

Are Angels Just a Matter of Faith?

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A recent socio-religious phenomenon is the virtual disappearance of angels from Roman Catholic devotional life, and their rather surprising reappearance in and around the New Age Movement. In this article I will argue that angels do matter, not just because they are part of Catholic doctrine, but because if Catholics neglect to give a rational account of their belief in angels they will fail to meet what has been recognised as a real need of many in the world today.¹ I examine both reported experiences of angels and sceptical objections, while challenging both the incoherence and neo-Gnosticism of New Age angelology and the very narrow and impoverished perspective on reality offered by a narrowly rationalistic philosophical (and theological) method. I argue that a philosophically viable Catholic angelology would not only help many people within and outside the Church to make sense of their religious experience, but would offer a much richer conception of creation and God's saving work.

Scripture and Tradition

In the Bible the Hebrew *mal'ach* and the Greek *angelos* have as their primary meaning "messenger". All the prophets, then, are messengers of the Lord, Malachi ("my messenger") being a prime example. St. Mark understands John the Baptist as *ton angelon mou* prophesied by Isaiah and Malachi (Mk.1.2f., Mal.3.1, Is.40.3). Messengers of God are also often non-human intelligent beings: in Judges 13 "the angel of the Lord" appears to Manoah's wife, who describes him to her husband as "a man of God" (a term also used of prophets, e.g. Elijah, 2 Kgs 17.19), but "his countenance was like the countenance of the angel of God, very terrible" (Judges 13.6). Angels figure prominently in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation, as interpreters of visions, serving the heavenly liturgy (cf also Ex.37.9, 2 Chr.3.11, Is.6, Rev.); and, in Revelation, as guardians of the seven churches. Daniel (10.4–7) describes one of the angels in super-human terms:

¹ See the recent Vatican document, *Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Waters of Life: a Reflection on the "New Age"* (hereafter *Waters of Life*), 1.5 and passim; on angels, 2.2.1. Available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCCPCIDA.HTM>

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, that is, the Tigris, I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with gold of Uphaz. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the noise of a multitude. And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision, but a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves.

There are different kinds of angels, such as the cherubim and seraphim. A few are named, such as Gabriel, whose appearance awes Daniel (Dan.8.16), and later comes to him “in swift flight” at the time of the evening sacrifice (Dan.9.21). Gabriel is of course best known as God’s messenger to Zechariah and Mary (Lk.1.11–23, 26–38). And a “multitude of the heavenly army” appear with the Angel of the Lord to sing the birth of Christ (Lk.2.13). Angels often speak to people in dreams (e.g. to Jacob, Gen.31.11, and to Joseph, Mt.1.20, 2.13), and, implicitly, have super-human powers to discern good and evil (cf 2 Sam.14.17). Angels minister to Jesus after His temptations in the desert (Mk.1.13, Mt.4.11,) and in His agony (Lk.22.43), and reveal His resurrection (as “a young man in a white robe”, Mk.16.5; as an “angel of the Lord”, Mt.28.2; as “two men . . . in dazzling apparel”, Lk.24.4). Angels rescue Peter twice (Acts 5.19, 12.7), and he sees an angel in his house who reveals that he need no longer observe the Jewish dietary laws (Acts 11.13). The devout Gentile Cornelius also sees one (Acts 10.3).

A somewhat corrective line on angels is taken by the Epistles: “For even if we, or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you” (Gal.1.8); “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor.11.14). The Colossians are told not to be bullied into “the worship of angels” (Col.2.18), perhaps a reaction to contemporary Jewish apocalyptic; and the superiority of Jesus to angels is strongly underlined in Hebrews (1.4–14).

As they were almost a commonplace of the Jewish world, some of the angels in the Biblical narratives may be part of a midrash (thus only Luke has an angel at Jesus’ agony), whose acting as God’s mediators serves to underline His utter transcendence. But as we shall see, both angels’ appearances and the circumstances of those appearances often tally with reported modern phenomena. Most important, however, is the primary reading – angels are first and foremost not incorporeal beings, but God’s messengers.

In the popular tradition of Catholicism, angels abound. Theologians have less to say, but they are not silent. St. Leo the Great (d. 461) identifies some of the angels of the Old Testament as pre-incarnational manifestations of God the Son (Ep.31.2; PL 54,

792), e.g. the angel who wrestled with Jacob (Gen.32.24), and the mysterious three men who were entertained by Abraham (Gen.18.1–16). Effectively, the Son is the Father’s angel *qua* messenger. Pseudo-Dionysius (6th century) develops angelology considerably in *The Celestial Hierarchy* (CH)². He argues that because, as Scripture teaches, “no one has ever seen God” (Jn.1.18; CH 4.3/p. 157), then God, utterly transcendent, is represented in theophanous forms, mediated by angels. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, “the word of God has provided nine explanatory designations for the heavenly beings, and my own sacred-initiator has divided these into three threefold groups” (CH 6.2/p. 160). Pseudo-Dionysius proceeds to develop the Biblical names under the influence of Hierotheus (CH p. 160 n.68), according to a fascinatingly speculative but questionably baptised Neo-Platonism. This speculative tradition is continued more soberly by Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* Ia 50–64). It is very significant that Aquinas, in contrast to his treatment of God in ST I.2, makes no attempt to prove the existence of angels, starting instead with the question of whether or not they are entirely incorporeal (ST Ia 50.1). It seems that for Aquinas, then, the basis for believing in angels is a matter of divine revelation alone. In view of his treatment of the existence of God, it is unlikely that Aquinas took angels merely as a given because they were part of his culture.

Vatican II decisively embraced an explicitly Christocentric spirituality, and the reform of the Roman rite after the Council resulted in a reduction of the number of angel feasts from five to two (Archangels, 30th September, and Guardian Angels, 2nd October). At the same time, profound changes took place in Catholic popular devotion, and in many places the saints and angels came to figure far less prominently than they had before. Some would argue that the renewed spirituality of the laity now focussed on a more intimate relationship with Christ, rather than, as perhaps sometimes happened, approaching a terrible and exacting God through the safer mediators (or alternative saviours?) of angels and saints. And Maritain has spoken of the intellectual “sin of angelism”.³ Vatican II’s adoption of modern historical criticism was only a continuation of the Church’s traditional but sometimes neglected dialogue with the human sciences, and was highly beneficial for the reading of Scripture. But in a climate of scepticism which was not entirely healthy, this could all too easily degenerate into a narrow, rationalistic demythologisation, and hence in the sidelining, if not in the outright rejection, of more mysterious or emotive Catholic doctrines, with a consequent impoverishment of Christian life.

² In C. Lubheid, ed. & trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Complete Works* (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 143–192.

³ See J. Maritain, *Le Songe de Descartes* (Paris: R.-A. Correa, 1932), ch.1.

Kenelm Foster OP's edition and translation of Aquinas' treatment of angels (*Blackfriars Summa*, vol.IX) tries to keep the balance. Thus Foster argues that "the broad biblical tradition [about angels] has been maintained, but scarcely developed, by the Church, for always her chief concern with teaching about angels has been to keep it in line with, and subordinate to, more central and important truths."⁴ Foster follows Karl Rahner's argument that as belief in angels was part of the Biblical and Near Eastern cultural environment, it did not have to be specially revealed, so is not *directly* a part of the Biblical revelation of God's covenant. Angelic involvement is 'on the side', while not irrelevant. Furthermore, Rahner is deeply critical of Patristic and medieval angelology, which he sees as indiscriminating in its use of biblical texts, excessively concerned with facile orderliness (hence the hierarchies and choirs of angels, cf Pseudo-Dionysius), a tendency to separate angels from salvation history, and thus to make angels a pretext for metaphysical rather than properly theological investigations⁵ (but should metaphysics and theology be divided?). In the doctrinal witness, liturgy and devotions of the Church, Foster perceives a correction of culturally-influenced belief in angels in the light of divine revelation, a correction begun in the New Testament. However,

the element of angelology in Christian belief can, rightly understood, enormously enhance the believer's sense of the majesty of God. It can provide, moreover, a perspective enabling us to see the material world in due proportion, to see its *limitedness* within what Dante called 'the great sea of being' (*Paradiso* I, 113) (Foster, p. 302).

In other words, Foster does not want to demythologise angels or root out devotion to them, but he wants to correct angelology and keep it within the bounds of a rational account of the Catholic Faith. He may have accepted that the opposite error of neglecting angels was inevitable as the Church was reformed.

While Foster (p. 304) stresses the cultural dependence of Aquinas' speculative treatment of angels, Cornelius Ernst OP goes further: the *a priori* conditions for our knowledge of angels are inescapably *within* our culture.⁶ Wordsworth enjoyed his numinous experience of "Nature", but we cannot do the same in a post-industrial culture. Experience of angels is innately subjective, because angels, like God, are not material objects "out there", but subjects, (analogically) like us. Hence we see angels only by "sharing a community with angels"

⁴ Kenelm Foster, 'Angelology in the Church and in St. Thomas', *Blackfriars Summa Theologiae*, vol.IX (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), Appendix I, p. 301.

⁵ Karl Rahner, 'Angelologie', in J. Höfer & K. Rahner, eds., *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 1957), vol.1, col.533–8, cited by Foster.

⁶ Cornelius Ernst, 'How to See an Angel', in *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology* (London: DLT, 1979), pp. 187–201.

(p. 200), that is in the eucharistic liturgy, in which we sing the angelic hymn of Is.6, “Holy, holy, holy”. Ernst thereby sanctions the validity of subjective experience, without setting it *against* the objective order in the way that William Blake does.⁷ But these conditions exist only in the space of the Christian liturgy. What would surely have surprised both Foster and Ernst, is the extraordinary rise of reported angelic experiences of those of all religions and, in particular, none.

Modern Angelic Experiences: Context, Methods and Data

In the past twenty years reports of angels have abounded, especially in and around the New Age Movement – even to the extent of a special report in that most untheological of magazines, *Cosmopolitan*.⁸ Typically, New Age books on angels give stories of quasi-miraculous angelic interventions – e.g. rescues by angels – as well as less striking, but equally attractive stories of “angel friends” whose interventions have apparently made individuals’ lives happy and successful. All that is required is openness to angels’ existence – there is no other code of belief or ethics. In some cases, rituals are provided to summon angelic assistance.⁹

Faced with this phenomenon, the Christian and the sceptic may find themselves in the same boat. Are these “angelic experiences” any more than the imaginative projection of psychological needs? Is it not rather that “for those who choke too easily on God and his rules angels are the handy compromise, all fluff and meringue, kind, non-judgemental. And they are available to everyone like aspirin”?¹⁰ In other words, angels are a spirituality for the commitment-phobe, as well as seeming to support G.K. Chesterton’s assertion that when people cease to believe in God, they believe in anything. Nevertheless, as the Catholic Church does believe in angels, some sense has to be made of this phenomenon, as merely to dismiss it could appear to be dismissing angels altogether. The simplest approach would be to argue from faith: since angels are, according to Catholic teaching, “spiritual, non-corporeal beings”¹¹, and are thus closed to normal

⁷ Ernst, p. 197. Compare Georges Huber’s *My Angel Will Go Before You* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1983), which restates biblical and magisterial teaching (as well as Aquinas), with additional hagiographical material, but makes no attempt at a dialogue with modern sciences such as psychology and shows none of Aquinas’ speculative imagination. At best the book is a brave restatement of traditional piety in an unbelieving world, but really it is unsurprising that Huber (p. 16) finds himself “in the disagreeable company of the naïve and uninformed.”

⁸ Dec. 1997, pp. 36–40 – see E. Heathcote-James, *Seeing Angels* (London: John Blake, 2001), p. 261 ch.1 n.1.

⁹ E.g. R. Webster, *Spirit Guide and Angel Guardians* (St. Paul MN: Llewellyn, 1998).

¹⁰ Anonymous source cited by Heathcote-James, p. 22.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pgh.328.

human understanding via the medium of the senses, one can begin only from the perspective of faith. But this does not help us to discern which reported angelic manifestations are bogus, malign or even just possibly genuine.

A different starting point would be a critical assessment of reported experiences of angelic manifestations, but this is a very controversial basis for any enquiry which seeks to establish a rational basis for faith. It is not just that “experience” became a tainted word for Catholic theology after the Modernist crisis of the early 20th century: rather, it is hard to see how a coherent angelology could be constructed out of diverse and necessarily unverifiable reports of individual personal experiences.

There are two possible responses to this objection: the first would be admit that any philosophical system which attempts to construct a totalising metaphysic – a criticism which some post-Heideggerian theologians have levelled at Aquinas – in fact shoe-horns reality, without any justification, to fit a human theory, rather than being open to receive reality in all its mysterious otherness, which includes perplexing individual experiences. Thus, according to Louis-Marie Chauvet, “reasons” and in particular onto-theological metaphysics have been used by Western society in the same way as the ancients used myths and rites, to fill the unsealable breach which is the essence of human nature. Far from resolving human nature’s internal conflict, these remedies simply exclude the reality of the Other.¹² A “post-metaphysical” account of angels would thus be a carefully constructed narrative, seeking, by means of uncovering hidden desires, guilts and dis-ease, to awaken the reader’s response to the Other. Such a method is attractive, because it has the potential to re-integrate into philosophy so much which positivist accounts have excluded. But it runs the almost inevitable risk of being merely an out-narration, telling a better (in what sense?) story than anyone else’s; but that is all. While not excluding the rational *a priori*, its epistemological relationship with the rational is not clear.

A second approach is that taken by John O’Connor, who argues that what Chauvet is really rejecting is not metaphysics itself, but a narrow metaphysics which has no room for intersubjective symbolic mediation. O’Connor postulates a non-reductive naturalism which recognises that the subjective is an integral and irreducible part of metaphysics, citing McDowell’s argument that an utterly impersonal analysis of the world could give only

¹² See L.-M. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: a sacramental re-interpretation of Christian existence*, trans. P. Madigan & M. Beaumont (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), p. 368.

the very barest account of the reality, totally excluding features of the world such as colour . . . On the pure scientific conception, 'looks green' does not presuppose any prior understanding of 'green' or 'is green'. To abandon any prior conception of what 'green' or 'is green' are is to treat the colour as separate from the object in some way, since to predicate it of the object is to include the premiss which itself must be justified in pure scientific terms. That is, the pure scientific account commits one to describing and explaining such features independently of the objects in which they are supposed to reside, which leads to a methodological breakdown.¹³

By contrast, an expansive naturalism can take a lot more on board. In recognising that to know that there is colour *requires* a subject, it refutes the hard empiricist's absolute opposition of subjective and objective, an opposition which originates in a failure to recognise the difference between the merely relativistic "it seems to me", and the subjective which may be objective knowledge *requiring* a subject, e.g. to *know* that the grass is green. Furthermore, recognising that our description of objects is dependent on a shared (linguistic) culture allows the introduction of context-dependent objectivity, such as a joke's being objectively funny¹⁴. This context is likely to be a certain culture, a tradition – e.g. among English people, absurd jokes are considered funny, but they may not be elsewhere. Applying this to angels, in many cultures and religions (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism) angels are part of a traditional shared belief, even if this belief has become attenuated. This is really Cornelius Ernst's point: in situating the knowledge of angels within the Christian liturgy, he is arguing that to perceive them requires a shared culture. Even our secularised culture, as the inheritor of the culture constructed by Christian tradition, derives much of its hermeneutic for "angelic" experiences from that Christian tradition: hence why people are much more likely to speak of having seen an angel than a fairy or a *jinn*.

On the basis of a context-dependent objectivity of the expansive naturalist kind, if reports of the angelic experiences of several people from the same culture show several points of similarity, they should be taken seriously (provided that there is not obvious evidence of lying, invention or psychological imbalance). At the same time this does not prove, of course, that these are experiences of real angels, or that angels exist at all. What it does permit is an inclusion of subjective experience, such as that of angels, within a metaphysic; secondly, it allows us to treat such experiences comparatively rather than as purely individual experiences.

¹³ John O'Connor, 'Expansive naturalism and the justification of metaphysics in sacramental theology', *New Blackfriars* 84 no.898/990 (July/August 2003), p. 365.

¹⁴ O'Connor, *op.cit.* p. 367f.

We thus have sufficient methodological justification for an attempt to construct an angelology on the basis of a critical assessment of a survey of reported individual angelic experiences. Emma Heathcote-James began her study, *Seeing Angels* (London: John Blake, 2001)¹⁵ in 1997, initially by placing advertisements in church newsletters and local free newspapers, asking for persons who felt that they had “encountered an angelic presence” to write to her. Although initially she had little success, the popular interest in angels resulted in serious journalists taking up her project, and by 1998 it had reached the national media. Largely but not exclusively through advertisements placed in broadsheet newspapers, Heathcote-James received a total of ca. 500 responses. Of these she used only 350, and is coy about the reasons, but one presumes she filtered out the obviously mad or inventive. Some of the respondents she went on to interview personally. She admits that the results are coloured by the necessary self-selection of the respondents: indeed, 69% were women, 44.6% were *Daily Telegraph* readers, and 33.8% in the 31–50 age bracket. In spite of this the respondents were religiously very diverse: 39.1% identified themselves as Protestant at the time of their experience, 6.3% as Catholics, 4.3% lapsed Christian, 4 respondents Muslim, and, significantly, 5.7% agnostic and 4% atheist (Heathcote-James, p. 237).

The largest single category of angels which respondents claimed to have seen (31%) was the “traditional” type found in the religious art of the respondent’s culture – “obviously” incorporeal, winged, androgynous, often dressed in white, and often radiant, translucent, and very tall. Those who experienced them were seldom intimidated – rather they felt calm, peace and security. There were very few accounts of “bad” angels. “Traditional” angels often appeared in “rescue” situations: a woman said that she was almost run over by a car, but somehow was “wafted up” on to the steps of a house by quasi-physical feathered wings. Sometimes they appeared just as a comforting presence, mostly commonly in the bedroom. This is generally where people feel safest and most relaxed, and, significantly, most of the apparitions occurred when subjects were on the way to sleep, a neurological state associated with the best insights and creative inspiration – but also harmless hallucinations, akin to daydreaming (*Ibid.*, p. 191f.).

A spectacular claim of “traditional” angelic intervention was the “Angel of Mons”. Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, a National Day of Prayer was held in England, even though most people knew that the English and French forces were unlikely to be able to resist the massive German onslaught through Belgium. Sure enough, the British and French were forced into retreat, but as they

¹⁵ *Seeing Angels* is based on Heathcote-James’ PhD thesis, and although a popularization, the book’s presentation and criticism of data and conclusions remain “academically intact”.

turned in a last desperate bid to slow the German advance, they saw an enormous angel and “bowmen” riding with them. The English thought they saw St. George, the French, St. Michael or Joan of Arc. German prisoners of war also confirmed the vision. The different explanations of the vision by necessarily opposing sources actually tends to strengthen the case for its veracity – they all saw the same but had to find a way of explaining it according to their own tradition.¹⁶ Nevertheless, as soon as the event reached the newspapers, it excited controversy: one writer claimed that before the story became popular, he had written it as part of a fictional work of his own, whereas a soldier who had been at Mons claimed that he really had seen the angel.¹⁷

In any case, several of the subjects of the above cases had religious faith, which provides an obvious rationalisation of their experiences. But this also lends particular significance to the reports of people who were atheists or agnostics at the time of their experiences. A GP reported that when she was a medical student on clinical practice, and a firm atheist, a child victim of a road accident was brought in unconscious with a single bruise on her face. The absence of injuries was extremely surprising as the lorry driver who had hit her and eye-witnesses affirmed that the vehicle had gone over her with both sets of wheels. After some while the child awoke and asked for the man in white. When the doctor came forward, the child said, “No . . . the man in the long shiny dress . . . he stroked my face, as he picked up the wheels . . . the wheels did not touch me” (Heathcote-James, p. 75). Note that neither this child, nor a three-year-old who had a near-death experience and spoke of “birdies”, used the word “angel”.

The second largest category was of “human” angels in modern clothes, but with superhuman qualities which made them look “different” – piercing eyes or unnatural strength. Such angels tended to arrive at a time of extreme need as rescuers, and then once they had rescued the subject of the vision, disappeared. Usually the subject felt that they were angels rather than people “in the right place at the right time” because they, and in some cases their car or van, would start to go away and then disappear into thin air. For example, a lone woman on an underground station claimed that she was saved from an attack by another woman who suddenly came up and walked with her, only to disappear when the threat had passed.

There is no shortage of psychological explanations for “human” angels: first, the respondents are speaking after more or less traumatic experiences, during which the reactions and emotions are not in normal states. People often experience an altered sense of time,

¹⁶ See K. Tutt, *True Life Encounters: Unexplained Natural Phenomena* (London: Orion Media, 1997), p. 289.

¹⁷ See K. Finlay, ‘Angels in the trenches: British soldiers and miracles in the First World War’, *Studies in Church History* (forthcoming paper).

memory triggers (as in “I saw my whole life before me”), or an ultra-focussed and thus narrowed awareness. This would explain the “disappearance” of the “angel”: because the subject is in an immediately post-traumatic state, he or she would be focussed on the perceived cause of the trauma rather than on the “saviour”. And many such helpers may be either shy or just in a hurry – such as the “people’s heroes” who have rescued accident victims, only to jump in their vehicles and drive away. Furthermore the filtering of memories is a natural way in which people get over traumas, telling a version of the story which brings about closure for them. Notably, all four Muslim respondents recorded “human angels”: in Islam angels are always quasi-human, never “feathered”.

A significant number of respondents reported having been spoken to and given comfort or warning at a critical moment, e.g. “Don’t go to London today”, and later a terrible road accident occurred; or, “Your baby’s in the road”, and so it was. In a few cases, they were in conversation with what they thought to be another human being, but other observers thought that they were talking to themselves. Less common were beams of light (one case of which apparently dispersed some stalkers), “presences”, or strange but very pleasant and comforting scents which afforded no natural explanation – such as a strong smell of lavender when there was no lavender or perfume nearby. These scents were sometimes associated with a death, reminiscent of the Christian tradition of death “in the odour of sanctity”. “Hearing voices” is, of course, a key symptom of schizophrenia. And not just schizophrenics, but also epileptics are sometimes prone to olfactory hallucinations.

Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) have received considerable coverage in recent years, from respected medical journals to the less credible publications on the paranormal. Typically, subjects are close to death, but when revived recall leaving their bodies and seeing the from above, passing into a tunnel of light, a feeling of well-being, seeing long-dead loved ones, a sense of welcome, and sometimes meeting an angel or the founder of their religion – who then sends them back again. Unsurprisingly, such phenomena are common in hospitals. There are many physical explanations, such as the the continuation of brain activity for some time after the heart has stopped,¹⁸ brain cortex firing to produce a sensation of light, sped-up memory

¹⁸ The explanation given by the logical positivist A.J. Ayer for his own NDE in June 1988, during which he “was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space” (A.J. Ayer, ‘What I saw when I was dead . . .’, *Spectator*, 16 July 1988, published in L.E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of A.J. Ayer* (La Salle: Open Court, 1992), pp. 43–53: this citation, p. 46). Ayer felt that they were not making a good job of it and tried, unsuccessfully, to gain their attention.

recall, auto-suggestion, oxygen starvation, and the effect of certain drugs. None of these explanations has proved conclusive, however. The American neuroscientist and paediatrician Melvin Morse has worked in particular on the NDEs of children, who do not usually have the “cultural” memory to generate NDEs. The after-effects are beneficial, giving a renewed commitment to life and greater social conscience.¹⁹ Likewise bereavement experiences – “hearing” the voice of the deceased at some point after death, or seeing an angel which makes the dying person or his/her loved ones ready for death, or “going to heaven” in a dream with one’s deceased – all these commonly comfort the bereaved. Morse believes that these are not to be so much “explained away” as to be accepted as something beneficial. What cannot clearly be resolved is whether these are an integral part of the brain’s “self-healing” mechanisms – psychological antibodies, if you like – or whether they represent supernatural intervention. Most baffling of all are predictions: e.g. an atheist smelled a strong scent and then “saw” his mother, who died very soon after this experience. On the other hand a cultural universal is the angel of death – found in Christian and Hindu cultures and pre-Christian Ireland, who warns the dying person or their relatives of the impending death in more or less comforting ways.

As we have seen, many of the above reported angelic experiences can be rationally explained, chiefly in psychological and neurological terms. This in no way devalues their beneficial effect for the individual, but should make us question how many of these experiences are really manifestations of objective, incorporeal, spiritual beings called angels. Most cases typically allow both “affirming” and “denying” explanations: either a genuine angelic manifestation or drowsiness-induced hallucination; either an answer to prayer in time of need or the brain’s response to extreme psychological stress.

The problem, though, is that only *some* of the cases can be explained. Some angels may be comforting hallucinations or post-traumatic healing mechanisms, but this does not answer some perfectly rational questions: *how* was someone carried to safety a split second before a car would have hit them? *Why* did the stalkers run away? In the case of the child run over by the lorry, who knows whether in his unconscious state, he did not have memories of angels on a Christmas tree? Or was this explanation suggested much later? But we are still left with the fact that he survived being run over by a heavy lorry, with only a single bruise. In that case, the possibility that some non-human being, probably non-corporeal as unobserved by by-standers, lifted the truck over him, does not seem so unreasonable.

¹⁹ See website at <http://www.melvinmorse.com/light.htm>

Even here, we are relying on personal testimony, which rightly arouses scepticism. Generally we are more inclined to believe someone whom we know personally, because our experience of their behaviour allows us to make an informed judgement of how credible and balanced they are. Thus any study based on personal experience will always be at two removes: we have to rely on the judgement of someone we don't know on people that he/she probably doesn't know well. But at the same time, unless there is evidence to the contrary, we may have good reason to accept the account: because we are always already social beings. We cannot aspire to a "view from nowhere", without, as we have seen from McDowell and O'Connor, restricting ourselves to a very bare, and indeed unliveable account of reality, which would exclude even such phenomena as colour. If we thus accept that our critical framework is socially constructed, we should take seriously reports of angelic manifestations from someone operating in a similar critical framework, provided that he/she does not show obvious signs of imbalance or prejudice: for example, the report of a First World War army chaplain who accepted – without claiming to understand it – a sergeant's story of being accompanied in battle by a "Friend in White". The chaplain said, "I find him a sergeant with DCM (Distinguished Conduct Medal) – a very fine specimen indeed. . . . he is not the sort to see hallucinations."²⁰ Also, while demonic manifestations are outside the scope of this article, the much more striking phenomena associated with demonic possession and exorcism (e.g. levitation, strange voices and inexplicable knowledge), even in an age of considerable psychiatric expertise, are a serious challenge to hard-line sceptics.

Thus if we wish to avoid the charge of being sceptic fundamentalists, people who unscientifically shoehorn reality into their own predetermined, socially constructed worldview, we should not automatically dismiss reports of angelic manifestations. Not only is there no reason to exclude the existence of angels *a priori*, but there is an irreducible core of data which defies the usual explanations to which we would reasonably first turn. This does not prove the existence of angels, but leaves it as a distinct rational possibility.

Towards a Renewed Angelology

We have seen that a good proportion of reported angelic apparitions are most reasonably explained as hallucinations, post-traumatic reactions or other psychological phenomena. And the congruency of many reports with the evidence of Scripture and Catholic Tradition – e.g.

²⁰ See Finlay, *op.cit.*

“traditional” angels, super-human angels (sometimes visible only to one person, like the “mighty man” in Dan.10), voices, rescuing angels, comforting angels and angels at the point of death – may be due to the Judaeo-Christian (-Islamic) cultural context of the subjects. But a number of manifestations were found to defy rationalisation. Thus we are can apply to these, at least, a Biblical hermeneutic.

In the Bible, as Gregory the Great (Homily 34.8; PL 76, 1250) recognised, angels are fundamentally *messengers*. This enables a much broader conception of what angels can be, as God can speak just as much through neural messages from the brain and people in the right place at the right time (the people to whom we sometimes say, “You’re an angel!”) as He can through incorporeal spiritual beings. This also offers an answer to the problem of how one “sees” an angel if it is incorporeal. There is no mental act involved: rather, God makes the angel manifest to the subject.²¹ And traditional angels, while immediately identifiable because they fit into the cultural expectations of the person to whom it has been sent, are thus also apophatic. They are manifested *quasi*-physically, but their translucent “insubstantiality” reveals that they are *not* embodied beings; their wings show that they are not limited by human constraints of movement; and their androgyny, that they are not gendered, unlike humans and other animals (unfortunately this is often debased by very fey artistic representation of angels, especially by the Pre-Raphaelites). This apophaticism points beyond them to the One who sent them; and cataphatically, their often great size, radiance, serenity and power are manifestations of the powerful love of the God. Similarly apophatic are the strange lights, disembodied voices, presences and unaccountable scents. Regarding “super-human” angels, there is value in Aquinas’ suggestion that they assume bodies for our sake, to speak with us and give us a foretaste of our communion with them in the next world – and in the Old Testament, to prefigure Christ (ST 51.2 ad 1). And note, both from Biblical examples such as Dan.10, and modern reports, that these super-human angels are again apophatic: they are not quite human, with their piercing eyes or extraordinary strength or an ability to disappear.

By contrast, New Age angelology is deliberately vague and imprecise, rather than merely apophatic: “there are many levels of guides, entities, energies, and beings in every octave of the universe . . . They are all there to pick and choose from in relation to your own attraction/repulsion mechanisms.”²² New Agers sometimes attribute the

²¹ A distinction made by Fergus Kerr OP in his discussion of St. Paul’s Damascus road experience: F. Kerr, ‘Paul’s experience: sighting or theophany?’, *New Blackfriars* 58/686 (July 1977), pp. 304–313.

²² C. Griscom, *Ecstasy is a New Frequency: Teachings of the Light Institute* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 82.; cited in *Waters of Life*, 2.2.1 n.22.

normal invisibility of angels to their “different” or “very high” vibrational frequency. There is simply no scientific evidence for this theory, which thus risks discrediting what may be genuine experiences. It may be that the New Agers are actually thinking analogically, although, lacking a systematic philosophy which has a concept of analogy, they fail to acknowledge it. But pseudo-science can only damage the rational case for believing in any non-physical reality.

Spiritually, the Catholic insistence that true angels are *messengers* of God presupposes a “discernment of the spirits”, “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor.11.14). This understanding of the angel as one *sent*, one *manifested* is in contrast to the autonomous and controlling self of the New Age conception, which invokes and *uses* angels quasi-Gnostically, with no inkling that such handy angels may not always be as benign as they appear. But the same demand of discernment also challenges Christians to admit that as “by their fruits you shall know them” (Matt.7.20), then through angels God has reached many people outside the Church in their hour of need – perhaps because Christians failed to do so. But above all, the fact that God uses intermediary messengers in so many cases demonstrated both His utter transcendence and His abundant love, speaking to individuals and communities in the ways most appropriate to each.

What are we to make of the angelic experiences which afford both affirming and denying explanations, e.g. angelic appearances to subjects in a state of drowsiness, or NDEs? It would be possible to take a middle way, and to argue that they are angels insofar as they are means God uses to communicate with human beings. Whether the apparitions are spiritual, non-corporeal beings or the product of human imagination or neural activity is merely secondary. How one interprets these apparitions depends on one’s world-view: they seem to have a context-dependent objectivity. In her study of reported angelic manifestations in the First World War, Katherine Finlay argues that while Protestants could accept the concept of miracles, it was easier for Catholics to make sense of them, as “while Catholic priests questioned the legitimacy of individual cases, they also had a system by which to assess, and thus the capacity to more willingly accept, the possibility of supernatural assistance”.²³ And of course, unlike the majority of Protestants, most Catholics at that time had at least the idea of devotion to one’s Guardian Angel. So the latter were either more inclined to believe in, and thus imagine angels, or God sent angels to those who were open to them. It all depends on your point of view. A crucifix at Loos escaped destruction because the shell which landed next to it did not explode: there were many similar cases.²⁴ Were these just chance, or had God, the creator and sustainer of all things, intervened?

²³ Finlay, op.cit.

²⁴ See Finlay, op.cit.

If we say that signs – such as angels – will be given only to those who explicitly believe in them, then we are admitting that, epistemologically at least, angels are just a matter of faith. To argue *only* from within the “context-dependent objectivity” of the Catholic worldview, however coherent one’s thesis, ultimately makes Catholic theology a closed system, lacking any common ground with the natural sciences and, indeed, with non-Catholics. But if we accept the possible veracity of apparitions of these spiritual, non-corporeal beings to non-Catholics, then the Catholic Faith can offer an evangelising interpretation of their experiences, as Finlay implies. To “see” an angel *properly* – for what it is – requires the proper context of the liturgy, as Ernst has argued, but even an inherited vestigial Christianity provides a hermeneutic and a context-dependent objectivity in which for the subject to respond rationally to an angelic experience. All the more interesting are the case of angelic apparitions which seem to occur where the subject has almost no hermeneutic (such as the little boy run over by a truck), and thus the objectivity of the experience cannot be reduced *only* to the context. In other words, to use Chauvet’s language, these are real irruptions of the Other.

And Chauvet’s accusation that the West has tried to fill the breach of otherness with “reasons” is a challenge which has to be met – and not just by secular sceptics, but by theologians too. Those of us who are engaged in the intellectual defence of the Christian Faith may sometimes, if we admit it, be annoyed by reports of such “irrational” phenomena as angelic apparitions. But such “irruptions of the Other” not only prevent us from totalising our systematic theologies; they also reveal the rich ecology and sociability of the cosmos. Whereas rationalism and empiricism tend to strip the cosmos down to a frightening environment in which the human being is little more than “a bare, forked animal”, and a lonely one at that, the angels come to the vulnerable and alienated as messengers of God’s redeeming love. Thus Aquinas treats angels in the context of God’s government of the world. And with the saints, angels are a sign of the unity of the heavenly and earthly Churches.

At the same time, this does not demand a special devotion to angels. Many Christians, theologians and otherwise, may be living sanctified lives but not find angels particularly interesting or helpful (their angel may instead be a human soul-friend). Again, “by their fruits you shall know them”: such a person and the angel devotee alike can rejoice in each other’s holiness and diversity, without trying to convert the other to his or her own’s spirituality. Nevertheless, in cases which admit of no rational grounds for dismissing someone’s report of having seen an angel, I suggest that, with appropriate discernment, we should treat this as God’s invitation to complete the work of evangelising that person which He has already begun through the heavenly Church. If we begin by ridiculing reports of

angelic apparitions, we cannot be surprised if their subjects are alienated from the Church and take refuge in the vagaries of the New Age. But if we respond eirenicly, biblically and rationally, they are more likely to be drawn to the Bread of Life.

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