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Angels in Christian Theology

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Angels in Christian Theology

Serge-Thomas Bonino

The doctrine of angels is not the heart of the gospel. However, it is also not extrinsic cultural symbolism borrowed from the surrounding culture, purely accidental, as a means through which the Christian faith expressed itself in the past, and which it could – or even should – abandon today in a profoundly different cultural context. Although it occupies only a peripheral and derivative place in the hierarchy of revealed truths, relative to the central mystery of God and his son, Jesus Christ, it is not to be neglected. Indeed, for Christian life and practice, belief in angels imparts specific characteristics (a strong doxological dimension, trust in providence, etc.), and legitimately captures the attention of the theologian seeking a more comprehensive understanding of revelation. Theological reflection on the invisible world of angels not only enriches the knowledge of the Creator and his work but also sheds light, indirectly, on most of the great mysteries of Christian doctrine.

In this article, we will first examine the main themes of traditional teaching on angels from Holy Scripture and the church fathers, placing them in the religious, cultural and intellectual contexts in which they arose (section 1). We will then turn to the angelological synthesis developed by medieval scholastic theology, especially the doctrine of St Thomas Aquinas. Relying on both faith and metaphysical reason, scholastic theology explores the metaphysical nature of angels and the modalities of their spiritual operations, so as to better explain the supernatural mystery of the angels' divine calling and sanctification, and the way in which they cooperate in the economy of salvation in Jesus Christ (section 2). While the Reformation did not challenge angelology but refocused it on scripture, the intellectual and cultural evolution of the modern and contemporary West led to a crisis of credibility in traditional teachings on angels. Angels have been expelled from the cosmos by the 'disenchantment of the world', of which the new vision of the universe induced by modern science is a major factor. Simultaneously, angels have been removed from what is considered revealed truths by the demythologization implemented by historical-critical exegesis (see Biblical Criticism and Modern Science). Therefore, contemporary theology seeks to update the traditional teaching while opening up new paths for an angelological doctrine, the theoretical and practical implications of which remain important (section 3).

As a specific article in this encyclopaedia is dedicated to Satan and demons, we will confine ourselves here, as much as possible, to topics relating solely to 'good angels', even though the question of angels and demons is generally closely linked in theological reflection. There are only a few theologians, such as Karl Barth, who almost entirely dissociate angelology and demonology.

Keywords: Christian theology, Angels, Thomas Aquinas, Church Fathers, Neoplatonism, Scholasticism, Providence, The Reformation, Demythologization, Cosmology

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1 Angels in the Bible and early Christian tradition

1.1 Angels in the Old Testament

The belief in a realm of intermediary entities, situated between the divine sphere and the human world, is a common aspect in the representations of premodern worldviews. These entities could be gods, fallen from their original rank; exceptional people or heroes elevated to a higher status; or hybrid beings existing on the border between the human and animal worlds (Römer et al. 2017). In the Bible, the Hebrew word *mal'ak*, translated as angel, originally meant ‘messenger’ (Meier 1988). Therefore, these intermediate entities are primarily conceived as servants and envoys of God to humans. In the first books of the biblical canon, the most attested figure of an angel is the ‘angel of God’ or ‘angel of Yahweh’ (Röttger 1978; Guggisberg 1979). The identity of this figure is difficult to pin down. Sometimes, he speaks and acts as if he were God manifesting Himself in person (Gen 31:11, 13). Sometimes, he is clearly distinguished from God Himself (Exod 32:34; 33:2–3). Apart from this angel of the Lord, the other angels seem to be ‘recycled’ pagan divinities, reduced to the rank of servants of the one God (Simbanduku 2004), who uses them for specific missions, such as watching over particular nations. The angels, sometimes called ‘the sons of God’, constitute God’s heavenly council and court (Job 1:6; 1 Kgs 22:19–22) (White 2014), and this proximity to God makes them ‘holy’ (Ps 89 [88]:6–8). This heavenly court evolves in later Judaism into a liturgical assembly that celebrates God’s majesty. As in the cultures of the Near East, where deities are often linked with celestial bodies, the biblical angels maintain a certain kinship with the stars: they are the guardians of cosmic order.

Close to God, angels can act as mediators between the divine world and the world of humans: ‘And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it’ (Gen 28:12). This angelic mediation gains considerable importance in the religious life of Second Temple Judaism. Indeed, after the exile, angelology – previously discreet and rudimentary – became omnipresent, flourishing, and exuberant, especially in the canonical apocalyptic writings (Daniel, Zechariah). It became unrestrained in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism: for example, in the *Book of Enoch* (Dörfel 1998). Three factors can explain this surge in angelology after the exile. The first is the influence of Persian and then Hellenistic cultures, both of which assign a significant role to the intermediate world of spirits. The second is the deepening sense in Israel of the transcendence of the one God: on the one hand, this dismisses any danger of a polytheistic interpretation of angelology, and on the other, it made these intermediaries necessary to gradually bring believers closer to the thrice-holy God. The third is the eschatological fever that was characteristic of the period, which increased interest in an angelic world perceived as the anticipated realization of the world to come.

Hence, angels act as mediators, both descending and ascending, between God and humanity. In the context of descending mediation, they are sent on missions by God to fight in his name, forming the army of the ‘God of hosts (God Sabaot)’ (1 Sam 1:3; Ps 24 [23]: 10), to lead punitive expeditions (Gen 19:13; 1 Chr 21:15) (Schöpflin 2007b) or to carry out missions of exploration (Zech 1:10). They guide and protect communities as well as individuals. Michael takes special care of the people of Israel (Dan 12:1), and Raphael protects Tobias during his perilous journey, just as an angel supports Elijah’s journey to Horeb (1 Kgs 19:5–7). In regard to descending mediation, angels, serving as messengers of God, intervene also in prophetic revelation. Admitted to God’s council, they are familiar with his plans and are capable of transmitting divine messages (as revealing angels) or providing humans the correct interpretation (as interpreting angels; Dan 9:22) (Schöpflin 2007a; Melvin 2013).

In the context of ascending mediation, angels lift the prayers and good deeds of humans up to God. Thus, Raphael declares: ‘So now when you and Sarah prayed, it was I who brought the record of your prayers before the glory of the Lord’ (Tob 12:12). As their own prayers support and strengthen those of humans, the angels become, by extension, intercessors (Job 33:23–24; Rev 8:3–4). They are therefore intimately involved in the liturgical actions of humans (Frey and Jost 2017).

In post-exilic Judaism, the angelic world thus expands: ‘A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him’ (Dan 7:10). This realm also emerges out of from anonymity. Some angels receive their own name. In the canonical biblical writings, these include Michael, whose name means ‘Who is like God?’ ‘and who is ‘one of the chief princes’ (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1); Gabriel, the angel who interpreted Daniel’s visions, whose name means ‘Man of God’ or ‘God is my strength’ (Dan 8:16; 9:21); and Raphael, ‘God heals’, Tobias’ companion. As for the pseudepigrapha, they abound with names, each more fanciful than the last. The internal organization of the angelic world also becomes clearer, although it is difficult to propose a standard model. An elite group stands out: the archangels. Sometimes there are four, sometimes seven (Berner 2007). Thus, Raphael describes himself as ‘one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord’ (Tob 12:15). The pseudepigrapha distinguish angelic classes according to their function. There are the angels of the face, close to God, but also the angels of sanctification, responsible for proclaiming the *Sanctus*, the watchers who (according to 1 Enoch) keep watch over humanity, etc.

Superhuman entities, which were not originally messenger angels, become integrated into this angelic world: the cherubim and seraphim (Hartenstein 2007). The cherubim are probably related to the *karibu*, Mesopotamian zoomorphic guardian and intercessor genii whose name means ‘blessing’ and who flanked the entrances to palaces and sanctuaries, or supported and adorned thrones (Wood 2008). In the Bible, the cherubim assume the

role of guardians and protectors of the holy places (Gen 3:24). Inside the Tabernacle, two cherubim – two solid gold statuettes – face each other to protect the mercy seat (Exod 25:18–22). Similarly, in Solomon's temple, adorned with cherubim on its walls (1 Kgs 6:29), two cherubim, in the form of two large gold-plated wooden figures, protect the holy ark with their outstretched wings (1 Kgs 6:23–28). The cherubim also bear the royal throne, so that God is called the one who 'is enthroned on the cherubim' (1 Sam 4:4; Isa 37:16; Ps 80 [79]:2; 99 [98]:1). The seraphim, named 'burning ones', initially refer to the hostile powers inhabiting the desert (venomous snakes or winged dragons). But they play a positive role in the famous vision of Isaiah 6: 'Seraphs were in the presence above him; each had six wings: [...]. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts'.

1.2 Christ, the angels, and the church in the New Testament

With the arrival of the 'one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5), angelic intermediaries lose the functional importance they had in late Judaism. They fade away before Jesus Christ, 'for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph 2:18). In order to emphasize the superiority of Christ's mediation over all the mediations provided in the past by the institutions of the old covenant, the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 1:4–2:18) insists on the difference in nature between the Son and the angels who had played a mediating role in communicating the Law to Moses (Heb 2:2). However, angels do not disappear as if they no longer had any reason to exist. They continue to perform their functions, but henceforth in the service of the one Mediator, Christ. They become *his* angels (Matt 13:41; 16:27; 24:31). In the Gospels, the mission of angels is entirely centred on the mystery of Christ. They are particularly active in the accounts of Jesus' childhood: they announce his conception (Luke 1:26–38), as well as that of his precursor (Luke 1:11–20). Remaining true to their liturgical function, angels sing the glory of God at the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem (Luke 2:9–14). Angels were more discreet during Jesus' ministry, despite serving him after his victory over the Tempter in the desert (Matt 4:11). They only fully return to the scene at Passover, where one angels comforts Jesus during his agony in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43); another rolls away the stone from the tomb (Matt 28:2) and, in their white garments, radiant with the glory of God, the angels announce the resurrection (Luke 24:4) (Nicklas 2007). They are present at the ascension, explaining its meaning to the disciples (Acts 1:10).

Angels then naturally move on to serve the church, the community of Jesus' disciples throughout history (Sullivan 2004). Indeed, '[a]re not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? (Heb 1:14). The Acts of the Apostles attests to their active participation in the church's mission, accompanying it in multiple ways (Acts 5:19–20; 8:26; 10:3, etc.). Their service will find its fulfilment on the eschatological Day of the Lord, 'when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory' (Matt 25:31). The voice of the archangel

will sound the signal along with the trumpet of God (1 Thess 4:16), and the angels will gather together the elect from the four winds (Matt 24:31). Then, in the eschatological kingdom, humans – sharing the immortal condition of the angels – will participate with them in the eternal heavenly liturgy, sumptuously described in the Book of Revelation by St John.

1.3 Angels in the life and thought of early Christians

Jesus Christ himself presents the angelic condition as the future of humanity: 'But those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they are like the angels' (Luke 20:35–36). Therefore, communion with the angels was for the early Christians, an important aspect of realized eschatology that they experienced at the time. This communion is especially evident in the liturgy, which is not just a symbolic anticipation of the eschatological worship yet to come, but also the participation in the heavenly worship that the holy angels presently celebrate before the throne of God and the Lamb.

The angel often appears as the model of the Christian life brought to fulfilment. This life is thus defined as *bios angelikos*, or angelic life (Frank 1964). For many Christians, imitating the various aspects of this angelic life (praise of God, purity, service to the mission, etc.) becomes a path to holiness. This angelic life is particularly suited to monastics, who embody the very mystery of the church as it is associated with the praise of the angelic orders.

However, following the New Testament (Col 2:18; Rev 19:10; 21:8–9; 22:9), the early Christians were wary of angel worship, which was suspected of latent polytheism and which flirted with Gnosticism. Nevertheless, as explained by several church fathers, including St Augustine, it was permissible to honour and pray to angels, provided that this veneration was clearly distinguished from the cult of latria, characterized by the offering of sacrifice, which is strictly reserved for God.

From a theological perspective, the church fathers' attention on the angelic world occurs within the context of a critical dialogue with the surrounding religious and philosophical culture of late antiquity. The latter put significant emphasis on intermediary beings between humans and divinity. For Plato, demons (morally good beings endowed with keen intelligence) watch over mortals and play the role of mediators:

> Everything demonic is an intermediary between what is mortal and what is immortal. – With what function? I asked. – That of making known and transmitting to the Gods what comes from men, and to men what comes from the Gods: the prayers and sacrifices of the former,

> the injunctions of the latter and their favours, in exchange for the sacrifices. (Plato, *The Banquet*; 202e–203a; Brisson, O'Neill and Timotin 2018)

While sharing the common belief in angelic mediation, the church fathers correct it on two points. Angelic mediation, on one hand, is entirely subject to and serves the mediation of Christ. On the other hand, contrasting with Gnostic thinking or emanationist philosophies that blur the boundary between the divine and the created, the church fathers clearly place angels on the side of creatures, incapable of creating:

> All those who affirm that angels are the creators of any essence are the mouth of the devil their father. Being creatures, angels are not creators. The author of all things, who foresees and maintains everything, is God, the only uncreated one. (John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, 17; II, 3)

It was in critical dialogue with Neoplatonism, whether scholarly or popularized, that St Augustine in the West and Dionysius in the East were to decisively shape Christian angelology.

St Augustine significantly develops the theology of angels in two works from his later writings: *De Genesi ad litteram* (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 404–414) and *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*, 413–427; see Madec 1986; Klein 2018). Firstly, he asserts the primacy of the angel in God's creative work. Indeed, he believes he can discern a reference to the creation of angels in the production of this mysterious light without material support which, according to Gen 1:3, springs forth first. The angel, a spiritual light, is an 'intellectual life in itself' (*Literal Meaning of Genesis* I, IX, 17). Inspired by Plotinus' concept of the constitution of beings, St Augustine conceives the angel as the effect of the solidification of a free emanation from God, which crystallizes when it turns to its Origin. The angel knows itself in its own nature, then refers itself entirely to God and, in so doing, completes its 'formation'. Thus, the angelic world occupies, in Augustine's thought, a place similar to that of the *Noûs* or Intellect in Plotinus' global vision of the universe. The angel is the first creature, an intellectual mirror for God's creative plan.

> The world of angels is perfectly integrated into the universe of creatures in which it plays a primordial role not only because the angel is the first and most elevated of creatures but also because he is the reflection of creative action and created works, as well as the first agent of the return to God through praise and love. The angelic nature thus becomes the archetype, the consciousness and the ideal of the creaturely condition. (Solignac 1972: 653)

The primacy of angels in creation is echoed by their primacy in the *City of God*. In Book 10 of the *City of God*, St Augustine explains the place of the holy angels in relation to the history of humankind: angels are not mediators in the strict sense, and they do not claim any worship for themselves, but they present themselves as auxiliaries of divine providence. He goes on to explain that the history of the two Cities begins in the angelic world with the separation of light (good angels) and darkness (evil angels), following the initial and definitive choice for or against God that the angels had to make. Humans then entered into this story, so that the Celestial City is composed of both angels and humans, forming a single celestial society in Christ:

> Christ is the head of the whole city of Jerusalem, where the faithful are numbered from the beginning to the end of time, to which are added also the legions and armies of angels, so that it may become one city under one king [...] happy in eternal peace and salvation, praising God without end, blessed without end. (Augustine, *Ennarationes in Ps. 36*, section 3, 4; *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum* 38: 370).

In a similar Neoplatonic vein – but more influenced by the metaphysics of Proclus – Dionysius the Areopagite offers a grandiose vision (especially in the *Celestial Hierarchy*) of the work of divinization, in which the angels play a leading role. Like a cascade of light, divinization follows a hierarchical order: coming from the Thearchy, i.e. the Holy Trinity, it first reaches the angels (the heavenly hierarchies) and then is transmitted to the church (the ecclesiastical hierarchy). In this dynamic perspective, Dionysius proposes a theory of the internal organization of the angelic world in three hierarchies and nine orders. A 'hierarchy' refers to the organic whole formed by intermediaries, each subordinate to the others, through whose action divinization is realized. The first hierarchy –Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones – is in direct contact with God. The second is composed of the Dominions, Virtues, and Powers; and the third of the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels, which are in contact with the ecclesiastical hierarchy immediately below. Within the hierarchical triad, each order receives divinizing light from the higher order, which it, in turn, conveys to the next order. In so doing, each higher order illuminates, purifies, and perfects the lower order. The angels of the higher order impart knowledge coming from God (illumination), freeing the angels from the lower order from ignorance (purification)and leading them to a more perfect knowledge (perfection)Thus, the return of creatures to God is accomplished in a hierarchical order. Despite a certain rigidity that does not always account for the entire scriptural data, this extensive vision of the angelic world captivated medieval thinkers and constitutes the framework of classical angelology.

2 The golden age of medieval angelology

Medieval Christians lived in a cultural and religious context that was saturated with angelic presence (Keck 1998). Liturgies, pilgrimages (to places such as Mont Saint-Michel; see Bouet, Ottranto and Vauchez 2003), and popular devotional practices all fostered a sense of proximity to the angelic world. In the West, devotion to the holy angels developed especially in the Benedictine order, and St Bernard of Clairvaux emerged as the great teacher of angelic devotion. In *Sermon XII*, which comments on verse 12 of Psalm 90, Saint Bernard defines the Christian's attitude towards angels:

> 'He has given his angels orders to guard you in all your ways.' What deference (*reverentia*) this word should inspire in you, what eagerness (*devotio*), what trust (*fiducia*). Deference for their presence, eagerness because of their benevolence, trust in their care. (*Sermon XII*, 6, in '*S. Bernardi opera*, 4', Sermones I: 460)

Spiritual masters in monasteries and teachers in cathedral Schools addressed angelological themes in their commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, but with the development of Schools and their scientific requirements, theologians also endeavoured to present the traditional angelological teachings in a systematic and rational order.

2.1 The angel of the scholastics

Therefore, Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* would become the basic manual for theological studies until the end of the Middle Ages, devotes a systematic exposition to angels in distinctions II to XI of the second book, which is dedicated to creation and sin (*Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae*, t. 1, p. 2 [Liber I et II]; Peter Lombard 1971–1981). While presenting the angelological theses on which there was a broad consensus in the twelfth century, he does not hesitate to raise questions and provide his own answers (Colish 1994: 342–353). Angelology is treated within the framework of creation, and angels are considered, before the cosmos and humanity, as one of the three great types of creature. Lombard focuses on the time and place of the creation of angels, their natural properties, and the trial that leads to the separation between good angels and demons. He then looks at the cognitive, moral, and physical attributes of angels and demons before presenting the angelic hierarchies and the ministries exercised by angels.

From the end of the twelfth century, the effort to interpret and systematize angelological doctrines by scholastic theology benefitted from new philosophical tools made available by the translation of Graeco-Arabic philosophical works, especially the Aristotelian corpus (Bonino 2015). Throughout the late Middle Ages, a complex relationship existed between angelology and philosophy. On the one hand, philosophy provides the necessary concepts to understand the nature and action of angels. On the other hand, angelology allowed philosophers to do new thought experiments, in physics, noetics, etc., which

encouraged the theoretical development of concepts (Kobusch 2008; Hoffmann 2012). Latin theologians of the thirteenth century also had to confront the cosmological and metaphysical speculations of ancient philosophers and medieval Muslim thinkers on 'Intelligences', or separated substances. Not everyone accepted the identification between these Intelligences and the angels of the Christian faith (Suarez-Nani 2002b). Many feared a 'naturalization' of angels, that is, a reduction of angels to their cosmological or metaphysical function at the expense of their role in the economy of salvation.

Against a broad background of common angelological doctrines, each theologian is distinguished by particular emphases, which derive from the type of philosophy used or the spiritual tradition to which they adhere. Although the synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas (the main points of which we shall outline in section 2.2, below) subsequently acquired the status of a 'classic' and played a major role in the subsequent history of angelology, with the promotion of the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) as a fundamental theological manual in Catholicism, it should not overshadow the other original approaches of the thirteenth century. The angelology of St Bonaventure (Keck 2014), for example, is distinguished by at least three specific aspects. Regarding the metaphysical structure of the angel, Bonaventure, unlike Aquinas, argues for the presence of spiritual matter in angels, which alone can account for their mutability. But he gives angelology a strong 'economic' dimension by placing the ministry of angels at the forefront in service of God's salvific plans – in contrast to the allure of Arab cosmological and philosophical angelology (Faes De Mottoni 1995). Finally, the structuring of the angelic universe unlocks, for Bonaventure, ways of thinking in parallel, about the structures of the church. In the apocalyptic perspective that becomes increasingly important to him, he uses angelological categories to conceptualize the crisis of the church and the unique historical role assigned to the Seraphic St Francis of Assisi, the sixth angel of the apocalypse, and his order.

2.2 The 'classical' synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas

In the *Summa theologiae*, in addition to the many articles related to angels scattered throughout the work, St Thomas Aquinas devotes two well-defined sets of questions directly to angels. Both of these are located in the *Prima pars* – or, more precisely, in the third section of the *Prima pars*, which is devoted to the 'procession of creatures' from God (q. 44–119). After considering the production of creatures (q. 44–46: 'treatise on creation'), Aquinas addresses their distinction, i.e. the diversity of creatures and the theological significance of that diversity (q. 47–102). To do this, he classifies creatures into three main types: purely spiritual creatures, purely corporeal creatures, and humans who participate in both spirit and matter. The questions dedicated to 'the purely spiritual creature who, in Scripture, is called an angel' (q. 50–64) thus open this section. Here is the outline:

(1) The substance of angels
    (1) Angelic substances as such [Latin, *absolute*] (q. 50)

(2) The angel's relationship with bodily realities (q. 51–53)
    (1) Its relationship to bodies (q. 51)
    (2) Its relationship to place (q. 52)
    (3) Its relationship to local movement [i.e. translation or displacement] (q. 53)

(2) Angelic knowledge
    (1) The cognitive power of angels (q. 54)
    (2) The medium of angelic knowledge (q. 55)
    (3) The objects of angelic knowledge (q. 56–57)
        (1) Immaterial realities [angels, God] (q. 56)
        (2) Material realities (q. 57)
    (4) The mode [i.e. the process and properties] of angelic knowledge (q. 58)

(3) The will of angels
    (1) The will itself (q. 59)
    (2) The movement of the will: love (q. 60)

(4) The creation and origin of angels
    (1) In their being of nature (q. 61)
    (2) In their being of grace and glory: the perfection of angels (q. 62)
    (3) How some angels became evil (q. 63–64)
        (1) The evil of fault: the guilty malice of angels (q. 63)
        (2) The punishment of demons (q. 64)

After addressing the distinction of creatures, St Thomas, in the third part of his study of the 'procession of creatures', considers their governance by God. He examines how God, in accordance with the eternal plan of his providence, guides each and every one of His creatures through the story towards their end (q. 103–119). Presenting the general laws of divine governance, Aquinas explains that God, not out of necessity but out of pure generosity, resorts to the mediation of creatures in order to govern creatures. By cooperating in divine governance, creatures thus attain the dignity of causality (q. 103, a. 6). From this perspective, St Thomas studies the action that the various creatures have, depending on the radical causality of God, on one another. He first considers the influence that angels exert on other creatures (other angels, bodies, humans) (q. 106–114), then the action exerted by bodies (q. 115–116), and finally those exerted by humans (q. 117–119). Here is the outline of the questions relating to the role of the angels in the divine government:

(1) The angel's action on other angels
    (1) Angelic illumination (q. 106)
    (2) Linguistic exchanges between angels (q. 107)
    (3) The organization of angels into hierarchies and orders (q. 108)
    (4) The organization of evil angels (q. 109)

(2) The governing action (*praesidentia*) of the angel on the corporeal world (q. 110)

(3) The angel's action on humans
    (1) The action of angels on humans by their natural virtue (q. 111)
    (2) The mission of angels (q. 112)
    (3) The guardianship carried out by the good angels and the assaults of the demons (q. 113–114)
        (1) The guardianship carried out by the good angels (q. 113)
        (2) The assaults of the demons (q. 114).

2.2.1 The angelic nature

2.2.1.1 Metaphysics of the angel

What, then, is an angel for St Thomas? First of all, do angels exist? Faith, based on the Bible which so often mentions angels, assures us they exist, but metaphysical reflection also offers arguments in favour of their existence. These are not *a posteriori* arguments that would trace identifiable effects back to the existence of the angel as a cause, because what angels do could just as easily be done directly by God himself. Instead, these are *a priori* arguments that affirm the existence of angels based on what we can know elsewhere about the logic of God's creative plan. Aquinas invokes, for example, the metaphysical law of mediation or graduality that regulates the order of things. Therefore, once the existence of God, pure Act, has been recognized at one end, and given the existence of purely corporeal substances at the other, we can infer the existence of an intermediate category of purely created spirits (Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata.de spiritualibus creaturis* [Disputed Question on Created Spirits], a. 5). Moreover, the existence of purely intellectual substances seems necessary for the perfection of the universe. Indeed, since the purpose of the universe is to express, by way of imitation and participation, something of the goodness and perfection of God, it is fitting that there should be creatures in the universe who, like God, are capable of intellectual knowledge and love (*ST*, Ia, q. 50, a. 1). Because it is the work of a pure Spirit, creation must have at its summit a properly spiritual reflection of its Creator, an 'image' of God, capable of an intimate union with its Origin. Humans are certainly this image of God; but since humans are intellect only by participation, it is appropriate to recognize the existence of a creature that is *only* intellect. Do these arguments go beyond the recognition of a high suitability for the existence of angels? Are they demonstrations in the strict sense of the word? There is some debate on these matters (Lang 1995; Ashley 2006; Doolan 2012).

What is the nature or essence of the angel? Christian tradition did not immediately affirm the pure spirituality (i.e. the immateriality) of the angel. For a long time, whether to account for the biblical angelophanies (angelic manifestations) or to safeguard the absolute metaphysical transcendence of God, it was thought necessary to attribute to the angel a kind of subtle, ethereal body, or at least to say that the angel was composed of spiritual matter, as has been pointed out in connection with St Bonaventure (Lottin 1932; Glorieux 1959; Faes De Mottoni 1993). For St Thomas Aquinas, this corporeality is incompatible

with the angels' definition as pure intelligence. But, by the metaphysical thesis according to which every angel is composed of an essence that assumes the role of potency and of an act of being (*esse*), it is possible to renounce the corporeality of the angel without attributing to it a simplicity or absence of composition that would take it out of the order of creatures (q. 50, a. 1–2; Wippel 2012). The distinction in angels between the essence and the act of being also entails the necessity of distinguishing in them their essence, their powers of action (intellect and will), and their actions themselves. Consequently, angels are far from the absolute simplicity that characterizes the transcendence of God.

The perfect immateriality of angels also results in their incorruptibility or natural immortality (q. 50, a. 5): just as they can only come into being by creation (and not through generation from another angel), angels could only cease to exist through annihilation. Similarly, if matter is the principle of individuation within the species, the immateriality of angels explains why each angel is unique within its species (q. 50, a. 4). Each angel alone exhausts the intelligible type expressed by its species. Therefore, the angel Gabriel is distinguished from the angel Raphael not in the way one individual horse is distinguished from another individual horse (for example) but in the way a horse is distinguished from a bull. This hypothesis, characteristic of Thomism, was strongly opposed and even condemned in March 1277 by the Bishop of Paris under the pretext that it would limit God's power (Piche 1999: 104).

2.2.1.2 Angels' intellectual activity

For Aquinas, angels' lives develop along the two axes of all spiritual life: knowledge (*ST*, Ia, q. 54–58) (Suarez-Nani 2002a; Goris 2012) and the love that flows from this knowledge (*ST*, Ia, q. 59–60). In their way of knowing, Thomistic angels are closer to God than to humans because, like God, angels know 'from within', i.e. by contemplating their own essence. Angels, who are purely transparent to themselves, know themselves perfectly, and consequently know God as the cause of their being. This knowledge is not based on discursive reasoning but occurs through the intuitive mode of a pure intelligence that immediately sees the conclusions in the premises. Angels' knowledge of other creatures poses a greater problem. Unlike their Neoplatonic cousins, Christian angels do not exert any creative causality, so that, unlike God, they cannot know other creatures by knowing themselves as their cause (or effect). In order to account for the angelic knowledge of other creatures, it was necessary to find a causality-free resemblance between angels and the creatures that they know. This is ensured by innate ideas (*species*) that God deposited in angels at the moment of their creation. These ideas are a participation in God's own knowledge, a reflection of the creative divine Ideas. Thanks to this noetic heritage, angels can know other angels as well as corporeal creatures, even in their individual uniqueness. However, future contingents and the movements of spiritual subjectivity ('the secrets of the heart') escape angels' natural knowledge.

For St Thomas, angels exercise cognitive activity from the moment of their creation, possessing the ideas of everything they can naturally know. However, since these angelic ideas are limited – each representing only a partial aspect of reality – angels must repeatedly engage in cognitive acts. Their spiritual life is thus marked by a certain succession of acts measured by a discontinuous 'time' that the scholastics call the *aevum* (Porro 2001).

2.2.2 The holy story of the angel

2.2.2.1 Creation and the divine vocation of the angel

Created immediately by God at the same moment as the corporeal world, forming a single universe with it (Ia, q. 61, a. 3), angels – according to St Thomas, from the moment of their creation (*ST* Ia, q. 62, a. 3), or later according to other theologians – were elevated to the supernatural order. God has called them by pure grace to become participants in the divine nature and to enter into the beatific joy of the trinitarian communion. The response to this call constitutes the holy story of angels. Like humans, angels' entry into supernatural beatitude is preceded by a time when angels must freely consent under grace to God's call. In so doing, angels merit eternal life, that is, become in some way the (second) cause of obtaining their own beatitude. But, unlike humans, angels' response to the divine invitation can only be instantaneous and definitive, because angels commit themselves entirely to their act of consent or refusal. The scenario of this original 'trial' of angels has greatly concerned theologians. It is mainly about explaining how such perfect creatures could have failed – this is the questions of angels' sin which is so fundamental for demonology- but also understanding by virtue of which good deed angels were able to merit beatitude (*ST* Ia, q. 62).

2.2.2.2 The angel's entry into beatitude

The process by which angels merited beatitude is still the subject of much controversy, even within the Thomistic tradition. One of the reasons for this is that the teaching of *ST* Ia, q. 62, a. 5, does not exactly match that of the slightly later teaching of q. 16 of the *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* [Disputed Questions on Evil]. It is generally agreed that there are (at least) two moments, i.e. two distinct acts, in the scenario of angelic story: the moment of the meritorious act and the moment of the reward, i.e. entry into beatitude. But does the moment of merit coincide with the moment of creation in grace, or is it distinct from it and subsequent to it? Is it through the angels' very first act – performed in the very instant of angels' creation in grace (for angels are created as acting in *act*) – that they have merited eternal glory? In *ST* Ia, q. 63, a. 5, concerning the sin of angels, St Thomas affirms that, in the very instant of their creation in grace, angels cannot sin at all because their operation is then under the direct motion of the Creator himself. However, it seems that angels can merit eternal glory, since this very first act of their will is a spontaneous act of love for God. The question then arises – and on this point, interpreters differ – whether

this spontaneous act is sufficient to merit eternal life, or whether it must be confirmed (at a later time) by an act of free choice by which angels, under grace, choose God, while having the option to refuse.

The question involves our idea of freedom. Thus, for Jacques Maritain, the act that determines angels' moral destiny requires perfect freedom of choice. It cannot be the first act of the will but only the second because 'the angel's free will only positively comes into play with his first act of option (with regard to the final end), that is, at the second instant' (Maritain 1961: 75, translated from the original French). To the moment of nature, one must therefore add the moment of the spirit, the moment of moral choice, the act of charity as preferential love of friendship. H.-F. Dondaine proposes another solution based on St Thomas' development between *Ia pars* and a. 4 of q. 16 of the *Q. de malo* (Dondaine 1955). In the latter text, St Thomas distinguishes in angels, created immediately in the state of grace, the moment of natural knowledge and the distinct and subsequent moment of supernatural knowledge. Angels' 'natural knowledge' is knowledge of itself and, consequently, of God as the author of its nature. 'Supernatural knowledge' is knowledge of God as the author of grace and the source of beatitude. But these two forms of knowledge cannot be simultaneous, because it is impossible to think about natural and supernatural realities at the same time, using a single *species*. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between a first moment when every angel takes possession of its natural knowledge, accompanied by an act of love for God (non-meritorious because of the natural order) – no sin can be introduced here – and a second moment, when angels perform an act of supernatural knowledge and freely determine themselves in relation to God's call to eternal life.

Is the grace that enabled angels to merit the beatitude and the glory they enjoy today Christic (Wagner 2003)? In other words, do they derive from Christ Jesus? To put it another way: in what sense is Christ the head of the angels? On this point too, Thomistic theologians are divided based on the place that Christ is recognized as having in the divine plan. According to Charles Journet, the grace initially offered to the angels was not Christic, but the Incarnation of the Word profoundly modified the nature of angelic glory:

> *At the moment when the Incarnation was accomplished, the humanity of Christ became, with regard to the whole order of grace, a universal principle of efficiency*. Henceforth, the grace and glory that the good angels hitherto received immediately from the divinity will reach them only by passing through the holy humanity of Christ. (Journet 2004: 322, original emphasis)

On the other hand, others believe that Jesus Christ is the source of the angels' grace and substantial glory in his divinity but not in his humanity. The latter is the source only of

the accidental glory of angels, which indirectly derives from the salvation of men (Daguet 2003: 283–285).

2.2.3 Angelic missions

Regardless of the exact scenario by which angels have merited beatitude, once it has been obtained the blessed angels cooperate, as a second cause, in the realization of the divine plans. Without ever leaving the beatific presence of the Trinity, angels carry out various missions in the service of divine government. In the *Summa theologiae*, St Thomas distinguishes three 'places' where this angelic activity is exercised: an angel can act on other angels, on the cosmos and finally on humans.

2.2.3.1 Angelic illumination

Angels does not exert any creative or even generative causality in relation to other angels, but their fecundity (their 'paternity', as according to the Apostle Paul there is a 'family in heaven' [Eph 3:15], i.e. among the angels) manifests itself above all in the realm of teaching – that is, the communication of that higher form of life, which is knowledge. This activity is called 'illumination', light being a very common metaphor for knowledge (Emery 2010). In the hierarchical order of illumination, the higher angel turns towards the lower angel with a free movement inspired by charity (love), thus revealing the truth, which he himself knows, to the inferior angel in a way that is proportionate to the cognitive capacity of the recipient. In doing so, the higher angel causes the lower angel to participate in its (the higher angel's) own perfection, assimilates it, and thereby brings it closer to God. This illuminating action has two aspects: the communication of objective information or content in a way that is adapted to the cognitive power of the receiver, and the strengthening (*confortatio*) of that same cognitive power. The relationship between these two aspects has given rise to various theoretical models, depending on whether *confortatio* is considered to be a distinct action distinguishable from the proposition of an intelligible content (the proposal of an idea adapted to the lower intellect), or whether the two are identified as one and the same action.

What does illumination relate to? What can the inferior angel learn from the superior angel? Doesn't every angel immediately know all that it can know by nature? As for supernatural knowledge, do not all blessed angels see directly, without intermediaries, the divine Essence itself? Certainly, but because their intellectual capacities are unequal, not all of them explore the inexhaustible intelligible abyss of the divine Essence with the same depth. They do not all perceive with the same fullness the 'reasons for the divine works (*rationes divinorum operum*)' (*ST*, Ia, q. 106, a. 1, ad 1) – that is, God's plans for the world, his 'unfathomable decrees and incomprehensible ways' (*Rm* 11:33). Thus, the superior angel, who knows certain aspects of the mystery or divine plan in God that the inferior angel does not know (or, in any case, does not know as explicitly), generously

and unreservedly communicates this knowledge to the angel it is illuminating. Therefore, there is room, at least until the Last Judgment, for a certain progression in the angel's understanding of God's providential plan, for the angel, as minister of divine governance, ensures its realization.

The theme of angelic illumination is related to that of the language of angels (*ST*, Ia, q. 107). Recently, the language of angels has been attracting a great deal of attention from philosophers – at least as a thought experiment – since it deals with what would be a pure intersubjective communication, freed from all conditions related to corporeality (Faes De Mottoni 1988; Raukas 1996; Goris 2003; Rosier-Catach 2006; Roling 2008; Kobusch 2008).

2.2.3.2 The angel and the cosmos

Angels are an essential component of premodern cosmology. The idea of angels 'presiding' over the cosmos is a common element, very present in the Bible, that has been embraced by the Christian tradition. Angels administer and govern the corporeal creation as stewards of God: either in the mediate manner by ensuring the regular movement of celestial bodies that determines the course of nature, or in a more exceptional, immediate way by intervening in the play of natural causes. For St Thomas, a pure spirit can, in fact, act on the world of bodies through local movement – i.e. translation or displacement, considered to be the most 'spiritual' movement – and therefore capable of serving as an interface and connection between the world of spirits and that of bodies. Thus, angels can produce anything in the physical world that can be caused by local movement, including qualitative effects. The intrinsic intelligibility of nature and its teleological dimension are highlighted through the theme of angels' cosmic action.

2.2.3.3 The angel and humans

God alone, as creator, acts directly on the spiritual faculties of humans. The actions of an angel on the will and intelligence of a human can only be indirect. Such action passes through the physical and psychic conditioning of the life of the human spirit (*ST*, Ia, q. 111). Angels can influence the human spirit through their actions on the senses and especially on the imagination. By acting on the physiological factors that determine the organic changes in the brain, angels can ensure that a particular image presents itself to consciousness. In so doing, angels 'illuminates' the human mind by offering it intelligible content in the form of images suited to its nature. Likewise, angels can also act indirectly on the human will. On the one hand, through its indirect action on intelligence, angels can present to the will a particular object in a way that makes it attractive or repulsive. On the other hand, they can excite those physico-psychic realities which are the sensible passions and thus influence voluntary decision-making without ever being able to constrain it.

The acting of angels upon humans is part of the plan of divine providence. It concerns human communities, and the church fathers developed the scriptural theme of angels being appointed to nations. It also concerns each individual human, as is clear from the doctrine of guardian angels (Bonino 2016: 261–273). Drawing on the book of Tobit and Matt 18:10 (where Jesus Christ urges not to despise 'one of those littles ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven'), Christian tradition has come to affirm that providence assigns to each person for his journey on earth – not only to the baptized – an angel of God tasked with guiding them to a safe haven (*ST*, Ia, q. 113).

3 The vicissitudes of modern and contemporary angelology

3.1 Angels and the Reformation

The Reformation did not challenge traditional angelology but reshaped it according to the Reformers' fundamental convictions. It attacked the excesses of the sometimes poorly informed late-medieval piety; as a result, the systematic application of the principle of *sola Scriptura* ('scripture alone') led to the marginalization, or even rejection, of certain angelological themes that lacked a scriptural foundation. However, the major axes of angelology were not called into question either by Martin Luther (Soergel 2006) or by John Calvin. The latter deals with angels (and demons) in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book I: ch. 14), just before discussing the creation of man (chapter 15; see Calvin 1955: 113–122). Calvin calls for sobriety on the topic. One should adhere to what God has seen fit to reveal to us about angels through Holy Scripture and 'leave these useless questions debated by idle minds, dealing with, without the Word of God, the nature and multitude of angels and their orders' (1955: 115, translated from French). Calvin does not dwell on the 'metaphysics' of angels. He was very critical of Dionysius' 'pure babble' (1955: 115) on the internal organization of the angelic world and, in the lack of precise indications in the Bible, he refused to comment on whether each person had a particular guardian angel. Similarly, one must avoid 'transferring to the angels what belongs solely to God and Jesus Christ' (1955: 120): any form of adoration of angels is idolatry and any recourse to the angels' intercession is, like the cult of the saints, superstition. For those who adhere to scripture, angels 'are present before God to adorn and honour his majesty' (1955: 116), but 'scripture is mainly concerned with teaching what can serve best for our consolation and the confirmation of our faith: that angels are dispensers and ministers of God's liberality towards us' (1955: 116).

During the early modern period, angels remained important figures in the lives, piety, and reflection of Christians, both Catholics and Protestants (Soergel 2006). In the Catholic world, devotion to guardian angels grew significantly, in line with the milieu (Manevy

2008; Mazurek 2016). It was only later that angelology and its scholastic formulation were subjected to a double and radical critique. Firstly, the disenchantment of the world (in the sense of the fading of the religious vision of the cosmos), rendered angels unnecessary and hardly credible. Although there is no linear causality between the progress of science and the disappearance of angels – in fact, Isaac Newton gave angels considerable attention (Schaffer 2011) – the development of an immanentist mindset in explaining physical, psychological, and social phenomenon led to the marginalization of angels from late seventeenth century onward. Secondly, certain sectors of Christian theology deemed it necessary to demythologize scripture itself, and came to deny that angelology was part of the substance of the Christian faith. The result is what Karl Barth called 'the angelology the shrug of the shoulders' (Barth 1960: 413) or, in other words, a refusal to take angels seriously.

3.2 The disenchantment of the world

With the development of modern science, activities traditionally attributed to angels – their role in the workings of the cosmos or their interventions in the human psyche – seem to be sufficiently explained by the interplay of natural, physical, and psychological causes. There is no longer any room for angelic action in a natural world reduced to the purely material and governed entirely by the immanent laws of matter. Moreover, the humanities endeavour to reveal the very human cultural and psychological conditioning at the root of both the belief in angels and the many ways in which human representations of the angelic world have evolved.

It is undeniable that the believer's relationship with the angelic world has irreversibly lost its immediacy and spontaneity in today's world. No longer supported by the common social imagination, belief in angels and their action belongs only to the realm of faith. However, this presupposes that the active presence of angels is rationally possible. In fact, unless one adheres to the myth of absolute determinism, nothing prevents admitting the theoretical possibility that a purely spiritual subject acts in the contingent course of events in this world to guide it. The physical universe and, even more so, the psychic universe are 'open' universes in which there is room for initiatives that arise from the 'creativity' of human freedom but also from the intervention of spiritual substances. Angelic action is, perhaps, unnecessary or even non detectable in the 'scientific' explanation of phenomena – but it is nevertheless a possible religious interpretation that does not substitute scientific explanation, but rather completes it in another way. Moreover, if angelology is properly integrated into Christian doctrine as a whole, it can contribute to reducing the fracture that has opened up between a materialistic vision of the cosmos, which is anthropologically unsatisfactory, and an unrestrained religiosity giving undue importance to 'spirits' that emerges as a backlash against it.

3.3 The demythologization of the Bible and its limits

Theologians have taken note of the disappearance of angelology in cultures shaped by immanentism, and have sought to disenchant revelation itself. For Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), angelology does not belong to the *kerygma* (proclamation of the gospel). It is merely an element, now obsolete, of the contingent cultural context in which the early Christian preaching had to be expressed.

> Since we have come to know the power and laws of nature, belief in spirits and demons has also disappeared [...]. One cannot use electric light and radio equipment, demand modern medical and clinical means in the event of illness, and at the same time believe in the spirit world and miracles of the New Testament. (Bultmann 1955: 142–143)

To remain credible in the eyes of the modern human, the Christian faith must abandon these archaic conceptualizations which, because they are in contradiction with the contemporary scientific vision of the world, constitute an obstacle to people accessing their faith in the present day.

Recent developments in biblical exegesis effectively require moving beyond a naive reading of scripture in which, for example, all the accounts of angelophanies are received as revealed affirmations of the existence of angels. The biblical figure of the angel may, in some cases, be no more than a literary device, and representations of the angelic world often reflect historically situated cultural conceptions. However, to determine the exact meaning for faith of the biblical texts relating to angels, a theological criterion for interpreting scripture is needed. For Catholic theology, this ultimate criterion is the tradition of the church and the teaching of the Magisterium guaranteed by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. While acknowledging the progress of exegesis and the evolution of the cultural imagination, the Magisterium, taking into account the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faith) and the intimate life of the church animated by the Spirit, persists in presenting the real existence of the angelic world and its role in Christian life as a truth of faith and not as merely optional (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 328–336).

3.4 Current approaches to angelology

Confronted with the challenge to the doctrine of angels, several theologians, convinced that it, nevertheless, belongs to the very object of faith, have sought to renew its presentation in order to deepen the significance. In the Protestant world, the most significant essay is probably that of Karl Barth, who, in the third volume of his *Church Dogmatics* (‘The Doctrine of Creation’), devoted a substantial section to angels (section 51: ‘The Kingdom of Heaven, the Ambassadors of God and their opponents’). Barth rejects

any metaphysical, non-scriptural approach that speculates on the nature of the angel as an autonomous subject and as part of a general world order:

> What angels are is to be understood wholly and exclusively from their function and activity. They are wholly and utterly angels, messengers. They are beings which are as they are engaged in the action thereby denoted. (Barth 1960: 512)

Angelology is therefore not a prolegomenon to anthropology, but an essential dimension of the doctrine of providence. Angels form the kingdom of heaven, that upper part of creation where God is already exercising His full sovereignty. But 'the heavenly happening is determined by the fact that the goal of the lordship of God by which it has to orientate itself is a happening in our sphere, on earth' (1960: 447). Indeed, it is from heaven that the kingdom of God comes to us. Angels are sent as authentic witnesses to the fulfilment of God's will in Jesus Christ. Barth even maintains that 'the visitation of the earthly creation by God its Creator means its visitation by its heavenly fellow-creation, and its encounter with God [...] its encounter with angels' (Barth 1960: 477; Lindsay 2017). Where there is God, there are angels. If this is the essential reality of the angel, it is clear to Barth that demons, those hostile powers opposed by angels, can in no way be fallen angels. Angels and demons are two quite distinct types of creatures that cannot be included in the same 'genus'.

In the Catholic world, the teaching of angelology continues to be largely inspired by the Thomistic synthesis, with efforts being made to emphasize its scriptural roots and economic dimension (Journet 2004), so as to ward off the accusation that angelology is merely 'sacred metaphysics'. But some theologians are trying to open up new avenues (Suárez-Ricondo 2007; 2009). Thus, Karl Rahner, taking up his own perspective the ambivalent Pauline theme of the cosmic 'Powers' that govern the world, sees angels as subjective personal principles that impart unity and meaning to partial orders of the universe or history. Indeed,

> if there are angels, they are to be understood, not *a priori* as Leibnizian monads, but as cosmic powers and authorities for which, with all their subjectivity and personality, a cosmic function (that is one related with the world) is an essential constituent. (Rahner 1983: 260)

The biblical angel is therefore not a 'pure spirit', radically separated from the cosmos, as in the Neoplatonism that, according to Rahner, contaminated Christian angelology. Just as humans are inscribed in and transform the universe through their bodies, angels are subjective entities that maintain an intrinsic relationship with matter. Their nature consists in unifying, structuring, and ordering a sector of cosmic reality or history (e.g.

angels assigned to nations). Rahner believes that such a conception is compatible with a scientific view of the world and resonates with a natural religious intuition. The belief in angels can therefore be taken up, as a derived and secondary matter, by the Christian faith, which confers on it the fullness of its meaning by placing it in the perspectives of the Bible and salvation history. Belonging to the same universe as humans, and involved in the same history, angels thus maintain an essential relationship with humans and their self-understanding. Consequently, angelology no longer appears as a foreign element in Christian doctrine.

3.5 Current issues in angelology

Rahner's insistence on the cosmic role of angels is, in its own way, in line with a central concern of contemporary theology, made even more urgent by the seriousness of today's ecological issues: rehabilitating the cosmic dimension of the Christian faith. The covenant between God and humankind needs to be seen in a broader context: that of creation, which also includes the cosmos and the invisible world of angels. Attention to the angelic universe also encourages openness to the distinctly theocentric dimension of Christian theology, which is sometimes threatened by an exclusive anthropocentrism. From a methodological point of view, it also invites us to avoid limiting the indispensable dialogue between theology and philosophy to anthropology alone, but rather to extend it to metaphysics, which alone is capable of embracing the universality of reality through the analogy of being.

Anthropology itself has everything to gain from this. Indeed, reflecting on the nature of human beings implies placing them in relation to other types of being, both similar and distinct. Contemporary philosophy, taking up in its own way a practice common to scholastic theology, likes to use the angelic hypothesis to carry out some very interesting 'thought experiments': comparing a given aspect of human existence (knowledge, intersubjectivity and language, sociability, etc.) with the way it would hypothetically manifest in a pure spirit, making it possible to determine both its essence and a better understanding of the specific forms it takes in a human person. But since angels are more than a hypothesis for Christian theology, angelology also enables theologians to emphasize the elevated dignity of the human person. Situated between animals and angels, humans participate in a unique way in both worlds.

> For a long time, to say what is most distinctive about man was, in every area, to say what distinguishes him from the angel, in a doubled finitude. To think of the one was always also to think of the other. (Chretien 2000: 126, translated from the original French)

Without the perspective opened up by the existence of angels, humans have only to contend with the chimpanzee or the robot. Does this benefit humanism? On the other

hand, the veracity of the angel preserves the greatness of human beings, the angel's cousin in the order of spirits and companion in the order of grace.

Finally, with regard to Christian life, the teaching on angels can nourish an awareness of the nearness of the paternal providence of the God of Jesus Christ. It is this God whom the angels serve as instruments, and so to speak, sacraments. Above all, since liturgical celebration is a participation in the heavenly worship in which angels play a privileged role (Peterson 1964), the faithful attention given to ecclesial communion with the angels fosters a very lively sense of the doxological dimension of Christian life and its eschatological tension towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

Attributions

Translated by Rosalie Bernheim.

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