

tackle the theologically more crucial, but philosophically more intractable, problem of the distinction between the rational and the irrational creation.

## Christ and His Angels

### by Rob van der Hart, O.P.

There is much more in this paper about angels than about Christ; but I am sure that you will forgive me this disproportion. Christ, so it seems, is already well known to us: we can take him for granted. But angels are new—there is news in talking about angels: they excite our curiosity.

At our disposal are numerous scholarly treatises in which Christ's personality is analysed and this nature is dissected in its several components. About Christ we may think we know almost everything there is to know. But angels. . . ?

Of course, we know they have not really got wings like birds, and that in fact they must be quite different from the naked babies that tumble from the skies in our baroque paintings. But what else is there to say?

To be fair only in the past century and a half have angels suffered a leakage of meaning ending in the present debilitated condition. Before that they were the objects of much serious speculation. Were they material or pure spirits; what sort of knowledge did they have; could they have intercourse; how many of them were there; etc.? Indeed, angels were dissected too: Fr Cipolla (Brother Onion) treasured in a box a 'penna dell'agnolo Gabriello' which was left behind on the occasion of the archangel's visit to the Blessed Virgin (*Il Decamerone* VI 10, 370)—supposing, of course, that Boccaccio is a reliable witness.

But alas, for us this wealth of information is buried in the past, unavailable because we do not even know how to make it appear relevant. The break with the past is pretty well complete: angels have been lost definitively in a welter of tinsel and feathers.

Let me therefore be realistic and presume that most of you will approach our subject in an attitude of the utmost scepticism—sympathetic, no doubt, if my efforts lead to making angelology into an issue of a certain poetic and romantic interest, but otherwise quite confident that I will never succeed in convincing you that angels are real things.

Yet, if we are to speak of 'Christ and his angels' we will have to take into consideration the strong statements about them throughout the Bible. And then it appears to verge on blasphemy to suppose

that angels could have been for Jesus mere illusions and romantic fantasies. He—together with the whole religious tradition in which he stood—took angels extremely seriously. They did not just sing and twang the harp to the eternal glory of God, or indulge in one of those other innocent activities that make Christmas into such an agreeable feast. No, angels intervened in God's work and earthly affairs: sometimes as a blessing, often as a scourge and provocation. They were involved in practically every major religious crisis. Angels cause and cure plagues and slay the first-born of Egypt. They are tempted by the beauty of the daughters of men, as it is reported in the sixth chapter of Genesis and on many other occasions: real things they certainly are.

But let us not get involved in a lengthy, dreary and basically absurd argument to prove the existence of angels to those who hold them to be mere conceptual illusions. Of course, one cannot prove the existence of things that are not experienced. And, suppose one could, then the only result would be the abstract knowledge that angels exist—and if that is not nonsense, it is in any case completely unimportant. Experiences may turn out to be illusions—or rather, we may have to learn that our understanding of certain experiences has led us into illusion. But one cannot put this the other way round. Illusions are, of course, real inasmuch as they are illusions, but they can never be made into reality.

So where does this lead us? Is this going to be a rather boring monologue in which I talk about my own experience of angels—something that will remain a closed book to others? This would not be much use anyway. You will point out that I am simply talking about illusions, without realizing it or wanting to admit it.

Indeed, I am not even sure myself that I ever really experienced angels. To be honest, for my knowledge of angels I depend mainly on the experiences of previous generations.

In the solid tradition of Western provincialism it is perfectly acceptable not to bother about the beliefs of others. So we shall carefully avoid topics like 'Angels in the Koran' and 'Angels in African Religion'. But such an isolation becomes really absurd when we cut ourselves off from the religious tradition to which we, Jews and Christians, confess to belong. If we cannot get away from the idea that angels are mere illusions, we will never understand what our fathers in the faith were talking about. When Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, stresses the fact that our battle is not against flesh and blood, human foes, but against the cosmic forces, principalities and powers, it needs considerable boldness for the modern theologian to maintain that angels in the Bible are really nothing else than 'time-bound constructions of the imagination, peculiar to the monotheistic religions, in which the immensity of the power concentrated in one universal god must somehow be channelled to reach the needs of man'—to quote only one of those minimalizing interpretations of

the biblical religion. Such theories must be regarded as pure fantasy.

The people of the Old Testament saw their god Yahweh as someone who was deeply involved in a confrontation with other deities, and in the New Testament Christ is seen as the Son of God who brought salvation by his victory over principalities and powers. Belief in Yahweh and Christ means faith in someone who relates not only to the world in which man lives, but also, and perhaps foremost, to a context of other deities: to angels.

All this is not designed to cause theological embarrassment. I do not want to maintain that we, against all our natural inclinations, must now accept the existence of angels on top of all the other things we find difficult to square with our modern so-called scientific world-view. Such intentions must be rejected as fatal to faith. There is something very odd—permit me to say—about some contemporary attitudes towards religion. Religion is often regarded as a matter of choice between belief and unbelief in the supernatural. Faith is supposed to depend on whether or not one goes in for a number of supernatural things. It is then generally agreed that one should not overburden the modern Christian with too many of those things, and that one should strip the supersensible to its bare minimum. Shall he drop the angels and hold on to more essential things like the virgin birth, physical resurrection, etc.?

How absurd this really is. When I tell people that I take a certain interest in angels there are usually two reactions. Most of them simply laugh at me, but others say, 'Oh, how delightful in this age of unbelief to find someone who still believes in angels!'. The principle behind this seems to be: if you believe in something as daft as angels, you can be trusted to hold firmly on to other (daft) supernatural things.

My point is, however, that angels are not objects of faith, but rather the context, the texture to which faith relates. Faith, surely, is not a matter of whether or not one believes in a number of supersensible things. The supersensible, or the wider sphere of existence in which man's sphere of existence is conceived to rest, is a matter of fact, a givenness: you don't believe it, it is just there. Faith concerns what happens in this wider sphere, what happens in the domain of the supersensible, not in isolation but as carrying and surrounding man's world.

This is at least, I believe, the way the Bible takes the situation to be. Faith in Christ is not a matter of whether or not you believe that Christ exists, but whether you accept what he did to the deities who unlawfully had taken possession of this world. In other words, faith in Christ is a rejection of idolatry and not a rejection of unbelief as sheer secularity.

And this has a reason that belongs to the very nature of religious belief; in fact it is the only way religious belief can make sense. For the religious domain cannot be just the supernatural as something

one-dimensional. It must be two-dimensional in itself, for only then can something happen within it; only then has it its own story to tell—instead of merely filling a gap (a lack) in the world, and so being degraded to what is basically a worldly category.

In order to be able to speak for itself and to tell its own story, religion needs to be structured out of elements that can be re-structured through the presence of Christ. His death and resurrection are understood as a victory over principalities and powers that now become obedient to him: 'He ascended into the heights with captives in his train' (Eph. 4, 8).

This is the reason why in each Preface of the Mass it is not just we who sing 'Holy, holy, holy'; we must join the choirs of angels on whose obedience to God our salvation depends.

These elements out of which the heavenly world is structured may have different names. Some call them 'angels' (*angeloi* in Greek, *malachim* in Hebrew: the word means something like 'messengers'), but we don't have to stick to this title which is rather debased in our history. We may call them 'holy ones' or 'saints' (Hebrew: *qedoshim*), a term which is more common in the biblical literature, anyway.

Angels are the necessary condition for religious belief. If religion is taken seriously, then angels must be taken for real.

So what have we gained? As the argument stands it still sounds rather dogmatic, Inquisition-like: 'You call yourself an adherent of the Christian faith? Very well, then you will have to accept the reality of angels as part of the package.'

But this, of course, would take us right back to the position which we have just left behind. So let me reformulate the argument so that it sounds less didactic and more like an analysis. It then looks more like this: When religion is something real—and I presume it is—then we do in fact accept the reality of angels, without perhaps knowing it; as it says in the letter to the Hebrews: 'We are entertaining angels unawares.' May I give an example

In our days few people have a clue as to what religious life in the sense of monasticism is about. Yet every member of the Church more or less accepts it as a matter of self-evidence that monks and nuns are part of the picture. The recent Vatican Council even goes so far as to say that religious life is essential to the nature of the Church—without, however, being able to produce one decent argument why. In a sense it can be said that we are entertaining monks unawares: it is felt intuitively that without monasticism the Church wouldn't be what she is supposed to be. Now, here is an interesting question. Is this merely an analogy or an instance, a case in point? I think that it is a case in point. For traditionally monastic life is called 'Bios Angelikos' (Angelic Life). The Church as the realization of the kingdom of heaven on earth needs to have angels among its members, needs to be two-dimensional: she needs to be the presence of the angelic and the holy to which the individual

member can relate. And so it becomes important to find out whether the angelic perfection is the final perfection, complete in itself, or rather a perfection to which something still has to happen.

So we are entertaining angels unawares. The angels are not illusions, but the illusion is our conviction that angels are illusions. We must open our eyes and see again that the reality of life is life lived in the presence of angels.

I do not say this because I believe that angels are necessarily a pleasant sight. On the contrary, I believe that they can be rather terrible. But if you know that the tiger is hiding in the bush it is no use closing your eyes and insisting that it is an illusion. Better keep your eyes open and make the best of the situation.

And then, of course, we will have to do something more than just keeping our eyes open. So it is with the angels. Seeing them is not enough; something must happen to them. They must be 'exposed', in their strength and their weakness. He, Christ, made of them a public spectacle, so it says in the letter to the Colossians.

Is it really so odd to say that man lives in the presence of angels? Is it not the same as saying that man's is a consciousness with an angelic dimension? Surely, this is not necessarily more odd than saying that man is an animal, an animal endowed with reason. If the study of animal behaviour (ethology) is recognized as revealing something about man, it is difficult to see why angelology should not do the same. I would like to go even further and suggest that the angel is a close relative of the 'naked ape'. But before we come to that let us first consider the following (not very original) metaphor.

Reason may be compared to the captain of a ship that rests in and is carried by the infinite waters of the ocean: it is the world resting in the wider sphere of the divine. A good captain knows his ship with a knowledge that is beyond theory: it is a sensitivity, an art, by which he understands in a much deeper way the secrets of his ship as stirred by the waters of the sea. He knows through identification with his ship. With his hands and feet he feels the movements, and he knows what direction to give, steering the ship safely through the secrets of the ocean. He has to be one with his ship in a relation of immediacy, feeling it as it were in his blood and his bones. And, yet, this immediacy of the relationship of captain and ship is not the whole truth: it entails paradoxically an element of distance. For a ship by itself is meaningless, an object like any other object: it is mute and does not speak as a ship. A ship becomes a ship only as resting in and moved by the waters of the ocean.

In fact, of course, this metaphor is used in the semitic religious tradition upside down: the world is surrounded not by the waters but by the heavens where the angels live. Or still better, the world is surrounded by both spheres: the heavens, standing for the bright side of the divine, and the waters, standing for the dark side of the divine: order and chaos.

Ethology says that study of man is hampered by preconceived moralisms, and that the study of animals will give us an unbiased picture of certain aspects of man's behaviour that come with his animal-like nature. It emphasizes what man has in common with animals: he eats, sleeps, has sexual instincts, is aggressive, etc. Unfortunately man has grown away from his spontaneous reaction—or at least, he would like to think he has. It is important to re-find something of the immediacy which comes out so clearly in animal existence: an animal is completely identical with his natural condition. Now, man must realize that ultimately he cannot help desiring a similar complete identity with his natural condition, and so he must recognize in himself something that is properly characteristic of animals.

This idea of the identification with animals is of course nothing new. It is a well-known cultural phenomenon. The African identified himself with his cattle, the Egyptian with frogs, the child with his pets, and the old lady with her cats.

But we must never forget that there is something more involved than just an identification with the animal type of existence. We must not say that man *becomes* an animal; we must say that man adopts the animal-like existence: the majestic strangeness of total identification with the natural condition. This is for the animal a matter of self-evidence, but for man it is a matter of desire.

And so, inside man, there is something totally different. What is for the animal mere immediacy is for man Paradise lost, lost innocence. What are for the animal mere instincts are for man propensities and passions, expressions of desire and longing. In contradistinction to the animals there is in man a distance between his passions and his immediacy, between knowledge and innocence. Despite the obvious necessity for a total identity with the natural condition there is a gap, a distance, and it is here that sin dwells.

Man, then, has to live out his immediacy differently: by suspending his passions, capturing his drives and emotions in one moment of perfection: immortality, beyond time and beyond growth—the spirit released from the tension between soul and body. This is angelic life, of which the law is expression. And the law finds its origin in the angels, as is testified by both the Old and the New Testaments. Only as angel is man like an animal: the angel is a close relative of the naked ape.

How far have we got then? We first saw that angels were a logical condition for religion, because religion had to be two-dimensional—otherwise there would not be a story to tell. Then we asked whether we could detect in ourselves a greater willingness to accept this idea, and found that there was a certain familiarity between the human and the angelic, just as there is a familiarity between the human and the animal. It is already less evident that angels are illusions: more probably they are not. Can we creep still closer to reality; is it

possible for us to see the angels as objective entities?

Consider then that no man is ever in the position to experience the absolute meaning of things. Without the assistance of cultural patterns man would be functionally incomplete, a sort of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of vague emotions. So we may be grateful that the meaning of things does not come to us in its absoluteness, but in broken clues tied up with education, tradition, profession, environment, nationality, etc.—all somehow related to language and law.

A short while ago we spotted in the law the angelic dimension in man: suspended passions. But this is surely more than just a psychological condition. It finds objective reality in things like education, language, profession. The state in particular is something real. It is St Michael who is always associated with the state; first with the state of Israel, later with the Church of Rome. Angels are frightfully real: they are as real as the state, as real as the Church, as real as ideology, as real as dictatorship.

Now, here is something very odd. Remember that we have actually only arrived at the first phase of our argument: angels are the logical precondition of religion. We only have to spot them, but the real story has not begun yet. Something is still to happen to them. And yet they are already so real. This should be only the setting of the stage before the play starts, the play during which we will live through the tragedy of our lives. But it seems that the audience is already satisfied, gaping at the stage, impressed by the mere appearance of the actors. As soon as the angels make their first appearance man is overcome with wonder and admiration. They are so marvellous, so perfect, so real, that nothing else seems to be required. Look at the greatness of the ideological systems, the perfection of moral norms, look at their gestures full of nobility, elevated far beyond passions. Those are the angels we fall in love with. And we applaud, even before they have spoken their first line, before they have begun their story. We like them as they are and we want to hold them frozen in that position of total perfection, without development, without history—we want to hold on to our illusions.

And our applause makes the angels proud. It pleases them as it pleases us. So there comes into existence a mighty covenant between angels and men. The two, so closely related (man is almost like the sons of god—Psalm 8), those two become one. The angelic delusions get a total hold on us, claim absolute authority, and they force our experience into the harness of ideologies, our actions into the rigid framework of morality as law. We are the prey of angels, spell-bound by their splendour, awe-struck by their greatness. Sheer terror they are.

O yes, I can see them now: man and angel merged into one. The sons of god chose the daughters of men as their wives, and their offspring were great giants. Flesh and blood they are. The dictator

who eats only dry bread for Christmas, the virtuous tyrant with such great love for children, the humble soldier who does only his duty, the priest with his superior knowledge of the good, the monk with his claims to perfection. They are all so real, and yet illusions.

The play has not begun yet, the story has still to start. The magical bond between angels and men, between ideology and experience must be broken, and angels must be made visible again. Exposed. We are to be led from illusion into reality.

This is, I think, what is meant by Christ and his angels: he has taken away from them their illusory authority and has made them obedient, subjugated to creation, to reality. He has led us from illusion into reality.

But this is a reality difficult to accept, a truth which mankind is reluctant to adhere to. For it means that we have to accept that sin is hidden in virtue rather than in matter. Owing to centuries and centuries of weaning away from the body of life, centuries of suspending passion and postponing life in timeless eternity, centuries of trying to escape the conditions of being and striving to attain the condition of total knowledge, centuries of pure religion, mankind may have gone too far, too far away from its origin. We have climbed and climbed to be near the stars, like the king of Babylon, Lucifer or Morning Star (Is. 14). And now, at last, at that great height of religious perfection, we cannot go back, and we are like a thing suspended, floating in absolute space, almost like a point of pure consciousness.

So man will probably always continue to cling to his illusions. Indeed, he quickly saw to it that Christ himself became one of them, one of the angels, taking the place of Michael. The ChristosAngelos ideology is one of the most persistent heresies in the Church. Christ like an angel identified with the state—like it was in Arianism. Christ is not God because God is not in it—that would spoil it. The story is already finished before it is ever acted out. The Death-of-God ideology is nothing new: at all times man has refused to accept the ultimate dimension of reality. The disappearance of God makes the angels invisible, they disguise themselves. Angels are inevitable, and we may justly see in them the majesty of the human race, its divine calling. But without Christ, the only one who could truly claim the title of God, angels are the downfall of the human race.

The present disappearance of God does not simply leave a void in which human reason can move freely. On the contrary. It is—to borrow the words of Iris Murdoch—the time of the angels, the time of ideologies, of the tyranny of the concept becoming master of experience. The death of God sets the angels free, and they are terrible.