacy of knowledge conferred through divine gift.[12] Hence the secular historicisation of angelology.

Thankfully, this trend has not been universal. Within the Christian tradition of writing about angels (more will be said in due course about Judaism and Islam), two interventions stand out for their theological trenchancy – one from the twentieth and one from the present century: Sergius Bulgakov's *Lestvitsa Iakovlia: Ob angelakh* [*Jacob's Ladder: On Angels*] (1929), and Serge-Thomas Bonino's *Les Anges et les Démons: Quartorze leçons de théologie catholique* [*Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*] (2007). In framing its material, the first, *Jacob's Ladder*, is presumptively assertive:

> It goes without saying that the doctrine of angels is not only of scientific-theological but also of religious-practical interest for every Christian. (Bulgakov 2010, xiii)

The second, *Angels and Demons*, is more concessive:

> I have no trouble admitting that the teaching about angels and demons is not the heart of the Christian faith. This is a side issue, a marginal teaching about a peripheral truth in the hierarchy of revealed truths. (Bonino 2016, 1)

The difference between these starting positions is not as stark as it at first appears. Bonino offers a lengthy footnote where the quotation given above leaves off, in which he clarifies that the existence of a hierarchy of revealed truths – an objective, logical order among the truths taught by the Church – 'in no way implies that the secondary truths are optional in the eyes of faith': 'All of them must be believed with supernatural faith' (Bonino 2016, 1, fn. 1). Bulgakov nonetheless remains the more strident, and with some cause. His systematic treatment of the role, meaning, and purpose of angels is informed not only by Scripture, liturgy, icons, and the Western and Eastern patristic traditions, but also by his own miraculous encounter with an angelic presence.

Jacob's Ladder is indeed an astonishing intervention and is self-consciously part of a celebrated angelogical tradition that includes Dante's exemplar, Pseudo-Dionysius, as well as Saints Aquinas and Augustine.[13] But comparing Bulgakov's book with studies on angels from an earlier age also highlights a key difference. Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, and Augustine each share Bulgakov's conviction that angels are of central importance for 'every Christian', and to be regarded as such both in 'scientific-theological' and 'religious-practical' terms.

[12] For a revealing account of this papal encyclical in the context of the development of what counts as rational knowledge, see MacIntyre (1990).
[13] See Potter (2017, Ch. 3) and Klein (2018).